

Our Tribal Circles

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A living novel about the intersectionality of a post-modern nightmare.

We are often reminded by circumstance that we control very little about our lives.

Disease is a terrible way to go. A coward's kill inflicted upon the strong so as to render them weak in preparation for their final reward. Stanley isn't having it. At 52 years old he desperately wants to live a long, full life. He feels strong, even if his bones are heavy and skin drawn. He can still walk and talk. Isn't some invalid, barely able to feed himself...yet.

The letter with his test results still lay in front of him on the table where he's thrown it down. Impossible. Sitting now in his dark wooden studio chair staring at the ceiling, he can't imagine a world without him. As though the vale would wash it all away the moment his heart stopped. He's not dying...they are.

A sharp pain lances through his abdomen. With some effort the overly pale middle aged man with the speckled brown hair corrects his posture. A quick glance around assures him no one is paying attention. Of the few patrons in this small coffee shop he's the only one actually drinking coffee. He can smell the crumble cake baking in the mini-kitchen in the back. It mixes with his dark roast. The girl at the counter is pretty...but not so pretty he can't admire his own handsomeness in the reflection of the napkin tin.

Stanley takes in a deep breath and slowly releases it. A half melted breath mint falls from his mouth and ricochets across the table. Without a moment's hesitation, he lifts his coffee and viciously scalds his thin stretched lips. It hurts but he's thankful for the distraction. The pain in his gut subsides slightly as his bottom lip pulses with a dull ache. It doesn't last long, already the heat has diminished significantly.

Maybe it's for the best, pain is practically the only real thing he feels anymore. Stanley is wealthy, he used to be very wealthy. The company he keeps makes sure he stays wealthy. He still feels like big money, though wall street had wiped out much of his assets a few years back along with everyone else. Luckily, he always gets more. He already has more than most, his cloths are clean, practically new actually, and he likes to keep it that way.

He generally surrounds himself with easy people that go along with whatever he feels like doing at any given time. Thinking back on it, he wonders if he's kind of shallow. He's never really taken anything too seriously. Money comes so easily to those unwilling or unable to consider the source of it. He had plenty to begin with in spite of his recent losses. Yet, he's tasteless, wearing only what he thinks others want to see.

The pain in his gut finally subsides and he picks up the letter again to reread it. Maybe it's magically changed in the last few seconds. No, he's terminal; six months at best and the last few months won't be much of a life. He doesn't ask why. Knows why, made his choices and they were mostly based on petty selfishness. He never considers his health, absolutely convinced of his own immortality. This is a common attitude among the wealthy who are used to getting what they want whether it's deserved or

not.

Stanley feels like crying. The people at the nearest table are talking so loudly. The room seems so small and the fire burns hot in the stylized hearth which blazes overly bright. The heat overwhelms. Opening his jacket helps a little, but the sweat pours down his face anyway. This is the worst moment of his life.

“I saw her do it, Max.” It’s the thin woman at the seat nearest Stanley belonging to the next table. A young woman, early twenties, long straight chestnut hair. Intelligent eyes. She’s a thinker.

“You’re crazy.” The man, apparently his name is Max, responds shaking his head. “There’s no way.”

“I saw what I saw. She pushed that poor man and then she ran up the street.”

“Well then no harm, no foul.” Max chuckles, “she probably just slipped and used the man to catch her balance.”

“No way! I saw the look in her eyes. She did it on purpose. No doubt about it!”

Carol shivers. She knows hate when she sees it.

Stanley lowers his head catching it with his hands, peeking out through the finger slits as though he’s 5 years old again hiding from his father. There’s no point in hiding anymore. The tears come easily, without even the hint of redemption. They are the tears of inevitability, come to clean the thoughtless of their sins.

“Well it’s over now. Life goes on.”

Stanley snorts. Life is a joke so start laughing.

“But what if she does it again?”

“It’s none of our business. You don’t know for sure.”

“I think we should report her, Max...while we still remember what she looks like.”

“And what did she look like, exactly?”

“Well she was short. Ok, average height. Blonde...”

“She had brown hair.”

“Brown eyes...”

“Ya.”

“Must have been in her early twenties.”

Max shakes his head in disbelief. Carol is way off base.

“30 at least and road weathered at that.”

Stanley finally gets control of himself. Fishing in his pocket for some loose change he sprinkles quarters across the dark wood of the table surface. The letter has already returned to his inside jacket pocket as he stands pushing the chair back far too forcefully.

Everyone in the room stops and looks his way as the chair falls to the floor with the kind of thud only hard wood on hardwood can make. Stanley is extraordinarily tall and to those seated he seems gigantic. His broad shoulders block the view to the exit, but thankfully he’s already walking toward it and out into the busy street.

“Strange guy.” Max is still looking where Stanley had just been.

“Was he crying?” Carol looks even more concerned now. The world is falling apart around them.

“Ya...I think he was.”

From the darkness we come and to it we shall return. Life is absurd, may as well rebel.

“I tried. I know I did. I just close my eyes and I see it so clearly.”

Not hard enough..

“He steps across my path — he can’t see me — and I reached out. I don’t think about it; I just do what comes naturally...fail.”

Try harder.

The woman, standing alone in the crowd, closes her eyes and looks up at the sky.

“I watch him stumble out of reach. He catches the railing that separates the pedestrians from the dangers of the uncaring commuters speeding only a few inches away. He doesn’t look back at me, he only resets his stance and waits patiently for the next opportunity to cross the busy street.”

Your eyes linger on his over-swelled belly and the too small shirt he wears like a bra.

“Yes, exactly. I was distracted by his disgusting...”

Just another failure to add to her list. She always has a list. Makes it easier to organize her scattered thoughts. What to wear on which day...when she’s supposed to work. How she’s expected to react given the most common scenarios she finds herself in. There’s no detail too small, to be excluded from her lists —

Trisha turns away from the fat man and fades back into the crowd from which she was born only seconds earlier; she has emerged from the shapeless faces to express herself in action. A dance of purpose and compulsion. It’s the briefest of emotion she craves, a validation of her instincts. For a moment or two she feels hope that the man might die along with everything he represents. All that decadent uselessness that characterizes the lazy and stupid.

No-one notices her. She is, to the casual observer, just another plain girl shuffling along casting suspicious glares at anyone unfortunate enough to meet her eye to eye. Occasionally, when someone passes closely enough, a quite muttering can be heard. Whoever she’s talking to, the conversation has been going on for quite some time.

Stupid, girl. Can’t do anything right.

“Shut up. Why won’t you just stop talking. I tried. Now leave me alone.”

Trisha looks frantically for escape. “I have to get to work. See it says right here on my list. 3PM. Work.” This part’s easy. It’s predictable. Trisha likes predictable, makes it easier to control the situation.

People scatter at the sudden outburst of some strange women huddling tightly against the brick of an old department store. Assuming her to be crazy, they forget all about it and she quickly disappears as though she never was.

Useless.

“I have to get to work.”

She runs down the street. Small for a women, really more the size of a girl, she easily dodges bodies of all types. The almost childlike timelessness to her features make it easy to see her that way. Small. Diminutive. Irrelevant. Just another shade ignored out of social convenience. With every step, she feels heavier. Time is racing against her and appears to be winning.

Her birthday had come and gone a few days ago. 28 years of hard work. 28 years living the same day over and over. She's pretty enough or had been once. The shadow of it remains and she can dial it up when she needs to.

Yet, ugliness doesn't bother her, in fact she often laughs at the hens clucking, obsessed with covering the smallest flaw as if anyone really cares. All the make up in the world can't deny a person's true form. Few people really matter and death is coming. All she asks is that it arrive on time. Hasn't she earned that much?

Living among the zombies in a wasteland of glass and metal; the habits and pleasures of all those around her driving the blood lust that even now she feels rising again within from that darkest of places. Her hands tremble. There's much rage inside her clawing against a tenuous self restraint. It gives her the only sense of power she's ever really known.

The hollowed expressions of the wage slaves she passes disgust her. An endless cycle of leering men with predictable needs. A moment later she arrives at the corner she calls her own. She's an independent girl and the others already know to stay clear. Pulling her tight white t-shirt down, exposing more of what little cleavage she can muster, an entirely different face appears over the old one.

Confident and cruel, she strikes a pose. Long legged on a short stack frame. It doesn't take long for her first trick to approach. Lucky guy.

Behold the enemy, hand extended in friendship.

"Hey, Max! Max!" The young guy of maybe 20 is yelling from across the parking lot though Max is walking in his direction anyway.

"What?" He doesn't yell it back. He just speaks it, not caring if he's heard or not. Max doesn't like this guy. They happen to go to the same University. They happen to have one class together. And for that tiny piece of raw chance he knows his name to be Ben.

"Come hang out, bro!" And sadly...they're neighbours in a duplex.

He better have weed.

"Come on, bro." Door open. "Come on in."

Ugg, I hate that word. Bro, Bro! BRO! Max dreads the thought but feels obliged to comply. Ben is, for unimaginable reasons, popular. Max detours from his original vector of home sweet home and instead heads over to Ben and his wide open grin. They fist bump. Max dies a little inside and then crosses the threshold.

There's only one other present as they forgo taking off shoes and make straight for the living room. Max immediately notices the brownish couch and mismatched green lazy boy recliner. No doubt, scavenged from some rummage sale. It crowds the corner beside a cheap mahogany end table which is tenuously holding up a bong made of PVC pipe and plastic wrap.

The other guy doesn't move. A spaced out zombie, Kyle is apparently the "fucking man" as far as Ben is concerned. Max isn't even sure Kyle's awake. He neither acknowledges their entrance or responds to Ben's energetic pleas for attention. After shrugging his shoulders, Ben slides past Kyle and reaches for a hidden space behind the recliner.

Pulling out a dirty glass pipe and some crack rocks, Ben grins from ear to ear.

"Oh come on, man!" Max can't believe it. He's already noticing the faint scent of burnt plastic in the air.

“What?” Ben continues to grin.

“Seriously, you invite me in here to smoke crack?”

“Ya man, it’s awesome!”

“Fuck off.” Max is already heading for the door.

“Wait, bro! Don’t judge, don’t judge...” his voice trails off, the pipe already in his mouth. Ben is half way to the moon by the time Max enters his own apartment.

With several shakes of his head, Max firmly commits to finding a new place to live as quickly as possible.

He picks up the phone he’d forgotten on his coffee table earlier and texts a familiar number.

Max: “WTF! My neighbours are crackheads!”

Carol (an hour and a half later):”!!!”

Max: “Seriously, I need to move.”

Carol: “Yes you do!” Carol secretly wants Max to move in with her and have lots of babies. However, her degree is in the humanities and she now feels that her own desires are the product of centuries of patriarchal brainwashing by women hating misogynists.

Max: “Do you know anywhere open I might be able to afford?”

Carol doesn’t answer right away. This is a tough one, in the end she simply says...

Carol: “Nope. Sorry.”

Max is oblivious to Carol’s feelings. She isn’t his type. He has plans for a certain ginger girl who also happens to be his lab instructor in the astronomy class he’d now failed and retaken twice.

No goodbye necessary, Max tosses his phone on the coffee table and goes back to doing whatever it is young people with no money or ambition do.

Who is the enemy? Whoever opposes me.

A few protesters carry placards with messages like “Hate Monger” and “Corporate Shill”. Capitalism is the enemy as much as anything to these people. The ones most consistently on theme for this particular event say “Crime against Women”. The Sisterhood of Womanly Concern has organized several of these events in the past few months. They circle with angry expressions not daring to leave their designated protesting area. They know the rules and play them better than anyone. Identity politics is their business.

Throwing imaginary daggers is enough...for now. That and yell profanity. If challenged on the use of such language, shrilly declare that one does not understand the larger problem and if that kind of language is required to get their point across...so be it.

Restless youth generally don’t feel important because they have never earned anything or been relied on for anything important. It’s a phenomenon caused by lack of responsibility growing up. It doesn’t help that most children aren’t allowed beyond the sight of a supervising adult until they are well into their teens. Independent development is never given a chance and now Universities are more like high schools and young adults are more like children; naive and unprepared for life.

The other students on campus give a wide berth, not wanting to be dragged into something that doesn’t concern them. Some even want to graduate for real and someday start actual careers. University isn’t a home for them. The protesters, oblivious to the issues of others, bring bullhorns to reach them and

punish everyone for thinking they can escape their righteous justice. With us or against us. No middle ground. This is war.

When the campus radio DJ doesn't play one of their many public pronouncements establishing which words are acceptable today, a short visit to the dean makes sure a personality more sympathetic to the cause is installed. Easy to do given the compromising position one of their members got him in last semester and they have the video to prove it. Another "donation" from a loyal member of the Sisterhood.

Paul doesn't know why such movements attract the hottest girls, maybe it's the excitement of escaping the adults, the sense of belonging and relying on each other for the first time. Being important for the first time feels really good.

The impressionable young man lingers. Paul Zander wants to be important too, and he wants the right kind of attention from the right kind of girls. He scratches his top knot, having put it in too tight this morning. Pulling his backpack up for the hundredth time this hour, he shuffles on as even cute girls reach the limit of his short attention span. Welcome to the life of a typical millennial.

The majestic theatre reveals the truth hidden behind consequence.

"Love is real, people!" The excitable man on stage practically screams the words across the room. As though the audience is deaf or perhaps dense, the smooth voice of practice easily penetrates the attention of the most stubbornly depressed.

"There's someone for everyone...even right now...in this very room...there's magic! Can you feel it!"

Most of the crowd cannot. If they could they wouldn't be at this ridiculous self help workshop listening to this excitable old man spout off about Love Everlasting. However, a few unenthusiastic voices float back their meek confirmation. Most notably a young man approaching thirty, shaking slightly at the attention. The man on stage seems to be pointing directly at him.

"Say yes to everything! Say yes to life!" The somewhat elderly man is on a role now. In spite of his age, he's pumping his fist in the air, dashing randomly at first from the left to the right and then back again. "Be the best YOU, you can be!"

The best me? James doesn't like himself. What does that even mean? I don't understand the actual me. Easily distracted, James wonders if he's wasting his time. Sadly, he has nothing else to do and no-one else to see. His attention snaps back to the present. He feels lonely which is why he's here in the first place.

The stage show is ending, the man with the Cheshire grin is plugging his book and reminding the crowd that he'll soon be at the back signing copies. James struggles to find his courage. With great effort he rises from his seat and makes his way to the line forming at the back; his newly purchased copy of "Love Everlasting", originally published in 1982 by Prairie Press Publishing, gripped tightly in his sweaty hand.

He can hear the conversations of those ahead of him. They speak of hope, goofy smiles on their diverse faces. The occasional burst of nervous laughter reminds James that these people are just like him. They have dreams and desires, just like him, and just like him they too are lonely.

"What's your name?"

The patient author is looking up at him expectantly. James hadn't noticed he's already next in line.

"Jimmy...Thompson." he's never called himself that before and isn't sure why he just had.

"Ok Jimmy, I see you have my book." Jimmy is holding it down at his sides almost defensively.

“Would you like me to sign it?”

The man presents it gently. It says something that he respects the work. For the briefest moment Jimmy sees what appears to be recognition on the author’s face. A familiarity not yet earned, but clearly felt.

As he signs the inside cover, the seconds pass by. The crowd mills about practising small talk. Jimmy shuffles nervously. Why is this taking so long? Stealing a glance up at the author, he’s surprised to find him staring back. Hands folded over his signature with an unusual smile. He doesn’t say a word. Instead simply nodding as Jimmy quietly thanks him, retrieves his book and walks away.

Jimmy doesn’t notice the unexpected, as is often the case. He even forgets to read the inscription as he wanders out into another pointless day. The author, Jay Andrew to his fans, watches him leave with interest. Love Everlasting clutched tightly against his chest as though to shield his heart from some unseen arrow. He ignores the protesters, avoiding eye contact as he weaves through the small group of overly aggressive women.

It isn’t until he gets home that he opens the inner cover and reads the words that change his life forever.

Growing old is still an accomplishment.

Jon Dinkle is old. Very old. In fact he is so old that he remembers the second world war. He remembers Hitler’s bunker the day he and his men beat the Ruskis to the prize and he remembers the radiant smile of his sweat heart Margo upon his return to native soil. Recalled how that smile had gotten him through the cold nights and violent days.

He’d managed to fight on the front lines for months without a serious injury. Several close calls, of course, and having to kill men does its own kind of harm. Losing friends does another, and returning to a world you don’t recognize when it’s all over.

His heart broke upon realizing Margo was holding his brother’s hand. Both happy to see him and yet dreading the conflict sure to come. It’d happened naturally enough they’d say. Comfort, loneliness. He was there for me... Margo pleaded with Jon who could no longer look at either of them. He gets it. The world moved on without him.

Without dropping his duffel bag or shaking his brothers hand, he walked on down the train station arrival platform. Numb. From the war, from the shock of losing everything he’d been fighting for; Jon broke that day right along with his heart.

His dark green fatigues faded by the unforgiving European sun and countless puddle washes. The blood of his enemies and friends alike belonged to him now. The stains were his memories. The war had taken everything from him and everyone he’d fought beside.

The just war they were calling it back then. Looking at it now, after a lifetime...after Korea and Vietnam or even Crimea. War had always been there, hadn’t it. And it always would be. There was nothing “just” about it. War only takes. It never gives.

Jon is a lifelong bachelor. He continues to live modestly as a mechanic. Building engines every day. Working on the kind of equipment he’ll never be able to afford himself, yet is respected, liked even by his peers and customers. Jon is a kind man. His eyes bright, yet haunted, even after all this time, the sadness lingers, but it only seems to add to the gravity of this simple man.

Jon is honest. He once found a wallet with a crisp hundred dollar bill in it. No address, no identification. Yet he was sure he recognized the style of its thick Italian leather. He held onto that wallet for 6 months never touching the money, until the man he figured it belonged to came back for a tune up. When he returned the wallet, the man wasn’t even surprised. Vintage Jon. He thanked him and left a big tip.

Jon probably should have retired years ago. Though he was young in 1945 he's very old now. His simple life anchors around his work. Metal never lies. An engine purrs when handled properly. There is never a reason to doubt the value of his skills. Each project just as complete as the one before. Every payment a reaffirmation of his work ethic. It's his name on the marquee. Jon's Mechtacular; practically a neighbourhood landmark.

Evening is approaching. Jon checks his watch. He's tired, long day, his thoughts drift back to a rude customer earlier in the morning. He starts putting his tools away expecting to be rested and back at it by the morning. He dwells for a moment when he comes across an old picture frame full of his war medals. It takes a toll, his lip trembles ever so slightly.

Each one of those dull pieces of metal represents a friend dead or an enemy killed. He smiles when he thinks of a life well lived, though he misses his friends even now, he's proud of their sacrifice. No regrets can overcome the good they did back then for the world. He shuts down the main lights, quite capable of navigating his garage by memory alone.

There are at least two cars and a lawn mower still in need of his expert attention. If he has a good day tomorrow, which will be Thursday, then he might even be able to take Friday and the weekend off. He can visit the boys at the lodge and play some cards. He's earned a break. His left arm is sore. He stretches it out a few times hoping to loosen it up.

Jon dies after a hard days work on a Wednesday night. Coronary Thrombosis. Heart attack.

Sometimes we all feel lost.

Have you ever seen a woman sitting at a table in a restaurant staring absently into space? It's as though she can see some invisible world in the distance, yet also all around her. You don't make eye contact with such a person. You simply allow them to persist in their imaginary world and you lose yourself within it as well if you're lucky.

Though you can't see or understand what she sees, you feel what you imagine she feels. Perhaps a wonder... a satisfying listlessness as though everything she's ever done before is already forgotten and only this moment really matters. It's shared space.

Creation begins in the mind. The vistas form; the rivers, the lakes, the animals. Can you hear the call of the invisible world? What does it say to you? Does it say FIGHT! Does it say SUBMIT! Does it stare back at you as if from the abyss? Can you survive the loss, when such a person stands and walks away. Their mystery is eternal, as like all cowards, you shake your head dispelling the enchantment and just as quickly return to reality and the banality of your normal life.

So it is for Dynasty as she sits once again in a local Asian fusion bar, downing her second bottle of 'not so warm anymore' sake. She has a crush on the waitress. Has for weeks. No such luck though. As the sake erases her inhibitions, she quickly realized that she's barking up the wrong tree. Nothing new. Dynasty's lonely. She craves the attention of a fine young women. With each day that passes she feels farther from herself.

The waitress is polite. Nice even. There's a sense of awkward understanding and maybe even a little regret. Dynasty's gorgeous by any male standard. Moodily stylish, young with perfectly spaced eyes overly large and the brightest green. A rare trait for one of Japanese decent. In her mid twenties she's exactly what any red blooded man would lust after. Yet, she holds no interest.

People flatten to silhouettes as the sun hits the peak of its cycle in the mid day. Sitting at the back of the main room as she is, Dynasty can only sink further into shadow as the contrast melts the detail of the scene away. She'll have to move on soon. Find another waitress or instructor or teacher... There has to be someone out there. Love is everlasting. Didn't she read a book about that once?

Occasionally, she catches the waitress glancing her way. Concern on her face. Dropping a bill on the table with a shake of the head and a nod toward the door; Dynasty is on her way. Stumbling down the main street like a fool, half drunk on a Wednesday afternoon, she makes her way down the block to her empty one bedroom apartment. She hopes to avoid the frequent attentions of those she passes. Surrounded by men at every opportunity she couldn't feel more isolated.

Integration is stable if not satisfying.

Mash is a young Muslim athiest. He's named after the TV series from the 70's because his father is obsessed with Korea. Actually his name is Mashfiq, but this is what he tells his mostly white friends. Strange approach to life for an immigrant, but in the old days it was important to integrate. Mash is simply the innocent victim of a time when TV mattered and was the easiest way for new citizens to identify with those already here.

He looks almost white anyway, or at least a very tanned white...when he shaves. His mother is Ukrainian though his dad is from Indonesia. They'd arrived around the same time and met during administrative processing. Only a few short years later, in 1982, a Sunday morning, a new natural born citizen had entered the discourse. A unique past can only help strengthen the fabric of such a rich culture.

Race hadn't entered consideration for Mash's family. They had no expectations, preferring to join a new world with open minds. A fondness even for all things new and modern. They'd voted in their first election as soon as legally possible and educated Mash early in life on the importance of participating in the local political process. His parents had spent many nights arguing over policy, though never in anger, always passionate. This stuff matters.

So it was no surprise to anyone when Mash decided to study political science in University. He already spent his weekends for several years volunteering at local food drives and community events. Politics was in his blood and he could speak easily to strangers so it made sense. The only catch, possibly, was his addiction to work.

By the time Mash had graduated, he was already running a successful political action committee he'd founded in his second year. With each passing cycle he had raised more and more support for local candidates of his choosing. In some small nerdy circles, they called him "The Fixer". There's no amount of political pressure he could not endure though it seemed each cycle brought with it new enemies.

To Mash, politics was a sacred ongoing conversation between the people of the past with the people of the future. However, it had become increasingly clear post grad, that the industry of politics is just as corrupt and self-absorbed as anything else. There is, by and large, no loyalty to the system itself or to the Country broadly, only to their own power. Usually reflected in a fatter bottom line for the Party and better career opportunities for its members.

Politicians have a vested interest in interfering in peoples lives. In fact it's commonly accepted insider wisdom that a Party can attract funding only in direct proportion to the sense the public has of their influence in public life. The small government ideal is always lip service because in practice it isn't exploitable as a product cycle. No product, no money.

No money, or at least the lack of ability to draw money. No energy, no power. No relevance, no power. No money. It just keeps going around like that. By the time Mash entered his 30's he was thoroughly disillusioned. His parents still pump their fists at the local Opposition rallies, but Mash finds himself drawn further and further to the wilderness of libertarian-ism.

He's stopped going to political events. The last movement he'd felt any connection to at all was an

obscure conservative presidential run in 2012. After watching the media companies unify against his candidate, the final nail was hammered home. The system is rigged. It had to be, nothing else can explain why problems, so easy to identify, continue to go unsolved. Or in fact in many cases have even gotten worse.

Race relations and identity politics is just too profitable to ever go away. Each side has its narrative and neither would change for risk of losing market share. Praising dead elder statesman, the left clinging to their little black book of character assassination for the greater good. And the right, preferring the bad habit of ignoring real problems as though they are all just the inevitable consequence of not being conservative enough in the first place.

So it is that Mash begins to drink a little too much. Not so much that one might say he had a problem... exactly. But enough that his friends and family notice. He isn't a drunk...just a drinker. Embracing a lifestyle of constant tipsiness, he imagines it eases the disappointment in a society he'd irrationally cared so much about for so long.

It doesn't take much though, when habit makes us brave, and thoughtlessness lulls the mind into unsafe thinking. And so one unremarkable Wednesday morning Mash wakes up behind the wheel of his car in the abandoned lot of an old elementary school with half the monkey bars bent over him like a vice. It's miraculous he remained absolutely unhurt. His car had suffered only superficial damage and in spite of the chaos of warped metal, he's able to turn the engine over and back away.

His insurance will likely cover it but the points could murder on this license. He decides it's best to not report it. Why should he? It's all just a big scam to get premiums increased anyway. Another year and the points start going down, but hey why play fair when no one else does. He remembers a mechanic in his neighbourhood and being still early in the morning, he feels it safe enough to risk the drive over.

Jon's already hard at work. The man works hard from an early hour, though Mash doesn't know it's his last day. Mash can't pull in because another car blocks the only parking spot. Irritated, he parks a little ways up the block at an abrupt angle and slams his door behind him. With a grunt, Mash, pushes the main door open and walks through. What a fucking life.

Profit comes from service.

That trick was a treat, thinks Trisha, still glowing with self satisfaction. Every bill stuffed in her pocket reasserts her control. Sometimes she wonders why people don't see her for what she is. Why they believe what they want to believe even in the face of obvious signs of danger. Desperation? Maybe it's just loneliness

Indeed, they ask for it, and you deliver.

Sometimes they just want to talk. Not this time. The plain brown haired man with the bulging...wallet, had left a few minutes earlier. The full package isn't cheap, but everyday she finds another willing customer. Life in the city is designed for two kinds of people, the exploited and the exploiters. She isn't confused about which she is. Like any good capitalist she plays to the prejudices of her victims.

Trisha brushes her hands down her tight little body. Feeling the validation of a good days work. Fresh bills, still ripe with the smell of sweat and want, flip through her fingers. 1 hundred, 2 hundred, 3. A good day. Seems the worse the economy gets the better she gets paid. Trisha doesn't understand such things, but shes in demand being only 4 foot 10, 90 pounds and since the latest supreme court ruling, perfectly legal.

Oh come on now, you've had your fun. The imaginary voice drawls like an old sailor drunk for loss of land.

Trisha shakes her head and sighs. Just a little peace and quite. Hasn't she earned that? The voice has been there as long she can remember. As a child it was there and as a teenager it was there. Always telling her what she didn't need to hear.

That's how she knew the basketball coach at her school was into her. That's how she knew what to do to pass his class without showing up. At 14 years old, she was already a woman, and more than that she was a successful entrepreneur. Earning her own money, buying herself the trendiest clothes. The other kids assumed she was rich by the time she dropped out at 16.

Rich. Please, she's at best wealthy. Nice house, furniture always less than a year old. Though only customers ever come to see her, it was perfectly put together with the finest decorative items she can find. No matter how terrible her day has been, no matter the manner of the trick, she continues to build a sanctuary of epic proportions. A paradise...or a fortress.

Your own little *piece of hell*... the voice chirped *...and within it a throne from which to rule.*

"Heaven." she blurts back to the empty room.

...and you're the abyss they cross over.

That stings but what else is new. Nothing is ever good enough for the voice in her head. Even when she does exactly as instructed there's always something not quite right. Less than perfect. Something not quite up to snuff. She's never good enough.

"So leave me alone then!" but she knows it's futile. The voice will never leave. They are connected in ethereal ways neither understands.

The disturbing truth is, Trisha needs the voice. Without it she's lost, without purpose. Having no personal preferences of her own, the voice drives her toward something. What it hates, she likes. Anything is better than nothing. The most painful feeling Trisha can experience is irrelevance.

And the most painful thing the voice can feel is failure. Ironically, Trisha excels at something, even if it's only sex. When expectations are clear, when there's a specific price to be paid. When all that is normal and unremarkable can be counted on, then the voice is happy enough.

She marks a number beside a name in a little red book she slips from beneath her desk drawer. Hidden, not because she fears being caught, but because she always keeps her lists hidden. Habit from the old days when she had less say in her life. Those days were never coming back. She's in control now.

And so the voice leaves her alone for now and Trisha smiles. She dims the lights and pulls down the window blinds. Exchanging her work clothes for soft flannel plaid pyjamas, Trisha settles into a quiet night of reruns from the series box set she'd bought the day before.

She'll clean up the blood on her kitchen floor later.

Regret is more lethal than a bullet.

Margo considered the worst options after seeing the look in Jon's eyes, God forgive her, the look in his eyes before he turned and walked away. Her own words sounded hollow as she gripped what suddenly felt like a stranger's hand, pleading to a war hero's back for an understanding she knew she didn't deserve. What had she done?

She thought it was college and the sexual awakening of women in society generally. A generation left behind by their warrior husbands. In truth there had simply come a point where Jon had been gone for so very long.

Somehow she'd come to believe he was never coming back and that even if he did it was right back to the life of a farmer's wife. Somehow that thought had become unbearable though Jon was a good man,

and had never raised a hand to her...though such things were common enough in her town.

But when she saw those pale blue eyes. When she'd seen the hurt she had caused to such a good man. A man of honour who'd fought the Nazis for her and hers...well...it was just too much. She felt she doesn't deserve love, though oddly she squeezed the hand she holds even tighter. Lord forgive me, she prayed silently.

The unexpected can change everything.

Seeing Jon laying there as he is, Stanley feels unusually...calm. He forgets all about the dent in his hood left by some stupid kid on a long board last week. His car is still parked outside where he left it days earlier. As he faces his own mortality, here is this old man, still grateful to be gone. A retired warrior, satisfied in his contribution and ready to go. Perhaps he's always held on too tight. Perhaps that's the very thing that's kept happiness at arms length. Or perhaps it's the endless string of superficial events leading nowhere. Will anyone even notice when he's gone?

Looking around Stanley realizes no-one is coming to help. There's no sense of urgency. He's mildly surprised he isn't more upset having discovered a dead body. It must be the shock, he thinks. Or maybe with his own death so close it just doesn't matter any more. He no longer feels obligated to show concern where he doesn't feel it.

Searching the service desk, he finds his keys. Still it hasn't occurred to Stanley to call anyone about this. As far as he's concerned Jon is meeting his maker on his own terms and Stanley sees no reason to interfere. There's no blood, no sign of struggle, and dammit if the man doesn't look happier than Stanley ever remembered him being in life.

Jon is/was such a clean man, Stanley notes. The garage is well kept, he hadn't left it in disrepair, nothing embarrassing, always respectable just like the man himself. Lucky guy. Dies and everything is perfect. Stanley shakes his head. Is this what envy feels like?

Locking the front door, out of habit more than anything, he returns to Jon's body for a final assessment. Clearing his throat he reaches down to Jon's clutched fist and takes one of his war medals at random. Jon won't miss it and right now Stanley needs it more. With that he leaves the garage to its fate. Police never visit him as there's nothing suspicious to investigate.

Jon's final wishes are eventually found in an old draft will from some years earlier giving all his savings and assets to a lodge that services vets suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. Even in death Jon is a good man and to this day his name remains on the wall of the local 403 honouring him along with his brothers in arms. The greatest generation all but gone.

Life rarely seems fair.

Mash leaves the garage angry. Jon refused the job. Said he has too many jobs already. No time. Come back in a week. Slamming his car door. Mash lowers his head to his hands. Breathing deeply and harshly, he inserts the keys, turns the ignition and rolls away in the general direction of his apartment. He's made it almost six blocks when he notices the low profile police interceptor rolling right along with him.

Mash sits up straighter, grabs his ID, the lights flash once, he finds himself parked on an empty side street, not sure what to expect having never been pulled over before. The police are taking their time, as long as a minute passes while Mash tries fruitlessly to find a better angle in the rear view.

By the time Officer Kate "Wiggles" Warchowski has made her way around the drivers door window Mash is nearly hysterical with anticipation. She mimes for him to lower his window, he complies. Leaning in steeply, Mash pulls back reflexively.

“What happened to you’re car, Mr. Rahman?” She or her partner waiting back in the passenger seat of the interceptor must have run his plates already. He hands her his ID, she glances and hands it back.

“I.I...” she leans in further, suspicion crossing her deep blue eyes. Or was it the flashing lights reflecting against their oceanic depth.

Her hand is so delicately placed on her belt or gun or something dangerous just out of view. Is he staring? Or has he only glanced at those...

“...the damage, sir. Are you injured?”

“Injured? No...I’m..no. I’m fine. Thank you.”

“You’ll have to call your Insurance Company and give a report. They’ll need to assess your car.”

Mash nods helplessly.

“Given the make and year I’d bet they’re gonna write it off. You have a nice day, now”

Kate smiles and walks back out of view. Mash strains to watch her go. Everything seems to have happened in the span of single brief moment, yet Mash remains still, not quite sure how to react to what he’s feeling.

Trust is earned.

“Any trouble?” It’s Robbie, Kate’s partner and generally well liked guy. Though not long on the force, he’s a quick study and enjoys the community building focus of today’s police services.

Kate’s lost in thought as she presses her seat belt snugly into place.

“Wiggles!”

“Huh. Oh, he’s clean. No worries.” She laughs easily, obviously a very easy going type of person.

“Cool. So let’s move, I gotta number two...know what I mean?”

She watches the car ahead of her pull away and takes a deep though carefully quiet breath. She hits the gas, pulls an illegal u-turn then slips into the rest of her shift.

Everybody lies when it serves their interests.

According to the Sisterhood of Womanly Concern, Carol’s chapter sisters, Jay Andrew is a shameless womanizer. A cheating, imperial, sexist coming to speak only for an opportunity to corrupt whoever is dumb enough to listen. Here to shamelessly pitch his book of patriarchal propaganda, Love Everlasting. So under this righteous banner she finds herself protesting the rare speaking engagement along with 13 other women, 2 men, a local digital reporter, and what appears to be a stray dog.

As far as anyone can tell the dog is getting the most attention, having earned several scraps and a belly rub..mostly from the protesters. They’d spent a great deal of time coming up with a list of one liners hoping to make a viral sound byte for their online channels. At last blush, they have 20,534 subscribers and growing.

“Ouch!” a girl yells in her face. Her breath smells like horse radish. Apparently, Carol has stepped on her foot which is easy to do given how cramped they all are in their designated safe space at the side entrance.

“Sorry.” She doesn’t feel sorry. She feels hungry. And bored, barely able to remember the chants she is apparently reciting wrong given the angry glares she’s getting from her sisters. What am I doing here?

She’s smart. Too smart for this crowd. Started out chasing journalism, then Max, then the current Prime Minister right into a humanities course. The sisters entered the picture during the run up to the last

election. Without many friends, having grown up in a Rural Community, Carol was all too eager to get involved in local events. A strong cos-ed movement on campus made it clear those who aren't involved are part of the problem. She doesn't want to be part of the problem.

“Ok, sisters! He's coming!”

Carol snapped her head in the same direction as the rest of the herd. Strutting up the main path, Jay Andrew, practically oozes evil. From his perfect smile to his well manicured nails. He walks with purpose, clearly proud of his insidious agenda. Monster. Soulless.

A line as solid as 13 young women, 2 men, and a dog can make presents along the path aggressively failing to actually block traffic as that would be against campus policy. The well polished man floats by carrying a box of his books, as if oblivious to the fluttering/seething nearby. He seems to turn his head ever so slightly in their general direction.

“He heard us, sisters!” Some high fives and a cooler of generic orange pop gets passed around. The protest breaks up having completed its purpose for the moment, the show won't be starting for an hour and they have business on the other side of campus protesting a Ministry of Justice booth. Apparently, the ministry is planning some kind of terrible for-profit jail system. Just another way to exploit the poor and disenfranchised.

Carol continues to watch the author disappear up ahead into the smallest theatre on campus. He doesn't look like a womanizer, but then again it's so hard to tell the good from the bad these days. What she does know is he has a kind face and peaceful demeanour. The spell breaks and she is alone. Her sisters have left her behind and she is suddenly very ok with that.

Everybody matters.

Jimmy stares at the inscription Jay Andrew has written on his copy of Love Everlasting. He blinks. Closes the book, places it on his coffee table, stands and walks into his kitchen. Somewhere deep in his cupboard his probing hand wraps around a bottle. He tops off his rum before returning to the living room and sits back in his main chair.

A flip of his index finger shoves his mouse enough to turn the screen back on. Another small flurry of motion and a keyboard finds itself on his lap. Browser open, search engine spinning. Who is Jay Andrew? Are you for real?

Jimmy is restless, finding only the usual clips and promos of the mysterious Jay Andrew. He tosses the keyboard in frustration, stands and begins pacing back and forth, downing his drink frequently.

No prior published works. Sip. No personal interviews and yet the publisher seems enthusiastic about it. Sip. 20 years ago this book was big. A forgotten has-been? How was that even possible in the internet age? He picks up the book and leafs through it pausing at random as though he might I-Ching some insight. Sip. Finally stopping again on the personal note Jay Andrew wrote on the final page. Jimmy absently mouths the words.

...a single thread in that weave...

As he fixes his eyes to the letters they seem to shift and dodge his focus. A wave of nausea washes over him. Too much rum. Falling to his knees, the air vibrates a deep cello. A soft carpet is never so appreciated before the inevitable darkness.

A family business is a legacy that investors understand.

Dynasty runs a martial arts studio full time. Her father had taught her a unique family style since she was a little girl. Having never pursued a fighting career, she instead prefers to run her studio as a fitness program. The income is stable enough. Nothing spectacular, but she keeps the lights on both at home

and here at her small but affordable second story loft commercial space. The cafe downstairs seems to provide enough steady traffic to supplement the regulars.

She only has to work 4 hours each night, plus the occasional seminar. It isn't easy money, she has to work for it. The hardest part is keeping her classes fresh and interesting otherwise things can get pretty tight should attendance dwindle below a certain level for too long.

The last few years have been steady though, she's learned how to be just flirtatious enough with the boys and girls alike and a professional approach otherwise keeps things balanced. As she sits alone at the desk in the far corner a single weak lamp illuminates her delicate features. This is the simple life of a young woman trying to make it on her own.

A small mountain of paper before her, she reads through a set of underlined numbers apparently representing the results of a recent PST audit. She has a month to challenge or otherwise try and get changes made, though they seem hell bent on taking her for over 15,000.00 no matter what she does. She could shake down past students or even worse hassle current ones, either is the kiss of death in her highly competitive industry. With boxing and mixed martial arts studios popping up all over, she's relied on what little competitive advantage she can find. Not charging PST is, now was, one of those.

Huffing in disbelief, Dynasty, tosses the papers down, the paperclip, tapping loudly against a glass surface in the otherwise silent room. Even the form letter she's being compelled to send her past customers, seems to drip with implication. Either she's bad at running a company or she's a thief. At no point will the government take responsibility for inconsistent rules based solely on gamesmanship. She didn't pay so she doesn't get to play. So much for free enterprise.

What a position to be in. All she'd done is run a small business and not leave a province when so many others had. She isn't charging all the correct tax because she doesn't know she has to. Simple mistake, that somehow hasn't come up in a tax audit she'd gone through only a few years ago and so completely blindsides her now. Her Dad ran his school for decades without any problem.

Debts mounting, even though she's good with her money and doesn't borrow. She pays her bills, doesn't over spend on silly investments, and even inherited her father's house when he passed several years ago. Which, by the way, he had paid off years earlier. This helps keep her overhead low.

When local real estate agents come sniffing around, trying to convince Dynasty to sell, she steadfastly refuses. Not because the money isn't good, but because it's the only thing her father had left her. In the end after a long illness, everything else had been used up, sold, or traded.

She can borrow again if she has to. The nice thing about owning a house outright is it becomes an asset, rather than debt. Or she can set up a payment plan with the Ministry of Finance of say hundreds a month for several years, or until a windfall comes her way. Seems the only state of living not tolerated is living without the dependence on somebody else.

She's been a free agent. The government hates that. She prides herself on making her own money. Just yesterday, she was making more than she was spending, and she owed nothing to no one. Now she's an indentured servant paying tithes to the political class. How has it come to this. She shakes her head. Why bother working toward anything? She drops her forehead to the desk surface lingering on the cold glass as though it was real and she were not.

"Excuse me."

She pulls back startled by the courier waiting impatiently on the other side of her desk carrying a heavy box.

"Closed." She dimly points back the way the man had come.

"I'm not here for lessons." he scowls. A low, very distant, throbbing massages the air. "Delivery, please sign here."

A creased frown on a young face. Dim eyes. She doesn't remember ordering anything recently so couldn't imagine what it might be. A gift?

She signs the form, he drops the box on her desk, turns and rushes out. No point of origin, just a plain brown box. She opens it, which turns out to be a terrible mistake.

A faded limelight still feels like progress.

He prefers silver. The sign looks silver, but Stanley Cassowary knows it's platinum. He knows because he paid for it. He ordered it and when push came to shove he's been carrying Cassowary & Douglas since they hit the red a few years ago. Ironically his college degree's in psychology, but his father was insistent he take over his position. At least books were hot, way back when. Fucking internet.

So now they cater to tweens and millennials and that's that. Gotta make the money. He still signs the cheques though so at least there's a little ego boost at the end of each month. Then again, everything is so regulated these days since the union backed them up against a wall during the recession of '08. He feels like a rubber stamp, can't take risks, can't make real money. As soon as he figures out an angle, the government changes the rules to ruin it all. Innovation or exploitation, who can tell the difference anymore.

Stanley thinks of Jon and the unaddressed dent in his hood. He stares at the war metal on his desk for a long time as though it might at any moment grant him meaning. What hope can a dying man find now. What kind of life had he lived when he had the time? Stanley makes a decision as he copes with new pain and vulnerability he's never felt.

Things have to change. He can't take on new clients, his health will deteriorate quickly. What staff remains will smell blood and run for the door soon enough. Who would protect him given the way he's always treated them? Stanley doesn't have kids, or for that matter a meaningful personal relationship to speak of.

His friends are vapid, his staff is down to a skeleton. And still there's the stubborn hope he can beat it... turn things around. But now that all seems pointless. Some comfort in the final days seems priceless. Calling in every favour, he collects every possible resource. Starts the process of selling any extraneous property or assets. He's gonna need it all.

He's determined to go out on his own terms. On top. The office has several months prepaid on the least and anyone left has read the writing on the wall long ago. He liquidates the companies primary assets and wishes everyone well. He makes sure to leave a larger than routine cheque in the hands of each of those who stuck it out to the very end. An unusually thoughtful gesture from a traditionally thoughtless man.

Stanley's been ignoring the inevitable at work for a while, most of the agency clients are gone and yet he's living the dream like nothings changed. Like he's still relevant. Not anymore. Realty check. No sales. Face it like Jon, face it like a soldier. It's not his fault the internet ruined the publishing business. It's not his fault the government remains impotent to enforce copyright laws so the big ad companies take all the profit now. They don't even provide a service. A game of ownership and corporate greed feeding off user generated content.

Stanley buys some property in the Midwest. Lots of trees and open plains. He tells no one and is quickly presumed dead. Life goes on for those that once knew him. People get new jobs and Cassowary & Douglas Literary Agency is essentially no more.

His last order of business is to place an ad online inviting local book enthusiasts to come by and take what they want. He won't be needing any of it anymore. He closes the door behind him, leaving it unlocked and forgotten just like his dreams.

Thick as thieves, a conspiracy is born.

"Listen, Max, I need you to trust me. Come on."

Carol tugs on his sleeve. They appear to be heading in the general direction of the Owlsh Community Hall.

"Come on!"

Max had been posing for a "selfie" with a vegetarian taco in the food court between classes when Carol came running up in a huff. Something about a story and needing his help with the photo. Max checks the time. Unfortunately, he still has at least half an hour to kill and Carol has that look in her eye. What else can he do?

"Ok, ok." He drops his taco onto his plate along with his soggy tater tots.

Campus food courts had been allocated to fast food joints years ago. Sadly, built in markets tend to reduce the effort staff feel they need to put in their jobs, so the University now sports the worst locations for all famous brands. And what's better is they are all required to employ students at more per hour than any other location.

It takes a few minutes to get wherever Carol is dragging him, in which time she runs through several scenarios. If she can snag an exclusive interview she'd get play in the University Press for sure. If she can get some good pictures then sprinkle in a dash of women's lib, maybe a balanced colour palette, she can impress the sisters and finally get access to the inner circle.

Unfortunately, the door is locked. Carol tenses up. The show must have already started.

"Whats going on?" Max is confused. Since when do doors get locked on campus.

"Let's try around back." Even the windows are dark as if covered on the inside.

A series of tall bushes block the view to the back door from the more common pathways winding around the main buildings. Carol does a quick scan for spies anyway, but it's private enough. She pulls on the rear door. To her surprise it gives easily. Swinging back far faster than she'd expected. A young man escaping early, shoves past her and disappears up the way around a bush.

Max slips his foot in the frame just in time to stop the heavy door from closing. Carol pats Max on the shoulder, smiles and slips quietly inside. Approval feels good. Max takes a final look behind and then follows.

Forgive if not forget.

Margo knows how to live with regret. She clutches Jon's obituary in her sandpaper hand and prays silently for his well earned salvation...and hers. It's over now, and the regret can finally die for good. She's a human being, allowed to make mistakes. She's paid enough and is a good woman, even Jon would recognize that. God willing, she'll see him again in the hereafter and finally they would find peace together along with all the loved and missed in both their lives.

God is just and understanding. A shelf full of titles she'd helped guide into the world reminds her everyday. Margo experiences a sort of cathartic comfort. Her time would come soon enough, and she has always lived as best she can in the light of the Lord. Imperfect, conciliatory, Margo is a humble example of Christianity's better angels. A true believer in the best possible sense.

With a few final tears, Margo forgives herself as God had long ago.

Beware the weak. Predators love to pretend.

“I regret leaving.” Trisha was confessing to her 5th shot of gin, two of which were now in a harmless puddle out of sight in the shadows of her bar stool. “A good man...a good father, but he just happened to be a wife beater.”

“Uh Huh.” grunts the man with his head lying in his arms at the stool beside her who apparently can’t handle his drink.

It’s time.

She leans in closer.

“So I left him...and my kids.” She keeps her eye fixed to him though to the casual observer she looks like she’s staring straight inside a bottle.

The drunk man slips off his stool, but of course she’s there to catch him. No one else is paying any attention at all. It’s noisy and smells like wet dog, urine, and beer. She often frequents dives like this. She’s acquired a taste for the fish that swim these waters.

The man shifts his weight against her, but she’s strong enough to handle it. Pushing him onward she raises her voice lets out an obnoxious whoop and cackles. Anyone even remotely interested looks away wanting nothing to do with either of them. The poor sucker’s wallet is already in her pocket as they stumble through the door and out into the late night.

Right and wrong are subjective principals, though we struggle to reconcile that with best practices.

Officer Kate knows it’s wrong but she finds herself doing it anyway. Nearing the end of her shift with Mashfiq Rahman’s file open on her laptop. Parked in silent mode up the street from his apartment on the vague pretense of checking the local nightlife as it releases into the streets. He has a very clean record, a few brushes with the state trooper’s as a young man protesting the Sitting Prime Minister. An only child. Strong tradition of Opposition Party support in the family. Used to be a member of the young Ruling Party in University.

She snaps her eyes forward as a couple bang a garbage can while stumbling into the nearest alleyway. At closer appraisal, however, it seems a woman is carrying a nearly unconscious man...and was that blood on his jacket. Someone might be hurt. Then again it might just as easily be vomit for all she knows at this distance. They disappear from view down the alley. Kate quietly steps out from her car. Worth a look see.

It’s hard to just watch the show when the music starts playing.

She’s been parked there for almost half an hour. Mash is sure it’s her. The officer that pulled him over. What does she want? What is her name? Is she available? He should go talk to her. She’s here for a reason right, so she must want to talk to him. He should go on down there and talk to her. He spreads the blinds again slightly and looks where she’s parked.

Something has her attention up the way. He can’t see what it is from his window. She carefully opens her door and slips out. She’s alone. Something is happening. Does she have her gun in her hand? What if she gets hurt? Not on his watch. He grabs his jacket and flies down the stairs.

It takes guts to play at this level.

Trisha sees the cop from a mile away. Long before she’s across the street the familiar outline of a police interceptor hugging the shadows part way up the block.

Look over there.

She turns and sucks in a sharp breath as the police cruiser and its occupant come into focus. Her already heavy burden squirms, hitting a garbage can lid leaning against the curb. The clang of metal on concrete momentarily eclipses the nearby freeway and its endless roar.

“Shut up.” She punches the side of the man’s head and then pushes him further down the alley. Game time, no point in maintaining the act. She hits him again, making sure the cop sees it.

And as with all stupid pigs, if she serves up some slop, how can they resist. It was only a matter of time until an officer comes around that corner.

Do it! Now!

She hits the man hard on the side of the head. He gasps helplessly, too weak to stop her. He passes out swiftly, happy to escape the excitement. The man’s toxic essence cakes her, the stench of booze and vomit is overwhelming, but she’s a practised hand at the despicable. Trisha fades to the shadows easily fitting her 4ft10 inch frame into the darkness behind the main garbage bin and the brick wall.

Now we wait. Listen...careful...steady now.

The voice is always clambering for escalation, but it wants to win. Now she’s finally playing the game properly.

Preceding every storm is a terrifying calm.

At first the alley appears to be empty. Officer Kate rounds the corner feeling it prudent to keep her fire arm holstered until clear presence of danger. They must have gone in some back door. Appears to be nothing but the usual street violence. She turns to leave and as she does a small noise draws her eyes back.

A little ways in she can see some one laying in the dirt near the trash. The unconscious man, is breathing erratically, choking on his own spit and bile. Where’s the woman, has she been attacked as well? Maybe she ran away? A gun reflexively finds itself firmly in Officer Kate’s well trained hand.

“Ma’am!” she calls, “Are you alright. Police, Ma’am. I’m here to help.”

Trisha strikes swiftly, slashing her hand forcing the gun to drop and skid away.

“I don’t need your fucking help.” Raining blows down upon Officer Kate, Trisha’s fists pound on her standard issue Kevlar and to a greater degree clawing through the leather that protects her forearms as Kate tries desperately to defend her most vulnerable areas. The gun skids off into shadow.

Kate struggles to breath as a wild knee smashed into the side of her head. The ground rises to meet her face, kissing her good night. The stars spin, and an army of disembodied voices drowns out her own. There’s not even time to realize whats happening before she passes out.

Trisha stands up victorious. Jumping around like a fool she wipes her bloody hands on her shirt, picks up the gun and points it at different places deciding which is best. She doesn’t see Mash’s punch coming. A straight hook with a running start directly to the temple, twisting a 20 degree downward slope just like he’d practised at Dynasty’s Dojo.

“Officer...officer.” he shakes her gently and taps her on the cheek, the side with less purple.

Kate’s eyes flutter open, she see’s Mash, he’s smiling, he’s hansom...she’s alive. He points at the small women unconscious beside them and then the gun and she rubs her head and he rubs her hand. They say nothing, though they look at each other for a long time.

To dread a dream is to live a nightmare.

Jimmy suffers lately from night terrors. Dark landscapes filled with self doubt and fearful digressions of inadequacy. Thankfully, as with all dreams its details quickly drift away to bother someone else. He glances only slightly at the book on his coffee table.

Love Everlasting. He has to admit, it comforts him in these dark times. He'd rather stay home and read it again, but he has responsibilities. Bills to pay. He'd spend more time with it tonight. He doesn't have any other plans and his fridge is stocked with his favourite smart living TV dinners.

Moments later he's mindlessly following the usual morning routine certain that at some point he'll wake up and discover he's at his real job.

Hiding in plain sight reduces costs and maximizes accessibility.

Dirty gray tarps cover the studio protecting the floor from soap and water as Dynasty continues to break her back scrubbing on hand and knee.

She hasn't slept well in days, not since the incident. The unusual man had left as quickly as he'd come. Of course she now sees it was to get as far away as possible. As she opened the box, yellow water soluble paint exploded everywhere. She was lucky to close her eyes in time to avoid being blinded. Fucking cos-eds. Pissed off that she's advertising body shaping exercises, like that contributes to some kind of "body shaming". Unbelievable.

She pours another round of sake, toasts to herself and to the cup she's placed for her absent father. She downs both and refills another round. Maybe it's time to shut it all down. This country is going crazy. Why enable them with services. Nobody appreciates personal effort anymore, it's all about product, product, product. Sales and marketing run everything now. Ads make more than anything with almost no input costs.

She tips the box back so she can see the tasteless obscenities they wrote on the bottom. Gross. These are the "good guys"? Social Warriors can kiss my ass.

She can sell the whole business if she wants to. Pay off the debt and use the remainder to setup something else. She won't have any trouble selling the business plan, she's had offers before, her school has legacy and more importantly it's in a prime location, locked in a long-term lease from before the mortgage crisis drove up costs.

A family friend wants to start a book store, maybe she can invest. Convince him to expand into a chain of stores. She always wanted to open more studios but she supposed the personal attachments...her father's memory stood in the way. Looking around the studio, she can see some obvious places where even basic upgrades would really change things for the better. It's time for a new generation. Time to move on,

Already she's running through possible locations with strong retail potential. If she plays her cards right, maybe she can turn a genuine profit, grow that business empire she always imagined having someday when she was just a little girl watching the respect her father inspired in all around him. Admired the loyalty his students always showed him.

She grunts to herself, decision made, then grabs a fresh rag and continues washing the walls until they look give or take as they did the day before. If she's gonna sell this place, she wants it to look like it wasn't just attacked by a group of grown children...even though that's exactly what happened.

It's rude to refuse an offer in good faith.

Old eyes blink painfully as the sun rises over the wall. Light streams through Margo's window. The retirement villa allowed a great deal of freedom to its residents. Margo sits in her chair most of the time, anyway, but she can walk well enough still. If she gets tired, a little bit of help is welcome. Jay

Andrew extends his hand. She prefers the strong arm of whoever is willing to tell her a good story and Jay tells the best ones.

They've known each other for over 20 years, worked together, if briefly when he had first published *Loved Everlasting*. She always liked Jay, a real gentleman. A writer's writer. When she was struggling during the recession, he worked even harder to get them both back in the black. In those days good hustle sold good books.

Blinking away unwanted moisture, her pupils contract tightly. She likes the sun and the grounds have a beautiful pathway that winds around some of the oldest trees in the city. She turns away from the window and looks fondly toward the well dressed man with the empathetic grin. Jay is waiting for her reply. He's asked her an important question.

"I'll do it." she finds herself saying gladly, she wants to help him.

"Thank you, Ms. Douglas, I know it'll be in good hands. It's almost time...just finishing up my last tour...Love Ever..."

He's so handsome...they tell each other stories and the afternoon passes easily by.

Though seeded, dead land won't bare fruit.

It's so loud. Carol covers her ears. Max is unmovable, holding the stair rail for support. Someone standing in the crowd holding up an air siren chanting profanity. A University staffer comes trotting down the stairs as a security guard drags yet another protester away. He whispers in Jay Andrew's ear, who in turn frowns and nods, then turns to the mic. Apparently, it isn't enough for the protesters to be heard any more, they must stop their opponents from being heard as well.

The stage is quiet, the show is over. In fact it had never been allowed to start. The Sisterhood managed to plant several members throughout the audience intent on disrupting the show at all costs. The seats empty as people stream down the isles. The lights brighten as Jay Andrew explains the event has been cancelled due to concerns of possible violence or excessive disruption.

Carol recognizes a set up when she sees one. Scanning for any sign of over interested student with a camera and...bingo. Tall boy wearing the logo for her chapter house with perfect placement for a central view of the action. He's working a rather large camera no doubt signed out from local campus equipment. Carol smacks Max into action pointing up at the tall boy.

"Get him on camera!"

Max sweeps up his smartphone and records the scene, making sure to get the key shot and surveys the room for background.

"Go it!"

They watch the other boy obliviously pack up his stuff and casually walk out the main door with everyone else. Max can't believe the balls. Carol's horrified. Journalists don't make news...they report it. She sees Jay Andrew shake his head in disappointment then motions over to a man standing patiently nearby in spite of the surrounding events.

He whispers something personal, signs a book and hands it to him. Taking it gratefully, the fan shuffles off. Jay gathering the other books in their box then sits for a minute thinking at the edge of the stage. Carol sees her chance and walks up to him, note pad in hand; pencil at the ready.

"Mr. Andrew? Can I ask you a few questions, sir?"

He looks up at her, already smiling at her politeness, rare thing these days in his experience. She can't look away from his kindly eyes. They seem to actually twinkle with wonder.

“Yes, of course.”

Taking a deep breath she focuses on her own voice, waves Max over and begins the interview.

Breath, Carol, breath. Slow and steady, relax and let the words come naturally, don't force anything.

INTERVIEWER: Carol Porter here at Owlsh Hall on campus with Jay Andrew, controversial author of the middling hit *Love Everlasting*. Mr Andrew, thank you for speaking with us.

JA: Jay, please. Thanks for having me.

He shakes her hand respectfully and looks her directly in the eye while she speaks.

I: Recently, protesters have been vocally criticizing your book and your speaking engagement here on campus.

JA: I'll have to take your word for that. I travel and I only just arrived before the show. It would certainly explain a few things, though.

He motions to the room. They both nod knowingly.

I: It's widely circulated in these parts that your book, *Love Everlasting*, presents a view of women out of step with today's main stream. Care to comment?

JA: I present a view of women constructive to the goal of finding may I say it? *Love Everlasting*. When I wrote it 20 years ago, I tried to use as much universal language as I could. I wanted it to be accessible to a large male audience.

I: And to those who find your illustrations simplistic?

JA: I agree which is why so many men understand it.

They both chuckle. Max finds a great perch just behind Carol's right shoulder and settles in for the long haul.

An oasis encourages solitude, and we all need a safe place once in a while.

Stanley simply calls this place his farm. The climate is helpful for his breathing, which has become more difficult lately and would only get worse. It might have been more fitting to call it paradise. Something like a childhood dream. Comfortable in solitude and peace. He doesn't want to see the world's ugliness anymore.

As with any new enterprise, he needs to establish market share. He doesn't know how the ground will react to his efforts, but he assumes it's futile given the colours involved. He would have to nurture it, love it, to encourage growth. He's got to be consistent and plan rows well so that one row compliments another both aesthetically and nutritionally. He has to carefully ration water.

It's a satisfying way to spend his time. And quiet, though the many sounds of nature entertain and distract in turn. He thinks about carrots vs beats and ultimately goes with carrots. Several hours of careful consideration lull an afternoon gently by. Pain might even vanish occasionally in such a place.

Self respect. It's a funny idea. Stanley's officially dead as far as the outside world cares. He'd considered returning for the funeral, hoping desperately he'd meant something to his home town if nothing else. His parents are long gone and he, being an only child, discovered he had no one he wished to see. So there wasn't any point in returning.

His new life, though short lived as it's expected to be somehow feels more real than his old one now. The gloves are off, the dirt cakes his fingers, and the scent of earth and rock fills his nostrils. No clients. No rules, except the ones he creates in the fulfillment of his final days. Stanley isn't burdened

by concern or guilt, only grim determination to live every moment his way. Until the very end.

He's involved in a serious situation, but that seems to just fade away in the background. He has a garden in its infancy, and the sun is so warm. The breeze feels like god's hand. It's getting chilly and he's exhausted. Time to go back inside.

He surveys his lands from his front window. He chuckles at how normal it all looks. Of all the crazy places to end up in life, so unlike everything he's known before. Of course that's the point.

There's no escape...not from death... for any of us. He trembles sometimes when he thinks about it even this far in. Time is the most powerful reminder of one's place in the world. It's out of his hands. He could have had a nice life, and he could have faded away like so many. 75 or 80 years just like Jon. A pension, an old faded gray picture on the company wall of fame.

Then I could have died with that smile on my face, a short final surprise. Easy, but it's never gonna happen. Not for him. It's gonna be slow and painful. A punishment. Should have done more with my life. Could have tried to make it work with the people in his life. Why didn't I pay more attention when it mattered?

Stanley mixes some ginseng tea of the finest quality and contemplates his situation. Spasms every day, not debilitating, yet. But it's coming soon. Placing the tea on his coffee table, Stanley lays down on his fine down feathered sofa, coughs, looks over to Jon's war metal, then closes his eyes for a nap. His third one today.

Things are rarely what they seem, which makes knowledge supreme.

A desperate nerd might become a brave knight risking the dragon's breath for a beautiful princess. Paul Zander fancies himself such a white knight and he's anxious to prove it. He's a young man, well dressed, and his smile betrays a deep wisdom...or is it cunning? He lives in a brown stone 2 story with his mother and her two cats. Paul prefers to occupy the spare bedroom in the basement now that he's officially an adult.

His mother charges him a modest rent which he pays so she can keep enjoying her weekly cribbage game down at the community centre. She doesn't know anything about his life at college. She still thinks he's majoring in film, but he failed film 100, cause he kept wanting to stay at the social circle too long on Thursdays when his class was.

He still drives the Pontiac two door, he'd spent his summers as a teen saving up for. Light brown with darker brown interior. Beige contours reminds Paul of the good old days when he cared about such things. If he's gonna win the heart of a college girl, he checks himself, woman, he can no longer afford the luxury of such mundane attachments.

He keeps his life as it is because it works. It's stable. He needs to stay focused. It's his turn soon. Already he can smell the flowers in their hair, the sea breeze when they surround him and praise him for saving them from the big, bad misogynists. It's his time and he's already sharpening his sword.

Paul is almost 19 and he makes mistakes. As Jay Andrew steps on the stage a few meters away, after the audience has settled and the presentation is about to begin; only then does Paul stand and lift his hand high in the air. A deafening siren screams through the room, the audience spooks, several stand and yell back, someone pushes him. His other hand gives everyone the finger. Classy.

Paul yells about gender oppression, dodging attempts to stop his siren. Tumbling forward he sees a security guard at the back coming his way. Throwing the noisemaker, Paul runs desperately through the side stage door. Another protester stands on the farthest part of the room from the security guard and does the same thing covering his escape. So smooth.

He feels powerful, they'll notice him from now on. This is just the beginning.

Before he's even out of the building he's thinking about which one of the sisters he'll date first? So many options.

Paul is young...and stupid, but the door outside is just up ahead. One of those thick cross bar gym doors. He doesn't stop running, instead he drives into the bar, imagines sword and shield to protect him. It gives from the inside easily. He blows by a couple of people skulking in the bushes but he couldn't care less. He's unstoppable.

Wouldn't want to be Jay Andrew right now, he thinks. Sacrifices must be made for the greater good. Given the inflammatory posts he's already made on the University website slamming Jay Andrew and his book Love Everlasting as an alt-right patriarchate plot. After posting Jay's complete speaking schedule for the next month, he expects a swift response back at the chapter house. When those of like mind work together there's no need for formal conspiracy.

He keeps his phone in his hand waiting for the 'likes' on his social wall. Such are the immediate concerns of the white knight.

A close call isn't a relief.

Officer Kate "Wiggles" Warchowski stares impassively at Trisha across from booking. Her face is swelling in spite of the ice pack, Mash was taken for his witness interview some time ago. He'd be sent home after that, Kate won't have a chance to see him again for some time. She thinks about him a lot as she rubs her jaw. He saved her life. A civilian. She's not sure how she feels about that.

Then she thinks about this little piece of work she's arrested. Trisha Brownbear. Looks like petty theft leading to attempted murder was just the beginning. The word troubled youth was being thrown around.

Prairie Cree, city born. The optics are bad. Local authorities have already pushed the button on the expected federal response. A special unit is on its way. The overly calm and well composed prisoner is dragged away to holding. She never breaks her cold stare. Until she's out of view Kate sees neither hate nor rage. Only a cold, deep, indifference.

Kate isn't particularly religious, but she's seen evil in those eyes. And it's changed her...

Can't avoid consequences for ever.

Ben finally reflects on his life. Crack has now taken control of his every motivation. He hasn't been to class in weeks, essentially writing off this semester. He feels like shit. Kyle just keeps handing him the shovel and Ben keeps digging. It's his name on the lease so he just keeps giving Kyle free rent. Eventually, they'll get kicked out, since rent doesn't get paid anymore.

So it isn't the biggest surprise when police catch on to Kyle's little operation. Nor is it unexpected to find himself sitting beside Kyle in a holding cell waiting for arraignment. The shaking was getting worse, looking at the sweat beading up on Kyle's forehead, Ben feels like crying. The nausea keeps him in check though.

Blurred, he can still see enough through his failing eyes, to make out a thin little woman being pushed past their cells to the isolation rooms. Did she see him, too? Pretty, athletic, scantily dressed. He guesses she's a working girl, but why'd she need 3 guards and full containment vest?

Kyle throws up in the corner barely missing Ben's outstretched leg. Ben looks reflexively with disgust and when he looks back the woman and the guards are gone.

A broken record still plays good music some of the time.

He's been home all night...hasn't he? Jimmy has a headache. And there's that book again sitting on the coffee table. Love Everlasting. He's sure he'd put it on the bookshelf yesterday. How strange...he feels he should read it again. No, he has to leave right away if he's gonna make it to work on time.

Maybe today that cute secretary on 3rd will smile when he says hi again. He straightens his plain black tie with red stripes. Runs his hands down his legs to draw the crease out. Should he wear a light sweater? Not today. The gray Jacket needs some play.

Though his socks don't match, as they often don't, Jimmy steps out for the day.

The smallest things can have the biggest impact.

Margo is good at keeping secrets. A package arrived for her several days earlier, just as promised, and she keeps it safe in her middle dresser drawer. She's been instructed not to open it and to not tell anyone about it. She keeps the smooth brown paper package with her old jewelry so the nurses at the home know it's not to be touched. They didn't seem overly interested anyway, assuming in passing it to be worthless junk sent from a relative.

Margo of course knows better. It's too soon to open it anyway. Jay Andrew specifically asked that it be opened on a certain day. He's finishing a colleges tour promoting his literary fiction, Love Everlasting. Timing is everything in this business. Margo was once a professional agent once, she knows how to handle such things with the highest degree of discretion.

Placing the calendar back on her dresser, she heads down the hall for her weekly painting class.

Distraction or digression, what motivates a man?

Mash isn't paying attention to the intermediate Kamura kata instruction that Dynasty continues to try and teach him during his private lesson. His mind is obviously elsewhere fixed squarely on Officer Kate. Is she ok? He hadn't heard anything more after that night almost two weeks ago. Is it all in his head?

"Ok Mash, take a break. Grab some water." Dynasty seems to have her own concerns barely looking at him as she turns away to pluck her own bottle from atop one of the iron free weights stacked against the nearest wall.

"I'm sorry, Sensei. I'm all over the place today." He chuckles nervously.

"It's fine. Really." She smiles easily. At least she's in a good mood.

"Sensei, can I ask you a personal question?" he doesn't wait for the answer.

Dynasty glances sideways, not really sure where he's going with this.

"I met a girl...lady...women." He shakes his head. Language has become so complicated. His feeling are pretty simple.

Dynasty relaxes and nods for him to continue evoking the same expressionless face her father would in such situations.

"The thing is...I don't really know how to approach her again. I'm sure she's busy and if she's interested she'd have called me or something right?"

"Does she have your number?"

"Well...ya I think she would have to... given her job and well...with what happened a couple weeks ago..."

"What happened?" Dynasty pulls her leathery black hair tighter in her scrunchy.

He tells the story about the alley, the violence and his surprising response. He remembers being so angry when he saw that sick woman hitting Kate. Can't explain where the courage to step in with such assertive finality came from. It felt right, it felt natural. He remembered his training and he didn't do anything more than what was absolutely necessary.

Secretly, she is pleased to hear a student used her teachings correctly, but she doesn't change her expression.

"Should I maybe stop by the station to see her? I don't want to creep her out." Dynasty can see that distant look in his eye. They wouldn't get any further into the kata tonight.

She thinks about telling him the truth. That she's the last one to ask, the last one to understand love. She's got a great handle on her life, financially speaking, her career is solid, she knows how to take very good care of herself and her responsibilities. She is, however, very much single and as lost as anyone when it comes to finding that special... In her case it seems even harder, in that her type is so rare given Dynasty doesn't really socialize, and her only gay friends seem to be men.

Instead she does what her father would have done. She pulls out a vague and yet apparently applicable piece of ancient eastern wisdom.

"Koketsu ni irazunba koji wo ezu, Mash-san. Which means, if you do not enter the tiger's cave, you will never catch its cub."

He nods, knowingly, emphatically. Mash suddenly realizes he wants lots of babies.

"You're right!" He apologizes as he reaches for his coat. "Thanks, Sensei!"

Dynasty stares blankly at the back of his retreating head. He even forgets to bow. She shakes her head and starts cleaning up.

They tie us up and drag us around like a stubborn dog.

Trisha grimaces. They'd taken the vest off when they threw her into the isolation cell normally used by the local drunk or the occasional schizophrenic. She feels nothing. Not even anger. This place smells like vomit. Thankfully the blood she's covered in starts to rot. She finds the scent of death is preferable.

I said they tie us up...

"I heard you the first time! Aaaaaahh, will you just shut up!" Now she's angry, only the voice can make her angry.

She looks around critically. There's no way out and frankly she isn't much interested in getting out anyway. Not yet. She has a plan. This was all part of a plan. She makes a list in her head of all the faces she's seen in this place, all the names she's heard. She assesses their ranks, and personal traits as best she can.

She's thinking through scenarios with those two young guys in the outer cell. Chances are good they'd be on the same transport and with over crowding in the penal system completely out of control, she may even end up in the same facility.

She needs allies for the plan to work, and jail makes the most sense given the type of recruitment she has in mind. Only the most reliable of psychopaths can serve her needs. Violent specialists of the first order. These and other grandiose thoughts pervade her little mind.

The view hole slides open and a guard looks in on her. She smiles and dips her hips a little in a sexy sort of bow. She'd been playing with her clumped hair. For all outside appearances she's a normal if someone flirtatious young woman. Of course as with many little women she seems much younger than she is. To a practised hand, she knows exactly what she's doing.

Officer Robert Gonzales shakes his head at her. He'd heard her yell at no one and yet here she is feigning perfect sanity. Textbook selfish manipulator. Wiggles wasn't kidding about this one. She's danger with a capital D. Trisha pouts and runs her finger down her torso...slowly. For Christ's sake, is she serious.

Robert slides the view port closed and steps back taking a deep drawn out breath. Signing the sheet of paper hanging near the door and noting the time, Robert begins preparations for transferring the prisoner. The truck is expected to arrive any minute now. He checks the restraints and considers sedating Trisha.

Ya they had better. He has a bad feeling about this one. Extra precautions are in order. He reaches for the tablet on the desk and upon bringing up the appropriate screen, he makes a request for the station medic to sedate the prisoner for transport. While he waits for someone to show up, he steps out the back door for a smoke.

"I've seen that girl around, man." It's Greg Finkler, the desk jockey from equipment processing Robert absolutely despises. Why is he out here anyway. Greg doesn't smoke.

"You don't say." Robert tries to be as obvious in his disinterest as possible, but Greg persists.

"Ya man, she works east side." Greg leans in to speak quietly. "I've had a taste. Not bad."

Robert stares at him hard and Greg pulls back grinning like kid on Christmas.

"Buy hey, who hasn't man. She gets around." Greg shuffles off throwing Robert a casual over the shoulder salute.

What a prick, he thinks as he watches Greg enter the station.

Finally able to enjoy his well earned cigarette in peace, Robert sits on the ugly green bench the union had installed during negotiations last year. He tugs hard and exhales harder. He feels old, been working the beat for only 5 years or so and yet he feels old already. He notices the aching knees, the sore back, the increasingly cynical opinion of the people he sees everyday. He doesn't trust people like he used to, knows them too well, he supposes. Have people always been like this?

At only 32 road years old, he's seen the worst the public has to offer on a daily basis for quite some time. It's a miracle he has as much peace of mind as he does. He likes Kate, though, she's cool and easy going, makes the job easier. Even his wife likes Kate. They went to high school together years ago. In fact it was Kate that introduced them 3 years ago at a cafe they were resting in between routes.

It's a small world, he thinks as he takes a final puff, then tosses the butt in the ashtray/garbage can. A small pain begins in the small of his back. Time to move. He stands and walks back toward the building and his waiting duty inside. Surely the medic will have shown up by now. He pushes the door open and steps inside.

The scene that greets him is both one of carnage and disbelief. The medic lays motionless with a needle stuck in his chest, blood trailing toward the isolation chamber. He seems to be breathing, if shallow. Desks are turned over and phones thrown against the wall. The room is otherwise empty, and the isolation cell is wide open.

Officer Robert has his gun in his hand already and hits the alarm button on the nearby wall. The lights start blinking but there's no sound. A large digital map on the west side wall, that matches a similar map in every main room, indicates the location of alarm, other officers will be entering momentarily.

Robert carefully approaches the isolation cell where he finds Trisha attempting to pull Greg's head off. She pulls like a wild animal. Greg is barely able to hold her back. Robert trains the gun on her.

“Stop! Now!”

Greg is choking, she’s playing with her food. She lets go, then looks up and smiles. Greg must have opened the cell. Fucking, idiot.

“I know this guy.” She laughs and laughs and laughs.

Life isn't easy.

Jay Andrew is tired. He spends all his time running his studio. He writes his books, he makes connections, does the seminars and still makes almost no money. Long tail economics is the only part still backing him. Reliable sales each year of Love Everlasting still pays for modest living of he keeps his overhead low. Living on advances of anywhere from 20,000 to 50,000 would be nice if he could get it, might help convince him to write more books, though he continues to make his living as a writer best he can. He almost made the New York Times best seller list once a few years ago when he first released Love Everlasting.

It’s been getting harder lately. Publishers needs to sell books meanwhile websites are making more on ads. Now with the extra competition of ebooks and self publishing, less profit in the market generally, things are getting bad. More and more of his time is spent promoting his books, taking over the roles the publisher used to handle.

And then there are the protesters. Hounding him at all his shows. Undermining, quite on purpose, his ability to sell his book. If he did something like that to them there’d be consequences but he is completely unprotected, taking on all risk and all loss while those that would join him find the most cunning ways to avoid personal accountability while maximizing profit on his good works.

He’s having trouble remembering why he became a writer in the first place. Was it another book that showed him how to write a meaningful manuscript if not masterful. Was it even possible to make ones own mark in the literary world today or has it all been done. Are there simply too many people vying for the same short list of prizes.

According to his research, the top 1% of writers make a pretty good living, everyone else though could make more money working at a Burger King. Jay considers himself a professional writer, in that he spent the early part of his career writing for someone else, honing his skills. Now he writes his own books and discovers it’s not so easy to face the business reality. He thought he was better than most, and maybe he is, but when this many institutional forces work for your competitors There’s no need to work directly against him.

Guess everyone’s a victim to something. Besides the protesters have filled that roll so well. He reads their tweets and their blogs, and he shakes his head in wonder at how so many people can make so much content in response to his work yet he can’t pay the rent with the sales. If only he had a piece of that action. He could write the most outlandish, crazy, offensive garbage he could think of and then make a fortune on the commentary.

Yet he won’t do it. He can’t do it. Just not that type of person. Something always holds him back. Dignity, maybe. It isn’t enough to make money, he wants to matter. Wants his writing to matter to somebody. The money is only the best way to keep score. Assuming he has any score to keep.

So when he finds himself sitting in yet another publishers lobby. While they “negotiate”, translation: bend him over. He smiles that perfect smile and thanks them for the privilege. His slacks are pressed, his tie is straight. He shows respect and honour to his craft, and in many ways that is why he doesn’t succeed.

There are rules to business, rules not of his own making, and contrary to popular belief these rules are

not the natural result of conservation of energy. They are the result of history and context, and like it or not, fair or not, they are the common narrative in which any narrator might aspire to apply their skills. It is both a prison and a blueprint.

The trick is to place ones energies in a container with potential to bare fruit. How many books can one person write and to what frequency? One a year or two, some say 3 months and some say 3 years. When Jay does the math, he sees only one path to success that doesn't involve bribery or manipulation. A lottery ticket hit, and beyond that volume.

So like most authors he writes as much as he can get away with. He tries to save his best lines for his best works, but it's a challenge when your best work is unacknowledged and you have no way to know it was your best work. Tough to adapt without stimulus. Growing skills usually requires a concrete understanding of success and failure. That's a powerful attribute to a publishing healthy publishing industry.

In the absence of a rational business cycle, Jay can only keep writing and hope for the best, but he doesn't like the popular audience very much. These are not the people he is writing to, and he has no idea where they are now or where he fits in a business cycle he's not even sure is still there. He can't chase markets and write at the same time. Maybe other, younger author's can, but he can't.

The audience has to be somewhere, of that he has no doubt. There's still a gravitas to authorship that resonates in the proper circles. It's not all digital. It just seems that getting into those circles is harder than ever. It seems to be more about him, the author, rather than the book. His reputation, his mystique. Is it really all about celebrity. He is now the product, and if he can't sell himself, his books are a non-starter.

Jay Andrew sleeps soundly having exhausted himself living another day as a professional writer. He's not even the slightest bit aware whats going on in social media. Would he sleep better or worse knowing he has less influence over his own life than bloggers hundreds of miles away, uncontrolled, driven by their own nefarious motives?

Probably, because Jay has a great imagination, and not a bigoted bone in his body. He'd probably write a book about it, a positive book. Something that tells the world not to fear new media but to instead embrace it, to find balance with the craft. Not because he doesn't trust technology, but because he wisely doesn't trust mankind.

We all keep secrets.

Occasionally, Margo's thoughts are drawn to the brown paper package. It makes her feel special which is a rare thing in this place in spite of the ornate features. The independent living home is if nothing else, extremely regular. Everything is planned in accordance to provincial regulations. The administrative staff are technically employees of the state, as private control of such facilities had been rubbed away years ago by politics and central planning.

Margo likes helping Jay. She still remembers reading his first book when he was just a young idealistic writer decades ago. Talented, deserved better, but then so many do. There's always a short list of authors worth genuine respect. Jay needs a keeper and protector, a strong woman in his life. That boy just doesn't know how to take care of himself properly.

When the time is right, she'll reveal to the world his latest work as instructed. She smiles, knowingly. Can it sense her thinking about it? She wants to read it, is so grateful to be the first. She misses working with authors, especially ones who don't need editors.

Margo figures given its weight and general dimensions she knows what it is but not what it's about. Too thin to be an epic and he wouldn't insult her with tiny font. She could open it, but she's an honest

women and promised not too. Patience, she tells herself, only a few more weeks to go.

Those who hold are also held.

“Mr. Cassowary, can I interest you in some of our literature.”

Stanley finds himself at the front door of what on the surface appears to be a rather ordinary farm house looking out at a weaselly looking young man caught stuffing flyers in Stanley’s mailbox for the upcoming elections. He’s become fond of wearing blue denim and cotton.

Apparently the Opposition haven’t been doing so well nationally and are renewing their efforts locally. From Stanley’s perspective, it’s pretty clear politicians are the worst people to ever live. The process corrupts absolutely and the endless supply of dumb young people willing to waste their precious time to help these pandering sycophants was intolerable.

“No,” he tries to close the screen door in the guys face, to make a point, he guesses. But it won’t close, having gotten caught on the young man’s courier bag which he had only moments earlier deliberately placed in the way.

“Don’t you care about your country, sir?”

Oh, God, here we go. The only thing worse than the regular visits from the children of Jesus are the glassy eyed poli-activists. The way they smugly feel simultaneously humble and yet better than everyone else not joining them in their crusade. Infuriating. Has this kid ever earned an honest dollar? How much weekly allowance has he lived on now for most of his short adult life. Does he buy bubble gum with a credit card?

“Look, I don’t want your propaganda. I don’t like your ideology so I won’t like your platform. Leave me alone, please.” He tries again to close the door.

The young man frowns as though kicked in the shins.

“But...”

“I said NO! Give your own money away if you care so much, stop trying to take mine!”

The political idealist pouts and mutters something about old bullies, picks up his bike and rides further down the road to the next farm. He make sure to flip the bird as soon as he’s off the property.

Stanley grunts as a phantasm of real pain shoots up his back when he sees the little twerp left a pile of bullshit at the foot of his front step. Forcing him to open the door, bend all the way down, soil his fingers touching the filth he now holds at arms length as he walks behind the house and drops it all in the fire pit. He’d burn it later tonight along with the next batch of financial disclosure documents.

It wasn’t long until someone from the the Ruling Party came sniffing around too. Dutifully ignoring the large, NO TRESSPASSING sign, Stanley had prominently placed beside the front door vainly hoping he would be free of these pests after the germ this morning. No such luck.

Nothing can stop the Juggernaut that is an election.

With friends like these...

Carol expects more from her chapter sisters. She lands an exclusive with the enigmatic Jay Andrew and then spends days carefully crafting it for publication only to be told her story arc is terribly misapplied. No gotcha moments, not even the hint of a biased question. Carol had applied a journalistic neutrality so rare in today’s academic climate she all but disqualified herself from ever being published anywhere.

Had she slandered Jay Andrew, or tricked him into saying what he must surely think about women well then... He must always be judged by what we all know he really thinks rather than what he actually

does or says. Everything is code for some insidious agenda. Crisis thinking on steroid's. That's a scoop, that's what readers want and news is always about what the audience wants now just like any other form of entertainment business.

Carol had done a good job, if it was 1968. Even-handed and honest, she thinks about the 1968 Newsman's Bonspiel mug she still pours her coffee into every morning. She remembers fondly seeing it at the antique mall a few years ago when she was figuring out her life and knew she wanted to be a journalist. Something about the lifestyle. Sure she got distracted by the hoopla of campus life, but she still feels the call.

Max stands helpless behind her, literally speechless, as he and Carol are told the reasons their story won't run. Carol gets angry and quits the campus rag expressing some choice words of discontent. Real feminism is surely dead. These people aren't interested in womens' issues or genuine dialogue. They just want power through story and they want to get paid asserting it.

If a story doesn't fit the narrative, then don't bother writing it because no one will ever be allowed to read it. Well written or not. Factual or not. Go ahead and post it online where it's drowned out by endless misdirection, repetition, and over competition with no coherent promotional strategy. Everything will have the return of a one off, forget about momentum or building an audience. Making content is for fools.

Life opens up for Carol and Max in this moment. They are for the first time seeing how things really are and it scares them. The implication of doubting every previous belief becomes a necessary inevitability. Everyone is part of the problem, their friends are part of the problem. Their very existence is being used as a demographic wedge to control other demographics. Race wars and word police get ratings.

Carol and Max look at each for a very long time both knowing what neither is willing to say. They are monsters of their own making and there doesn't seem to be any way out. So this is what finding oneself can feel like. They expected more ice-cream and cotton candy and all that sweet sugar the real world is supposed to be made of. Reality tastes like prison, everything requires permission and some how you're never the one who gets it.

By the end of the week, Carol and Max have dropped out of school. Carol starts writing a romance novel to pass the time and Max gets a full time job at the co-op down the street from his parents house. Just another couple of dreams unfulfilled. Two more smart people, buttered and battered, and ultimately served up as chum for the larger group of dim consumers that now run everything. It might be tragic if it weren't so everyday normal.

Justice delayed isn't justice denied.

Paul is interested in the future. Great wealth and power has been stolen from the innocent. So many inequities to be corrected . Paul follows the instructions exactly as his sisters supplied them, not everything can be handled online. He has no reason to deviate, he wants to be part of it. Paul is emotionally invested.

He quietly records the encounter between the chapter sister and the professor from the safety of a nearby group of bushes. He'd graduated to this position after his successful activity involving Jay Andrew. Still hasn't gotten play, yet, but it's coming...

As the Movement expands its interests, Paul and those like him remain a big part of the plan. There's an election coming up. Paul is direct, but respectful. Moody, but generally kind. He loves his mother, he loves his work. The movement admires these qualities. It's marketable. He's the fuel of social mobbing. Or at least a convenient bottom line.

Upon realizing he's loyal and can influence opinions online, the Movement escalates Paul's involvement. Just a little thing, not honest but necessary for the greater good. He's working for his position. And soon he'd get some more intimate attention.

Ignoring common sense, Paul continues to record as the chapter sisters pretends to be interested in the professor, she's over 18 but it won't matter. She's careful to block her facial expressions from the camera with his silhouette having done this several times before. They want him to look as guilty as possible with maximum narrative leverage later. This guy might be better off if he kills himself. Paul chuckles absently.

She quietly draws the professor toward her, and as soon as he leans forward to meet her lips...she pulls back dramatically horrified. Throwing her hands against him, the professor stands shocked and confused. She runs away as though she's just been attacked. The professor looks around scared, before walking quickly in the opposite direction. Unfortunately for him, the Sisterhood knows all the areas on campus where the security cameras can't reach. So there is only one tape and they have it.

Paul is thoughtlessly destroying another life.

Are we the masters of our own domain?

Jimmy kind of freaks out when he catches himself running his fingers over the title letters of his worn hard copy of Love Everlasting again. How many times has he read it now? He can't remember. He's struggling to make sense of his lost time. He puts it back on his bookshelf. When he shuts his eyes he can almost see the words, the elegant shape of those perfectly balanced paragraphs. The total lack of pretension. What's an adverb?

He enters his shower and begins his day.

Confusion is a sign of wonder.

Kate has re-read the message Mash left for her at the front desk about a dozen times. She loves the flowers. She wants to say yes.

...flowers as rare as I feel you are...

She really likes Mash...but she won't call him back. She doesn't know why and tries not to think about it.

Even when all the pieces are clearly placed on the board, the next move remains a mystery.

Mash waits, but the call never comes. Days pass and the call never comes. Eventually, he moves on. A little darker, a little meaner. He was so sure there was something between them. Guess he was wrong. Wasn't even close to the first time.

How can anyone love him, he was foolish to believe it in the first place. Love is a cruel joke. An illusive fantasy ginned up by movies and old stories from old people who still care about such things. Hadn't Kate verified his worthlessness by rejecting him just like they always do.

Mash eats half his breakfast, his appetite isn't what it used to be. He fails to tuck in his shirt, and he no longer presses his pants or shaves. He exists. Without meaning or purpose, he simply exists, and not much more. He stops taking lessons with Dynasty, hanging out with friends, or going out generally. Mash is depressed and feels there isn't much point in anything anymore.

What is a life without love? He asks the emptiness around him. Not much it seems to answer back.

It's in just this state of mind that a certain book finds itself in his weakened hands. Mash opens it dimly as he reads the title. He'd bought it while back at some seminar. Love Everlasting with cryptic personal message scrawled on the inner cover.

“Don’t give up, Mashfiq. — Jay Andrew”

Mash reads, then cries, he still doesn’t know what he did wrong and finally...sleeps.

Partner or dependent, no way to know until it’s too late.

Dynasty likes visiting the University. The stairs give her a great work out, and the long hallways always offer an opportunity to stretch the legs and test the endurance. She’s gotten older but she’s still in amazing shape. Had to be, for her students if nothing else. She carries her legacy with serious and sacred intent. Someday she would pass on the knowledge to her own family should she be lucky enough to form one.

Bert works days at the science lab, but his book fetish is presenting an entrepreneurial opportunity. He put the “back soon” sign on the front window, pulls down the blinds so random students don’t bother them. Turning, he greets his old friend who he has been expecting.

“Dynasty, my dear girl it is so nice to see you.” Bert is easily twice Dynasty’s age hovering around 60 for some time now.

They hug warmly. She narrowly avoids knocking over a beaker.

“Now let me understand, you want to buy into my book hobby? It’s not really a business, you know? Publishing is dying and book stores long before that.”

“Then we innovate. I can help with that. I’ll advise you on how to set it up, I’ve done it all before. We go bigger, push the scale up. It’s the single location book store that’s dead. We need companion services. A coffee shop, trinkets. Books are the binding...the backbone, but a store still needs to be a store.”

“But I don’t make any money at it, you know? I probably break even once in a while and lose money the rest of the time.” Bert looks over the tops of his glasses. He doesn’t doubt his skills, but is Dynasty really committed.

“Then I’ll get a good price.” She laughs easily. He trusts her.

Bert thinks about it, he always wanted to own his own real business. Do it full time, do what he loves. He’s just not good with people, he misses the walks he used to take with Kobo-san. Dynasty’s father. The international awkwardness seemed to dispel the social doubts and they became great friends for decades.

It’s fortunate that Dynasty is great with people, just like her father. Practically everyone responds to her. She can sell anything, even Bert’s jewellery. And she can tolerate Bert, has most of her life already.

“How much do you think we can make?”

“Well honestly I don’t know. But I’ll put in enough to make sure you’re paid and can set up the proper facilities.”

“How much time?”

“Get me something to sell within 3 months and I think we’ll have a good start.” Dynasty likes the questions. He’s in for sure.

“Mind if I get some help?”

“Please do, Bert-san. More importantly find us some rare books we can work with.” They both laugh now.

“Oh, we’re gonna make some money.” He’s already running through a mental list of independent shop

keeps in town and digital authors he can bring on his team or collaborate with. New content is expensive, but maybe there's an opportunity in old books. Content already vetted and proven to make sales in the past. Perhaps there's a way to bring that content into the modern age. Maybe a poster on campus will help. Gotta build some street cred before they go after the chain distributors.

He holds out his hand. Dynasty takes it and they shake. Partners.

"Thank you, Dynasty, I appreciate the opportunity."

She nods, respectfully.

We always pay for our mistakes one way or the other.

Kyle passed out a little while ago. Occasionally, Ben sees him shake as if running somewhere desperately. Poor guy, he isn't going anywhere.

Suddenly the emergency lights come to life. The door swings open, startling Ben rudely. Three officers run by his cell toward the isolation wing. What the fuck's going on. He pokes Kyle with his foot, but he doesn't respond. Sweat beads everywhere he sees exposed skin. Shit. Ben scratches his shoulder without relief.

He hears people barking orders up ahead. An officer runs back through, is that blood on her vest? The emergency lights in the corner are distractingly bright, even if there's no siren it sucks. He hears a name over and over, Trisha Brownbear. He also hears the words bitch, crazy, scary, and a string of other adverbs of similar nature.

Someone's hurt bad, two more officers run by carrying a stretcher, and some sheets. Holy shit, it's bad.

"What's happening?" Ben yells at anyone he thinks can hear him scratching his arm intensely. His body aches competing for his attention.

"Shut up!" Officer Robert smacks the shatter proof glass with his bloody fist and smears it as he stalks back toward the main station. A woman's screeching laughter drifts in as the door behind him closes.

Ben shrinks back. It's too much. This is all too real. He continues scratching his arm. So itchy and it's so cold in here. He wipes sweat from his face as the shakes set in. Fiercely pathetic, Ben transforms into a cockroach, recently stepped on.

Anticipation taints the mundane, even a sure thing carries risk.

As the big day approaches, only a few more, Margo feels more and more excited. Jay hasn't returned, but he hadn't said he would so she wasn't waiting. His instructions were clear and she had given him her word. He had chosen her because she was trustworthy and knows about such things. She tries to focus on other things to pass the time more quickly.

Some groups are based on what you are, not what you believe; think, say, or do. To be accepted in a group when one doesn't naturally belong is called honorary. Margo is an honorary member of the local Jewish tabernacle. She's actually Presbyterian but she loves to sing and there's no other choir group in the community.

Luckily she's known many of its other members for decades due to years of interfaith outreach back when such efforts were in vogue. That's how things were done back in the day. Making due meant getting along. Several of her authors come from this community. She's one of the stronger voices in her row, and she spends her days surrounded by friends.

Though it's somewhat unusual for someone of her religious background to live in the "Abba Brodt Halls", she earned it through many dedicated years of good work for the church and surrounding community including key synagogues during difficult cultural times and they'd collectively arranged

her retirement in line with her preferences. She never left her neighbourhood and intended to die in it.

God willing, her final days will unfold as expected and she'll embrace her promised reward. She feels so grateful. So many friends of so many different kinds of peoples, Praise him. Praise him. And may his blessing be upon Jay in these turbulent times. Give him strength as he faces the Adversary who will surely oppose him.

Plant the seed and watch it grow.

Bert sits patiently in the waiting lobby of the ministry of justice where he is handing in his incorporation forms. They're calling the company and all locations Our Tribal Circles Books. He has two employees and an silent partner handling the financing of his initial set up. Maybe it's all just a dream. Given the quality of his sources and the lack of competition remaining in the marketplace he figures he'll break even on Dynasty's investment within six months and then profitable from there on out. At first modestly, and then a slow gradual growth for the next year.

Of course it's an unpredictable age and businesses usually fail at the best of times so he's not taking any chances if he doesn't have to. The only way they can make this work is to find new money and new efficiency. Period. There is no room for waste. Loss can't be tolerated, and they must try to make value from anything they can.

He'd bought a second hand ford truck, and custom paint job. A visible printing of the new phone number and website grace the tale gate. His cousin takes care of the web content for now, and even set up a secure order form so he could handle the requests and feedback from his growing audience. A real digital strategy would come soon, once they finish setting up the core business. In fact the internet will be critical to accessing the new markets.

"Bert Johnson."

He looks up upon hearing his name. The hipster girl working the till, overprotected behind a plastic window, waves him over. He smiles and hands her the papers through a narrow slit.

"I believe it's all in order."

She looks it over casually, makes sure nothing obvious is missing. It seems to pass initial scrutiny, so she turns away with it and walks out of site. When she returns she has a light yellow sheet which she hands back to him.

"Debit, or Credit Card. We don't take cash any more."

Bert reads the yellow paper. No cash. He had no plans to use cash but now that it isn't an option he suddenly wants to.

"Debit."

She hands him the debit machine and he transfers almost \$900.00. It ticks. They wait. Approved.

"It can take a few weeks to make make sure the proposed name is available. If not then you will need to spend an additional 100 dollars for each successive name search. You'll receive a notice in the mail at the address you provided. Have a nice day." She's already lost in her smart phone.

Bert reads the receipt, next up, deposit on the studio, and then property insurance.

When we live in our heads, all manner of shadows take root.

Trisha is comfortable alone in her cell. Well, she's never really alone...or comfortable. But the plan is working.

Everything is just fine.

“I know that.” she says. So far she’s been visited by several specialists. She assumes they are still trying to figure out what to do with her. Does she belong in the corrections system or a hospital.

She’s violent, but is she irredeemable. Is she sick? Treatable? The provincial Minister of Justice decides she’s an opportunity. Given her aboriginal decent, perhaps reservation partners could be brought in for a consult. This is really there territory. She’s likely abused and drugged out, that’s the convenient narrative for now. This can’t be her fault. The ministry is already moving, important people notified. It’s just a matter of time now.

They’d run blood tests the night she’d come in and found nothing. Remarkably clean for street class. Since then they’d also confirmed no major infections or long term conditions. The MRI clearly shows the traditional patterns of psychopathy and her behaviour would suggest early childhood abuse. This came as no surprise to any of those who had interacted with her.

There’s no getting around it. Trisha Brownbear is a killer waiting to happen. A sadist. A very sick young women. There’s no easy way to deal with a predator like her. She simmers in her own sense of awesomeness. Look how they all run around, moving in predictable policy driven ways. The feds would be more fun.

Thud. The door vibrates as Trisha snaps her head toward the sound. The view port slides open and a giant of a man peers in, his skin as black as coal against the bloodshot whites of his eyes. She can see the round halo of his wide rimmed brown hat shading his face from the cruelty of the overhead neon lights. In the shadows, she makes nothing of his expression.

“Trisha Brownbear.” A statement not a question. “Step back.” An order, not a request.

She crouches back against the far wall, not sure where this was going but knowing well enough what they would expect from her. Until she could gauge the personality traits of this new player, she’d play innocent, weak. Anyone of substance would see through her games easily enough, but even that served to separate others on her list by the potential threat they pose.

The door slides into the wall, the giant bends low, squeezing through the frame. He reaches forward and roughly grabs her by the back of her neck and tosses her into the waiting circle in the main hall. The others press her hard into the ground, ignoring her grunts and dramatic screeches. She puts up a terrific fight for someone so small.

The giant steps into the hall, leans down and swats her hard across the lower jaw. She concedes the fight falling helplessly into darkness. The last thing she notices is the taste of her own blood in her mouth as her face begins to swell. She doesn’t like her own blood.

Sometimes the direct approach is best.

Detective Chris Nobody rubs the back of his hand with satisfaction. The best part of his job is seeing monsters like this bleed. He’d just gotten off the plane an hour ago and some action was good for shaking the rust. This is quite the piece of work. He’d read her file on the way over.

There was a series of unsolved murders through the prairies that fit details related to this case. The priority now is to get further information from the suspect. Suspect? Please, one of the local officers caught her red handed and got a couple stitches for her trouble. She’s lucky to be alive.

If he had it his way they’d just leave this bitch in a field to rot.

He motions his guys to clean her up and drag her into the field car. They were going to a special facility. A new place, made for people just like her. She isn’t suited for corrections, maybe a lobotomy. He chuckles to himself. In the end that seems far too humane for this piece of trash. He prefers the old ways. Beat her to a bloody pulp and then leave her naked and helpless to die scared and alone just like

her victims.

But first the doctor wants a word with her. The minster has called in all on the favours on this one. Suppressed media coverage, hidden detainment, and best of all a professional extraction team. Finally some of those Intelligence resources get to work for the good of real Citizens.

The “Circle” is a few hours away, deep in an Indian reserve, protected from the prying eyes of the media. Once Trisha is safely secured in the back cage, Detective Nobody slips deftly behind the wheel. An overly thin Norwegian eases himself into the passenger seat beside him with a grimace. His mentor, a nearly retired senior(as in old) partner, Frank Horn.

Those hemorrhoids must still be bothering Frank. Chris makes a personal note to drive a little slower and avoid the bumpier of grid roads if he can.

Responsibility is a close cousin of accountability.

The movement doesn't feel guilt, but its individual members do. This conflict of emotion is hard to reconcile. Business is about people, and people never go out of business. A warped logic that seems closer to the predicted outcome than intuition would imply. The Movement finds it quite effective to work through other people rather than establishing itself as a known point of power. Maybe that's why he likes targets like Jay Andrew. He works for himself, creates his own product, big money taking down a guy like that.

It's worked out well. Revenue is up. Students are willing to hustle for the cause if nothing else. It's surprisingly natural. A trait the movement benefits from. Even those so called under-achieving people make choices every day that contribute to the cause. A willingness to better themselves while exceeding expectations. Remarkable.

If they knew how it works, would they push so far? Maybe not. The movement drives human behaviour, that's its primary function. It never feels responsible for the unintended consequences of its volunteer army. All the adaptive qualities of real people none of the accountability.

A reliable soldier is better than a drunk general.

Paul gets a text message. He reads it with a snicker. Nodding, he replies.

OK, I'LL TRY.

Paul, begins a new program. A dangerous program, but he's confident his sisters will protect him. Perhaps it's a weakness to be so loyal to strangers, they are just so damn pretty. And they smell like cinnamon. He's banking dollar bills and feels important. Paul finally enjoys his life.

He doesn't realize he's now part of some pretty terrible stuff, but somehow he doesn't notice or care. The movement is running much bigger than Paul realizes. He believes it's still about posturing for girls, nothing is really leaving campus. The internet isn't real.

He likes the attention, and if he has any reservation at all, it's that he doesn't know when it'll pay off. Chicks sure like to take their time. But then again what else is new. He crossed that bridge already. He's in. Still, its gotta happen soon or even Paul might wonder off the chosen path. Millennials aren't known for long attention spans.

Controlling territory takes a considered investment.

“Requesting entry.”

A soft women's voice that Chris immediately recognizes radiates from the wireless speaker. It's the thing he always has to deal with at this point of an operation like this. Software keeps the potential for human error down. Everything is measured, the protocol doesn't deviate and the detectives appreciate

that. It is, after all, their life on the line should anything go wrong.

Chris nods to the camera watching him from the gateway. Incoming protocol initiated. The recorded voice, a pleasant voice, a smoker he imagines, gently reveals instructions. He's heard it all before, but he has to listen anyway, it does this every time whether they like it or not. Frank uses this opportunity to scratch his ass.

"Please prepare to move forward no faster than 20km/hr when you see the green light."

Once the facial recognition programs verify them and the situation appears secure, a green light flashes as promised and they rolls forward until they enter a wide dimly lit tunnel. Chris holds steady, impressed actually. They continue to move forward at the suggested speed for a few minutes.

Frank looks out in wonder. He can feel they are still going deeper at a slight angle.

"This is new. How far down are we going?"

Everything they say can be heard by the machines. Frank imagines the sophisticated devices built into every inch of this place can detect basically anything above the atomic level. Heart beat, breathing, the flow of blood through the circulatory system down to the specific vein. Materials are inventoried, and everything is broken down and recycled as needed by custom engineered 3D printers.

He shakes his head as the soft woman's voice returns.

"Details about facility operations are strictly prohibited to authorized personal only. Partners and clients have all signed a "blackout clause". (Basically a non-disclosure with a termination on breach of a lethal type)

"Well..." says Detective Chris, turning toward his partner with a chuckle. "I suggest you shut the fuck up."

A real man knows the value of hard work.

Max cashes his first pay cheque. It feels strange or at least unfamiliar. He works now he gets paid. His parents are very understanding of his choice to move back home and enter the labour force. They aren't doing so well economically right now, and freeing up tuition payments is good for everyone. In return for keeping his room, Max contributes some of his modest cheque to the household. This being his first, he's allocating \$400 to his parents, because of his contribution power and energy is paid for everybody.

Max doesn't know yet, but his father lost his job last week. Laid off to make room for refugees who can work on a government stipend. This despite more than 20 years loyalty to his employer, almost no sick days, no major vacation or time off. None of it compares to the savings his company enjoys now that they aren't obliged to cover his full pension or that of his entire generation.

Luckily Max's parents have always planned well. They have some savings, enough to sustain them for months anyway while they figure out what they want to do. The house is paid for, in fact they'd surely turn a high profit if they sold it now having bought it years ago before the local housing boom. As it is, the monthlies are manageable.

Max wants a car, but he can't yet afford one. His dad has an extra that he's been using from time to time, but he feels the need for something of his own. He's not greedy, anything that runs and doesn't drive like it's a minute past collapse should be fine. There's no lack of used vehicles available for sale at one of the many car lots in town.

Given the size of his cheque and his projected income for the next month or so he takes a chance and asks his dad for some help. He explains that he needs a car and that he really needs to borrow a small

amount of money for a down payment and then he can cover the payments. It might be a few months before he can squirrel enough extra away to pay him back.

Max isn't lazy. He writes it all down on paper. Does the algebra and lays it all out including repayment schedule, amount, and interest on the principal. Max has impressed his father. Later he would tell his wife all about the responsible young man Max is growing into and how proud he is of him. They'd always wanted more children, but Max is fulfilling all their dreams all by himself.

Max looks up expectantly waiting for his dad to reply to his business plan. With a car he can get a better job further in the city. Maybe even downtown, escape the local neighbourhood. Discover new places, people, and opportunities. Given his level of education he's willing to work his way up from the bottom. He's thinking online courses might augment his earning potential.

Max benefits from a rare disposition. Smart but not especially interested in any particular thing. Really he can do whatever needs doing as long as it keeps his mind busy and he's paid properly given his current economic goals. He likes math enough to use it, but not enough to study it. He likes buying and selling assets but not enough to personally invest in any product long term.

This makes him ultimately employable. He works hard, is very reliable, and dedicates himself completely to his task. Lacking political ambition helps him avoid conflict with middle management. On paper he is perfect, in person he is even better. His father's face is flush with pride. At first Max thinks his dad is angry, until he smiles and nods respectfully.

His dad is very impressed. Max can feel it now. Sees it in the eyes. Respect. This plan was the right move, it took many hours of preparation, but it's paying off. Good chance his dad ponies up the cash. Then he counter offers.

Given the precarious financial situation he finds himself in, and not wanting to worry Max, he thinks long and hard. Oooohs and aaaawes, then reveals the keys to his Toyota. The backup car, the one Max already drives most of the time.

"\$100 a month for a year and she's all yours."

This is even better than Max anticipated. That car is worth at least \$8,000.00 and he's gonna get it for 1200.00.

"Seriously!?" He pauses reaching for the keys shaking his head. "It's worth more than that. How about \$200.00 instead."

Stunned, his father nods agreement.

Max grabs the keys for the last time. No longer having to ask for them a day in advance. He can park it in the back by the tree like he prefers instead of having to move it at the smallest peep from his mother. Forget the basketball net, no one uses it anymore anyway.

"Deal." Max sticks out his hand to shake. His father firmly returns the grip and completes the transaction.

Our son is a man, the father thinks about it all day, into the night and then more the next day. Grandparents got calls about it. Friends put up with endless coffee chatter about it. Old frustrations wash away and it's as though a whole new world has opened up for everyone. For the first time in almost 20 years his parents feel like independent people clear to do as they please without worry. The worst of their job as parents is over.

Max Fletcher has grown up.

We all enjoy a natural right to be left alone.

“Hey Carol!” her mom bangs again at her bedroom door. Carol hasn’t left her room for days, smuggling in plates of food at night when she’s actually awake. She doesn’t hang out with Max anymore, or anyone else for that matter. She’s very lonely, but in no condition for company, so she hides from the world and all those perfect people in it.

“Come on, Carol! This is getting scary. You have to come out of there.”

“No I don’t.” she squeaks as if from a great distance. She means it. As far as she figures, she can stay in her bed room forever, or until she dies. Whichever comes soonest. She’s putting her money on death. Though it seems too easy for some reason. Pain like this can’t be solved that way. There’s really no way out of this one. Life has cratered and she’s the asteroid.

Her barely started novel lays ignored in some data file on her laptop under a pile of dirty cloths. Quickly upon sitting down with it she realizes she isn’t a good writer. Short non-fiction stuffed with facts and best practices, no problem. A creative work with endless possibilities. Not so easy. She can’t even begin to understand the insurmountable effort such a work will take.

Especially a romance novel. She has so little life experience with love. It never works out for her it seems, and she hasn’t gone deep enough to really experience the magic so much music and movies allude to. To seed the experience in the deepest of secret gardens. The unique discover of what makes us human in the face of disappointing rejection and absurd existence. Only through loss and then the struggle to rebuild can our better angels reveal themselves.

Without this key insight, a novel, especially a romance novel, is simply beyond her right now. So she gives up as she has with everything else lately. It’s just easier this way. Let the wounds simmer, she doesn’t care if it gets better, but even in this state of hopeless failure, small flickers of hope linger deep inside. Hope that at any moment things can change.

Given time, a new opportunity will present. Just not yet. For now Carol must work it out on her own. All part of the plan, such as it is. She’s certainly not the only person disappointed with life upon realizing the world isn’t concerned with her or her goals.

A book arrives in the mail with Carol’s name on it. Her mother leaves it in front of her door should she ever come out to go to the bathroom or something. If she’s ordering books it can’t be all that bad. Maybe she just needs time to work it out. Love Everlasting. Seems positive. Her mother wanders off feeling, even if slightly, better.

In the boardroom, time stands still.

Jimmy can’t make out the words anymore. He watches his boss mouth instructions to the group in some alien tongue he can’t begin to understand. Looking around he can tell his peers are engaged and yet he can’t pay attention to even the most remote expression of perfectly sensible extrapolation. It’s all nonsense. He doesn’t need to be here.

The boss man needs to feel mighty. Needs to see his troops rally to a cause. His lady army, formed to counter the boys club narrative, jump with excitement. Something about new product release. Money, market share; blah, blah, blah. With exaggerated hand slaps and over-nods, the gang of appeasers rush to please. Jimmy stands alone, disinterested.

His boss notices and Jimmy is fired to make room for fresh blood. Something about synergy. It’s fine though because he’s just a contractor anyway. Most of the remaining staff are either happy he’s gone or can’t remember him in the first place. Now that he thinks about it, he doesn’t remember anyone’s name. He’ll miss the cute secretary....

Moral outrage is an ugly step sister of bigotry.

It covers its motives with self righteous pabulum designed to smear opponents as the monsters of their own making. Jay Andrew knows intimately the consequences of character assassination. It's inevitable these days for anyone speaking on certain subjects, even worse should one dare to write on certain subjects. Triggering an outrageous response is easier than selling the book.

At first he thought the controversy would help sales. He was wrong. If not for the occasional orders from his website and steady long tail back orders, he'd have no sales at all. He guesses he should feel lucky to have sold any at all in this climate. Spending all his savings had earned him a speaking tour at various campuses and literary institutions.

Though he's spent everything he has to fund his dreams, bought the insurance necessary to cover the venues, the protesters don't care. They see an enemy and he must be destroyed. In their selfish zeal they are ruining a good man, a man of integrity and work ethic. In order for the Social Warriors to feel important someone else must be sacrificed on the altar of "heart in the right place".

Jay is a humble man, trying to make a living as an author in a world unwilling to pay properly for content anymore. Thanks to online streaming services and lack of alternative options any money to be made on subscriptions goes to the ad guys now. Meanwhile artists try to create a sand castle one grain at a time helplessly watching as technological abstractions obscure the connection to the audience devaluing their hard work.

His last book was a good seller back in the 80's when he'd last attempted this kind of thing. He credits it with helping him find love and buying a house sizable enough to enjoy a reasonable quality of life. He'd gotten married, had a daughter. For a few years everything was perfect.

The accident took his angel away. A thoughtless driver. Just wasn't paying enough attention. Jay had never felt more alone than the day his wife left him, too. She saw their daughter's eyes in his eyes, there was nothing he could do to persuade her to stay and he never heard from her again.

He now enjoys working in his garden dreaming about his opus preferring the solitary life. A driven man, he is often working, and has few friends to distract him. Not sure if this is by choice or circumstance of age. Now firmly in his 50's the prospect of meeting someone else seems fruitless. What could he possibly offer that any real women would want. He can't offer a family. No, he instead focuses on helping others.

The only thing in life with any meaning at all for Jay are people. People matter, love matters. He's been there, he knows about love, so he's motivated to help as many people as he can find it too. That and hold onto it, as he wasn't able to. He's known loss and come back from it. Been abandoned and come back from it. He has faced the absurd truth of the world and stands complete in his defiance of its futility. So long as he draws breath he'll work toward educating others on this eternal truth.

In this spirit of contrast, he is far too kind to deserve what happens next. The inevitable consequence of ignorance and youth when incited to a fervour by a hidden agenda. A pack of faceless ghosts wailing and screaming profanity swarm him as he approaches yet another venue. Faces covered with horrible masks, mocking and laughing they push and pull him. Confused and scared, Jay Andrew covers his head and collapses into a ball. A blow to his gut prevents him from drawing breath to yell for help.

Even as the circle of violence surrounds him and the mob of feminists overwhelm him with punches and kicks, scratches and claws. Even as his ears are assaulted with high pitch shrills and terrifying appeals for his head as they kick him to the dirt, he still manages to love and forgive them for their crime. They spit on his motionless body, several of them recording the event and themselves on their phones to troll for clicks online later.

The theatre crowd is confused when no one appears on stage to run the seminar. The mystery is quickly

solved when someone bursts through the door screaming for someone to call an ambulance. Jay finally has his audience...

Sometimes we authentically over-react.

Margo is lost in panic. Someone has taken the package. She notices right away upon waking, a terrible feeling. She had one job, protect it, and now it's gone. She cries for a long time, her sandpaper hands soaking in the tears. Age brings confusion and she spends so much time alone when the weather keeps her from the choir. She forgets things sometimes when she isn't focused so she likes to read as much as possible.

Reaching to the drawer she pulls it open just in case she's wrong. There it is. Relief. The package is safe. She breaths deeply and lets out a long steady whistle. She has even surprised herself with her reaction. She takes her responsibility very seriously, as though it's the last thing she'll ever do.

And today is the day. It's finally time to open it. Jay gave her a gift and an important responsibility. She opens the package. Within she discovers a layer of tissue paper. It smells like dried daisies. Her favourite. Author is always so thoughtful. And beneath that a manuscript, his opus.

Oh, how exciting, to read an unpublished work again. A masterwork by a skilled craftsman.

She plucks her reading glasses from her sweater pocket and begins her appraisal as promised. She realizes now that Jay has good taste choosing her practised eye for this task. She has over 50 years experience running a successful literary agency. Though retired, she is more than just some old woman. It feels good to be remembered, to be useful. She thinks of Jon and then of Jay. Two good trusting men.

She consumes the first few pages, it's a romance novel with a political twist. Aboriginal intrigue. Elegant prose, easy on the adverbs, good flow. She can't put it down. She soon realizes it's sort of non-fiction. It's so unlike Jay's other books. It's clear she'll have to go through it again before she passes it off to one of the active agents at her old agency. The story is rich, the characters have depth. How can a man write women so well?

Margo keeps reading well into the afternoon.

Fat and lazy is far from attractive.

The landlord storms across the martial arts studio stopping abruptly at Dynasty's desk as though he's just noticed it. Probably can't see over his stomach. He lets his eyes wander around taking it all in. He hates exercise, fat and proud, he lets his money open his doors for him. He likes to put people down, make them even smaller than he already feels they are. Consuming, always consuming. Finishing off a chocolate bar he wipes his dirty fingers on the desk.

Dynasty watches this arrogant display patiently. A more disgusting man, she can't think of. Making a mental note to wipe off her desk after he leaves she pointedly fails to extend her hand in welcome.

"Ms. Kimura", he leers at her ample bosom. "You owe me money."

"As usual, you could have just waited for the cheque in the mail." She replies. An expression as impassible as her side guard.

"I prefer the personal touch." As in he'd like to personally touch her...all over. He's read about Japanese women online. Docile to a fault, submissive, yummy.

She shakes her head catching his meaning. She briefly shows the disgust she feels and then just as quickly the stoicism returns. She reaches into her desk for the cheque she'd already placed in an envelope, licked and sealed sporting a shiny new stamp in the upper corner. She hands it to him, he tries to touch her delicate fingers, she recoils dropping the envelope to the floor.

Snatching it up quickly, far too aware that Dynasty might see him bend over, he grunts at the effort.

“Next time, then.” he squeals, his smile as much a grimace as anything, crowded as it is by overlapping jowls.

“Never gonna happen.”

He hesitates. Sees the look in her eyes, thinks better of it, then leaves.

A sigh of relief. She isn't gonna miss this. Dynasty grabs a disposable towel, wipes her desk then begins sweeping the floor in preparation for the next class.

The darkest night always has a dawn.

Without his job, without his friends, without his family, Mash is lost, but he is not forgotten. He's been reading Love Everlasting and believe it or not, actually feels better. He's not the only one with these kinds of challenges. Many people the world over, struggle every day to find meaning, to find partners in life who elevate their experience. He, like them, feels lonely but is never truly alone. Not while Jay Andrew understands his pain. Writing what he and every other man in his situation feels.

Putting pen to paper like a divine herald of romantic redemption, the mysterious author breaks the enchantments seducing the ego. The book isn't about hope, or false delusion. It's about realizing the value of people, and seeking the complex potential of a healthy intimate relationship. None of this is possible while Mash remains chained to instinct.

Mash embraces the journey, takes pride in the struggle. Officer Kate might not be the one for him, but that's a far cry away from there being no-one out there at all. Closing the book upon finishing the final chapter, Mash smiles peacefully. Love is everlasting. It's bigger than any one of us. Rather than a thing that happens, it's always there.

Daring a look in the mirror, Mash barely recognizes himself. He shaves, showers, and then brushes his thick black hair. He'd just noticed he hasn't gotten groceries or done laundry for over a week. It's time to move on. Today's a new day, and he's a new man, ready for anything.

Thank you, Jay Andrew, wherever you are.

Consequence is like diving into shallow water from a great height.

Ben twitches as pain shoots through his legs. Assuming awareness, the sweat's been replaced with cramps. It takes several minutes to run out his muscles and relax the tension.

He stretches and surveys his surroundings. He's in a bed, he knows that much. It's not his bed, but the sheets are clean, the air is clean too. The walls are plain, some shade of mellow beige. There's a single door at the far end of the basically square room with no window.

Southern Medical, he sees some branding on the side of the hand rail he now pushes against as he sits up. He's alone in the room. He briefly wonders what happened to Kyle. How long has he been here? What happened to Trisha Brownbear? What's gonna happen to him?

A knock at the door, a moment later it opens and an old worn looking nurse stalks in carrying a tablet that somehow looks too large for her hands. She stands at the end of the bed and shakes her head disapprovingly.

“Such a young man, to be making so many terrible choices.”

He gets that. He wouldn't be here if it wasn't for some of those choices. Never should have let Kyle move in. Ya it was a bit of struggle handling the rent alone with all the other costs of school, books, meals, no time to work so the mighty student loans set the budget. He could of stuck it out as many do.

Or even give up the two bedroom closer to school and go for a one bedroom a little farther away.

“I’m done smoking crack.” He feels free of it, for the most part. It still calls to him, makes him ache as thoughtless anticipation draws its seductive touch over his memories. The name alone...but he shakes it off. Not his burden to bare anymore. From now on powder only. He wipes his nose.

“Mr. Richards, you came very close to dying.”

He nods, “isn’t the first time, won’t be the last”.

“You say that now, but the recidivism rate of crack addiction is quite high.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“I suggest you join one of our long term support groups. We have several options for young people just like you, Mr Richards. School stress has driven many through our doors over the years. Some of them beat their addiction...if they commit honestly to the program.”

Some? He wants a smoke. The nurse hands him a document and some pamphlets.

“When can I go home?”

“You can go anytime now. Of course you’ll have to return to court for your hearing next week, it’s all in this document.”

The perks of being a first time offender with no record of violence. Ben sees his cloths, washed and folded on a chair.

“What about that woman at the station, what happened?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what your talking about.” Odd. “Well I’ll leave you to read and think about what you want to do.” She step toward the door then hesitates. “I had a son like you, same eyes...he’s dead now. Anyway, really think about it, ok.” With that she leaves him to whatever fate he chooses for himself.

Ben stares at the door now closed. He actually thinks about what she said, for a moment. Gets dressed thinking about whether he should sign up like she suggested, but then he loses interest, anxious to leave as fast as he can.

On the bus home he checks his smartphone for news about what happened at the police station. Oddly, he finds nothing. It’s as though it never happened. The document the nurse gave him doesn’t mention anything other than important dates and basic descriptions of his charges.

When Ben gets home he calls out for Kyle. The apartment is empty, dirty, furniture turned over, papers everywhere, tv smashed. Any drugs or money on the property have either been bagged for evidence or scavenged by “customers” who dropped by discovering an unlocked door.

Backed up mail reveals new problems as he discovers he’s been kicked out of school for being “a disruptive influence on other students”. Ben considers calling his parents for money. Later. He can’t face them right now. Needs a little pick up.

Finding his well hidden secret stash behind the furnace, Ben draws a line...powder only.

“Snooooooook.” Idiocy is a hard disease to cure.

A job is pride, a task that requires focus.

Jimmy needs a job. The next day he finds a message waiting on his answering machine from a local recruitment firm. Apparently, they have a customer looking for an office manager, and he fits the bill. Though he wonders how they know he’s available, maybe it’s just coincidence.

Either way he finds himself sitting in a book shop, slacks and tie, being appraised by his new boss, Bert Johnson, literary extraordinaire. Apparently, Bert likes to focus on life style, whatever that means, and needs someone to handle the paperwork and other miscellaneous business stuff. Balancing books, hiring, firing, paying rent, collecting and processing orders, the usual. Admittedly Jimmy is well suited for this being a natural bureaucrat through and through.

“So I need a new shop, this ones too small and then within 6 months I want another on the east coast and the west...” Bert continues at length laying out his vision and explaining how Jimmy is instrumental in achieving this.

How strange, he wonders, that Bert would also have a copy of Love Everlasting on his desk...

“Well, Bert. I’m gonna need to shadow you for a few days meet everyone involved.”

“Great.”

“In the meantime I’ll start gathering your documents.” Jimmy loosens his tie and rolls up his sleeves.

He carves out a corner for his desk as far from the noise as possible, Jimmy realizes he has a new job. It’s downtown only two numbers over from the pub. He licks his lips. He can deal with these documents tomorrow. He’s done enough today. Grabbing his coat, a book falls from his bag. Love Everlasting.

The page showing has a title referring to us all having the power to be the best version of ourselves for 5 minutes each day. Jimmy remembers the exercises he’d practised last time he read that chapter. He recognizes the moment. He’s either getting better or he’s getting worse. He puts his coat back on the hook. He has work to do. Drinks can wait.

The ideal candidate comes from unexpected places.

This is the one for sure. The Minister of Justice can hardly believe it. Textbook psychopath, no fear. Visible minority. Highly marginalized. Revelling in narcissism. The protocols worked well enough. The new colour schemes and instruction blurbs seemed to convey their intent. No problems at all in fact.

The reports sent ahead made stocking the grounds with mnemonically seductive items a trivial matter. As others arrive they can expect the same. Should trouble present, simply remove the oxygen from that section and let nature takes its course. There’s always another monster to fill the void at least so long as we let them.

Better than expected results and inquiries about the transport processes. It’s important that the ministry’s reach extend to all audiences when the time comes. The optics have to be perfect. That requires a positive and easily digested plot. Trisha Brownbear will/must be rehabilitated. The election depends on getting the support of the venerable Assembly of First Nations and that support depends on genuine improvement in their communities.

Check out the scenery.

Detectives Chris and Frank enter first leaving Trisha locked in the car. A large screen comes to life with clear white letters directly in front of them.

“Attention. Side Door Prisoner Access.” That familiar soft female voice again.

A line glows around a nearly invisible, rather large door. Even with his arms stretched to either side, Chris can’t reach the sides.

“Caution. Please transfer prisoner through door into containment area. Prisoner first. DO NOT enter the containment area once prisoner is through the entrance.”

“Go get her, Frank.”

The over the hill bachelor draws up his thin belt and huffs about all the walking. Chris watches him with disinterest. He’s on autopilot now. A minute passes.

“Hey Frank, whats the hold up?”

A muffled response. Sound doesn’t carry very far in here. Chris pulls his piece and stalks back toward the car where he finds Trisha dancing around Frank, who is simply too old and slow to catch her. Her upper torso and face are still bound, so there isn’t much threat.

“Caution. Prisoner requires restraint.”

“Ya. Ya.” Chris, a true athlete, easily reaches out and grabs her.

She struggles pointlessly, snot running down her gag. Wild eyes searching for any point of control. Psychopaths smell weakness, but she can smell nothing here. Chris drags her across the room while Frank catches his breath. He tossed her through door. The lights rimming the door fade away as it seems to sink into the ground.

“Please return to your vehicle. Thank you for your deposit. Have a wonderful day.”

“That’s it?” Frank bitches, he’s not looking forward to sitting again, was hoping for some coffee at least.

By the time they’re back on the surface and driving down the road again, Chris feels much better. Danger past, another monster off the streets and no one the wiser. He doesn’t know and doesn’t care what happens to Trisha Brownbear from this point on.

He’s already thinking about the next case.

Fulfillment dwells on the other side of the unknown.

She’s alone and it’s dark. Moments earlier, the restraints fall away automatically. A soft female voice permeates the room. Trisha figures it’s a small room. It smells like rubber and fresh concrete. A new jail?

“Trisha Brownbear, welcome to the Nêhiyawak Rehabilitation Circle. You are designated number 1.”

That means we’re the first.

She shakes her head.

“Shut up and let me figure this out. What is this place?”

“Please follow the path to explore your territory.” A thin line of white light appears on the floor drawing a path forward into the darkness and then to the left and right around corners down hallways.

“My territory?”

“You have 10,000 sq feet of space, several furnished rooms including bathroom, bedroom, living room, personal gym.”

“What is this place?”

“Please follow the path to explore your territory.” Its identical pronunciation reveals it’s a recording. No point in arguing.

As she walked down the white line, digital screens light up more of the area, flashing messages explaining mundane details like how to get food, or water. What to do with dirty dishes, laundry. Entertainment, books, movies. This isn’t like any jail she’s ever heard of.

This is a trap.

“If so we’re already caught.”

It isn’t right. What’s this all about anyway?

“It’s nice. I like it. Shut up and let me handle this.”

She touches the panel for living room and it slides away revealing a comfortably lit room beyond. Her eyes fall upon furniture that looks much like her own yet newer, nicer. The TV is bigger, and its stacked with dvds and all her favourite movies and shows. She wants to jump on the couch but she’s gross and needs a shower.

The bathroom is clean. She guesses it’s never been used. None of the stuff in this place has ever been used. It’s all for her. It smells good too. Lilacs. Her favourite products arranged just the way she likes it. She undresses and tip toes into the biggest shower she’s ever used in her life.

Best soap, loves the shampoo. Some kind of porous sponge, that’s new but she’s buttered up now. Why not settle right in. The water has one temperature and it’s perfect. She’s sure it’s automatically adjusting, but how does it always know what she likes. It’s bliss.

She hears something shuffle and quickly sticks her head out the curtain. Her dirty rags are gone and a pile of carefully folded cloths have replaced them by the door.

This is Hell.

“I said shut up. This is Heaven.”

Time doesn’t stand still.

So much dust everywhere, Margo coughs as she enters the room. What has become of her beautiful agency. She’s been retired too long. Almost 16 years have past, but she never expected this. They were profitable, prestigious. All her hard work....gone.

“Hello?” she croaks to the empty room. There’s a desk, the same one she remembers, but where’s the secretary to greet visitors? She sees the shelves carrying hardcovers of all their past publications, but they’re out of order, some are almost falling off the shelf, and most of these had been here for years in her time. What’s going on here. The door’s unlocked.

“Hello!” she yells it this time. Surprising herself. It’s been a long time since she’s raised her voice and wasn’t entirely sure she could anymore. It makes her smile.

Her eyes shoot in the direction of a shuffling from behind papers and books deep into the office on the other end of the main hallway.

“Can I help you?” A meek voice. A young woman stumbles toward her awkwardly apparently stubbing her toe on a door stop.

“Ouch!”

“Ohhh. Oh my, are you ok, sweetie?”

The poor girl jumps around for a moment and then continues toward her grimacing.

“Ya.” She rubs her foot leaning against the door frame.

“I’m looking for Stanley.”

“Who?”

“Stanley Cassowary. Senior Literary Agent.”

“Oh that’s before my time, ma’am.”

“This is Cassowary & Douglas Literary Agency isn’t it?”

“No. Well, yes. Technically, but no one’s here any more. I mean no one operates the business. Just kind of riding out the lease ya know?”

This can’t be. She made a promise to Jay, she had been his agent years ago, and he needs one again.

“What happened?”

One of the exercises in *Love Everlasting* suggests going out and collecting books. She is to imagine herself a treasure hunter, fast on the trail of an illusive and rare volume of lost knowledge. Why not start where Jay Andrew started.

“Poor management, bad investments, the economy. Pick one. Look I’m just here for a few weeks to clear out the office ya know. Saw an ad for books and supplies online. Practically giving it away and well...I love books, ok.” She lowers her chin to her chest and mumbles. “wish I could write em.”

Margo likes this young woman. Very much. She has a thought. Yes. It’s possible she has to given the circumstances. She built this company from nothing and she can do it again. Stanley’s father was just a money player anyway, and she should never have taken the payout to step aside for his son. Genre fiction, please. If this is the result of playing to the common taste, what’s the point.

She hands her a manuscript which Carol takes from her without hesitation.

Jay Andrew! “Our Tribal Circles” He’s written a new book?

“What’s your name, dear?”

“Carol...” She still sleeps with *Love Everlasting* by her bed rest. “...Porter.”

Margo points to a picture on the wall honoured by a thick dark oak frame. It was taken years ago in the golden age. Beneath it a bronze plate with a name etched in elegant cursive.

“Nice to meet you, Carol. I’m Margaret Douglas. I love books, too.”

Life can be cruel like a lover.

The following in news coverage: Local author found unconscious this afternoon just out side of the amphitheatre on central campus. Authorities inform us that several protesters attacked the controversial writer in what they claim to be self defence after unprovoked micro-aggression. Jay Andrew was scheduled to speak only minutes later.

This latest incident comes a week after a previous speaking engagement was cancelled at the same venue. At the time, campus administrators decided to cancel rather than risk the safety of the audience.

Though receiving medical care at Southern Medical, it’s unclear at this time the extent of Jay Andrew’s injuries.

In further news...

Injustice cannot stand indefinitely.

Jimmy and Mash both see the news at the same time and they know it because they are sitting in the same pub, though not together. They don’t know each other. Each stands reflexively upon seeing the news on TV, they nod to each other from across the room.

It isn’t right whats happened to Jay Andrew, they soon find each other sitting at the same table discussing what they can do about it.

Paying the piper.

Ben scowls as he leaves the hearing. They made him sit in a chair, a hard chair for at least half an hour. The smell of these people. Body odour and sneakers. The dim instructor droning on and on about personal responsibility while offering all kinds of incentives to join various substance control programs. Apparently his charges were filed as a summary offence. A small fine, and all he had to do was sit through a mind numbing presentation.

The charges were filed down do to whats called “prison overcrowding”. They can’t processes his case fast enough so some minister signed him down. It pays to be a non-violent offender with no felonies. Ironically, this being a summary offence it won’t stay on his record permanently. So in 2 years he’s back to having no priors.

He still hasn’t heard from Kyle and as far as he can tell no one else has either. Asshole owes rent, but like that’s ever gonna happen. Ben hasn’t paid either, and bills are long overdue. He figures he’ll get around to it after he has lunch with his parent tomorrow. Needs to squeeze the lemon.

Ben stops in front of his door. The thin white letter is taped so he can’t miss it, and neither can his neighbours. BIG RED LETTERS.

Ben Richards. You...Are...Evicted. Right. He remembers a letter about this. Fuck. He should have paid more attention.

All good things must come to an end.

Dynasty takes a final look at the studio before closing it up for the last time. Funny she somehow feels it left her a long time ago. She misses her dad. She misses a lot of things. The lights dim, it smells like wood and rubber mats. The unmistakable bitterness of old incense lingers. And there it is in the corner of the room. That tiny spot of yellow she couldn’t quite reach with the cloth.

She sighs, turns, and closes the door behind her.

“Coming?”

Bert waits for her at the car. He’s driving today, they’re meeting some store owners, and she needs to go over notes. It’s why Dynasty is wearing a pant suit and her power tie. This is what she does. Time to make some money with books.

Time to grow up.

Max needs an apartment, but his job doesn’t pay enough. Carol says she has a line on something good, so he finds himself nervously waiting at reception in the offices of Douglas & Porter Literary Agency. He’s wearing a tie, and an eggshell off white button up. The dark tan slacks perfectly compliment his business casual flat tips.

Carol set up an interview for him with a manager. They need someone who can handle photos and social media, general running around and getting things, etc. Office stuff. An administrative assistant basically. Pays five dollars an hour more than he’s making now, and it’s indoors almost all the time. He’s a minute early. There’s no receptionist at the front desk but he figures someone will come out and get him. He waits patiently.

“So Max... what do you think?”

From her perfect pumps, to her elegant blouse. Carol beams down at him. This is not the girl he remembers. This women stands with confidence, walks with grace. She’s carrying books, and a thin pair of reading glasses. He can’t take his eyes off her.

“Do I look that bad?” She pouts.

“You look amazing!” She really does. “You work here? You’re my boss?” He can hardly believe it, he’s on his feet now, hugging her and then awkwardly steps back shaking her hand.

“Believe it! I’m the Porter in Douglas & Porter. You’re my assistant.” They laugh. “Well the office assistant, but I’m the only other one here most of the time, so you’re MY bitch for now.”

Max punches her in the arm playfully.

“What do you...we do here?”

“Books. We connect authors with publishers. Handle all their paperwork and make sure they get proper royalties, etc. Beyond that we’re gonna modernize this place, get it online. It’s kinda dated.”

She motions him to follow and they walk through the office.

“Margo is still training me. She’s the Douglas part. She’s the real boss, though.” She points at Margo’s office. Big office. “I’d be lost without her.”

“She’s not here now?” It’s pretty quiet.

“No, no. She’s an elderly lady, she can’t be here all day. She comes in as she pleases. Spends a few hours showing me a little bit at a time.”

Max can tell she’s very happy, and very grateful.

“Oh, Max, she’s a wonderful woman, so kind and she knows so many useful things, you’re really gonna like her.”

Max nods, the smiles haven’t left their lips since Carol entered the room. He believes her and he’s excited to be here.

“Where do we start?”

“Well, I’ve got exactly one manuscript waiting for me on my desk. You can start by cleaning up the office, top to bottom. Supplies in the kitchen.” She turns and points, then looks back over her shoulder as she walks deliberately away.

He’s mesmerized.

“Yes...”

“Come see me when you’re done.” And she rounds the corner out of sight.

“...ma’am.”

Steady progress can be planned around.

The Minister of Justice connects with the Minister of Finance through secure back door channels as is normal during election season. A document detailing its situation with Trisha Brownbear and proposed solution spells out the intention of the communication. A request to involve the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs in a profitable venture is welcome news. The election is projected to be close, far too close for the sitting Government’s comfort. It just finally won it’s full majority four years ago.

Private rehabilitation centres. Big money, especially with a cross border agreement being pushed by trusted partners. Long time promise to the base so far unfulfilled. Jobs. The Minister of Finance answers it will get its staff working on it right way along with proposed campaign tactics.

Need budget for new industry partners. Propaganda campaign to keep public opinion focused on Bill 17, content based advertiser regulations. Large front end investment, big payoff. Proposed law with direct support from Ministries of Justice, Finance, and Indigenous and Northern Affairs is top priority and central to reelection strategy.

The thinking is though Bill 17 is focused on the written word and references to it for works published after 1923, if it improves conditions for the skilled labour sector, perhaps it could be a model for other forms of content as well through an expanded mandate which only re-election can secure. The narrow focus for now will reduce the strength of the Opposition by keeping the interest fairly obscure and improve the odds of positive news leading up to the vote.

Whats this note? Prairie Press Publishing. A direct partner? Is there precedent? Yes. 1943–49 arrangement. Anti-Nazi Publication. Pro-Government. Loyalist. Program reactivation approved.

The election will be all about the economy and what kind of work force we need. The best creators in the country will have strong financial incentive to form alliances. The sitting Government is about to do more for the arts than any of the political party's have in a century including its own.

Never underestimate old people.

Gordon Libnezin is rumoured to have died years ago. However, the truth is Prairie Press Publishing, has always been under his control. It's set up perfectly to conduct stable business under very specific policies that haven't had to change since he was fighting the fuhrer.

It now belongs to his son, his namesake, ; heir to his empire, but that power comes from strict compliance to policies set decades earlier. When his father left for his final adventure, many years ago a manila envelope arrived at the office of Prairie Press Publishing's legal representatives spelling out the transfer of power, expected rolls and by who. Father had left nothing to chance.

Gordon has been groomed for this, mentored all his life. Worked his way up from the presses to the management, to junior editor and finally senior editor. He knows the publishing business inside and out. He's been stirring the ship for a decade. He reads a lot. Especially numbers. He reads all the numbers on publishing he can get, yet he still feels impotent to prevent the gradual but undeniable reduction in revenue those numbers show.

Industry wide they say but doing the math, even a traditionally solvent operation like his will fold eventually. He's a wealthy man, already well into his 60s himself, he's more worried about the staff, their families, the authors and their works. The name on the door since the great war, one of the most successful publishers of heritage works in the country. Gone...and nothing can be done it seems.

All the wrong people are making money for all the wrong reasons on the internet. Long form is a tough market at the best of times now this. Doesn't translate to the soundbite world of 255 characters with the ad platforms.

A tap on the door.

And the stuff just gets online for free anyway.

Another tap.

His eyes fall upon Jay Andrew's latest manuscript, he's been reading it all day, it has some very interesting ideas...

And those damn websites just make pennies on the ads, but it adds up to big money when you don't have to pay for any of the source content especially when millions of members post it for you. And when it doesn't make money it still contributes to an overall devaluation. Hoping for more sales in ebooks didn't pan out at all, the volume was used again as an excuse to lower the price. May not matter as much to the book store, but it sure matters to the individual books and their authors.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Gordon opens the door and casually walks back to his desk as Short One and Tall Two step in and find

their usual seats.

“That damn Internet is killing us!”

He slaps his hand on his fathers antique rosewood desk once owned by Winston Churchill himself.

“It’s like Social Media controls water, but they distribute it for free so nobody cares! But it isn’t free. They get rich on ads people only see cause of our content and they don’t pay us because it’s “user generated”. What a hustle...”

He crosses his arms and leans against the desk.

“... and on the other side those media companies that bought all the Internet providers holding everyone hostage at the last mile.” Short One inserts helpfully.

Gordon nods agreement. They haven’t had a real pay day in over 3 years, yet the rise of the amateur writer and self publishing has increased the work load each year in that time. And as mediocre becomes normal the expected value drops even more. Though this hasn’t produced better books, the traditional role of agents and publishers are being economically diminished in a bid to remove them altogether.

“Books were already too cheap if you ask me and as expected prices dropped even further. Too far to maintain a healthy industry. I think people expect less and want to pay less..or nothing at all. Look at this, guys.”

He shoves a document across his desk toward Short One. 75 percent of adults read a book last year and yet there are only a couple dozen literary agents and a few hundred publishers available to authors in the entire country.

“That’s all the market can sustain...” Short One hands it to Taller Two.

“We need a piece of that user generated content, guys. I don’t want to stop the sharing, but I want a piece of the action. Why is Social Media milking our content for Billions. We need a piece of derivative works, in a new world! WE NEED A PIECE OF THOSE ADS!”

The phone rings. Gordon’s private line, blocked number.

“Yes?”

“Please hold. Ministry of Justice...”

“Mr. Libnezin?”

“Yes.”

“It’s come to our attention that your father entered an arrangement with us several years ago. Are you aware of the details?”

“Yes, of course.” They’d literally printed books about it.

“Then you are aware the arrangement was never officially terminated?”

“What..”

“Do you love your country, sir?”

“Yes, of course, but...”

“Then we have need of your family’s services again, Mr. Libnezin, and I think you’ll like what I have to say.”

Recovery is a bitch.

He can't yet open his eyes but Jay can smell the familiar sterility of a hospital. He's not alone, there are 1, no 2 other people in here as well. One of the voices is vaguely familiar. It's not a large room.

He licks his lips.

"He's awake. Jimmy, grab that glass of water."

Jimmy?

"Here ya go. Oh fuck, sorry Mash, spilled a little."

The young man from the seminar last week?

Mash's hand, lifts his own and places a lukewarm glass in it. He finds the strength to hold it with a little help to keep steady. His throat is so dry, and he can still taste iron. The water helps. He downs it all.

"What..."

"You're gonna be ok, Mr. Andrew." Mash sounds certain enough. "You were hurt pretty bad, but the doctors got to you in time."

Mash turns to Jimmy, "Wave down that nurse next time she walks by."

"We're your biggest fans."

Jay tries to rub his eyes, but pulls back in pain.

"Oh the nurse said earlier you have a broken nose...and a broken arm. Pretty serious concussion."

He can't remember exactly what happened. He was walking to the theatre and then nothing. Here.

"Some protesters..."

Placards and fists.

"Love Everlasting..."

"...they couldn't block the entrance to the theatre so they...well. I'm sorry, sir."

"All this for a book."

"Not just any book." Jimmy holds his signed copy. Jay's eyes finally adjust as the hard cover comes into focus. He'd chosen a finger painting his daughter had made for him for the cover art and thankfully it's the first thing he sees now.

Jay is reminded of something Margo told him a long time ago. "A good book can change a person when nothing else has."

Each having their own experience with this; they nod. Mash finds his own copy in his hands. Nobody is giving up. The nurse enters and the room gets pretty small.

"We're gonna work your shows with you so this doesn't happen again."

Jay tries to smile at Jimmy but his cheeks hurt. Jimmy waves. Mash slips out as well, leaving his number on the table.

"Call us when you're feeling better, Mr. Andrew."

After they're gone, Jay learns he'll be fitted for a temporary arm brace to match his boxer's mask and be out by late afternoon. He'll make a quick stop by the pharmacy for some pills on the way. He needs to see Margo about his new manuscript as soon as possible. It may already be too late.

Qualified or scapegoat, probably the latter.

The room is empty but soon the chapter sisters will arrive to praise Paul for his great work. Tonight is the regular meeting, and he knows what the only topic will be. Thanks to his social scorch, over a dozen people showed up to protest Jay Andrew. Got a good beat down, too. Good, he deserves it. Just another bully getting his due. Social Justice Warriors unite!

Speaking of which. Where is everybody? Usually, someones here by now. The rooms so quiet. Paul walks to the window, it's really quiet. Nobody. He checks his watch. Somethings wrong, they should have started 5 minutes ago. Shuffling at the door catches his attention.

The door slams inward. Officer Kate's boots stomp forward with gun pointed directly at Paul's head.

"Down! Down! Down!"

"What the..."

Kate brings the butt of the gun down on the bridge of his nose. He kisses the floor, choking on blood.

"Paul Zander! You have the right to remain..." Kate's knee drives hard into his spine while pulling his arm up almost to breaking point. He screams in pain.

"Wiggles! You're gonna break his arm." Robert rushes in to add cover. No telling who else is in here.

Kate flashes him an ugly expression.

"Don't call me that...ever...again." Thankfully, the room otherwise appears empty.

Robert understands that look and simply nods acknowledgement. Violence changes people in unpredictable ways, he won't judge. Instead he pulls out the cuffs and slaps them on this little cyber terrorist in the making. Ever since terror law changes allow law enforcement more early intervention options Robert has noted a slight increase in the incidents of violence.

"You idiot." Robert spits at Paul, "Inciting those peaceful,well meaning protesters into hurting that poor man."

"Anything you say can and will be..." Kate continues.

Paul is still counting stars in his imaginary Safe Space. He's the falling one. The girls were never gonna...fool...he passes out.

Leaving the nest is a requirement.

No answer again. Same polite message laughing about Mexico. Ben's tried several times. His parents are gone on vacation. No way to get a hold of them. Left a message, but so far nothing. They probably don't want to check messages. It's vacation, best to avoid getting sucked back in.

Where's he gonna sleep tonight? He doesn't know anybody in town well enough to impose. Most of his stuff fit in his car. At least he still has a campus parking pass for the semester. Then it hits him. He can find a place on campus and sleep when he needs to. The classic head on bag technique. Student style. No problem. He's got enough cash to float on cafeteria food and vending machines for a little while anyway. At least it buys him time to think.

He chooses one of the lesser used study halls, it'll be quieter since it's summer and most of the international language students have returned home to visit family. The two story building is empty though the lights are always on even if dim. He stakes out the farthest corner and sets up some dividers to hide it even further from the casual visitor. Final touch, hangs his back on the corner. Universal sign of, this is my corner, bro. Step back.

Sometimes people need to piss and they leave their stuff behind. This is a sacred trust that not all on campus have in the past respected. Anyone who would say take the bag will be hunted down with dogs

using campus security footage and expelled thanks to zero tolerance policies on campus. So it's usually a pretty safe thing to do. Ben's tired, and he could really use a smoke but he's out and he needs the money he has for food. He pulls out some homework he should've done before they kicked him out and falls asleep on top of it.

A welcome visit.

Margo was napping in her rocking chair when Jay tapped lightly on her door. As age sets in she notices the smallest sensation with finest detail due to the acuteness of her thin skin. She feels touch so much more now. The sun warming her, a finger drawn. As she relaxes into the certainty of a life well lived she couldn't be happier. A day full of manageable regrets and fond memories.

"It's me."

"Oh, Jay, come on in dear."

She's already done up for the day, expected at the agency for a coffee in about an hour with Carol. Though the days are short, they are just as full of activity as ever. Especially now that she has Carol. Young and talented, Margo couldn't ask for a better protegee and she's firmly committed to mentoring her. The last one she imagines. A privilege and a sign God is pleased with her.

Jay enters with his head turned away. His one arm is awkwardly laid across his chest under his sweater. The jacket covers his arm from the outside left. His other hand carries a box of muffins from the local bakery. He knows she likes apple and carrot so that's what he brought. That and one chocolate chip bran for himself.

"Oh my Jay, what happened to your face?" He can't hide the damage from her.

The bandages make him look like something out of the invisible man. He reflexively touches them and immediately regrets it as pain shoots down his face.

"It's a long story, Margo, truth is I'm having doubts..."

"Come sit, dear. It can't be that bad. Tell me all about it."

He does and she listens so patiently. He has no family of his own anymore. Margo is the closest thing to a grandmother he has. He tells her his story. She usually loves his story's but this one isn't a good story. It contains bad people with bad motives hurting the ones Margo cares about. She can certainly understand why he's upset. Now she's upset, too.

As he finishes, his face is in his hands, pain or not. She hasn't seen him like this since....well she isn't going to stand for it. She's been through worse, and these young people need to be reminded there are real problems out there. On the one hand it's progress of sorts that these protesters don't have a war or institutional oppression to fight against, but making monsters of good men is a different kind of evil and no kind of replacement for the real thing.

Protest is not a business model. It's not suppose to be profitable. The Frankenstein marriage of sensational gotcha journalism with political agendas is destroying the publishing industry. It has to go beyond that but she knows what she knows. The best authors have gone underground, not because they fear the state, but because they fear the audience. The reviews are bad by default, ginned up by bloggers, bought and paid for by the social justice warriors conveniently located at a campus recruitment centre near you. The smallest bit of bad press and even respected careers are destroyed.

Not since McCarthy has she seen anything like this. Jay looks helplessly into her kind eyes. He'd done everything right. Worked hard, wrote good books, followed the rules. Got an agent, got published. Did the speaking tours. Did the talks on the local campuses, signed copies at countless book stores... even the occasional local station public interest interview.

It didn't go very far. Jay owns his house. An empty house that constantly reminds him of the family he used to have yet can't afford to move out of. He gets by on royalties for work done years ago and savings, the days of big advances and publishers making a writer's dreams come true are long over. The market isn't stable, advertisers make more on content than content producers.

"I hear it's even worse in the music industry."

Looking at Jay as he is now, Margo can't help but think that the world has gone crazy again. Maybe some good news will cheer him up.

"Well Jay, I know it's unfair, what happened to you isn't right."

He nods. He just wants to contribute something real in this short life.

"But I've read your new book, my dear. It's absolutely wonderful. We are going to get it published, Jay. I promise you."

He looks frightened. Even with Jimmy and Mash watching his back there's no guarantee he'll be safe.

Margo can sense the hesitation and so presents her most persuasive tone slipping easily back into the role of literary agent.

"I'm going to take care of this for you, Jay. Don't worry, let me do the worrying now, ok?"

"Ok Margo." He finds it easy to trust her. She's always come through, has she not.

"I've already got Carol working on it in fact."

"But you're my agent...right? Who's Carol?" he spooks slightly.

She handles him perfectly with that measured experience that made her so great in her time.

"She's my new partner, Jay." Her steady gaze soothes him, though in truth he doesn't know much about how businesses work. "She's young but smart, has the energy I don't."

"You look great, Margo," He is so fond of her. His little girl had loved her, too, called her 'Big Gram'.

"We're going to make sure this doesn't happen again. To you or any of our other authors."

Jay nods his consent again trying to smile through the pain. He feels better, Margo can handle anything, that's what she does.

"Margo...no more speaking engagements, ok?" Sadly if she pushed him, he'd still do them.

"Of course, Jay. We're gonna handle the promotion. The whole business is gonna change and young people like Carol will lead the way..."

The unequivocal qualification.

"I like this, I like that. The only real problem with the deal is him...really." The rep points his thumb accusingly at the manuscript on her desk. This is not what a publisher is supposed to be like, but these were reps. Lawyers and public relation types are at best one degree away from accountants.

"Background, that's what's going through my head. I mean who is Jay Andrew?"

"We'd rather work with you cause we know you, but..."

"Yes. It's the team."

"Trust is huge."

"Exactly. I mean theoretically it's a good idea. He's been published before."

“Years ago. A different market entirely. It’s all about the millennials now.”

“I’ve seen books in the ditch, on fire...what about this stuff with the feminists.”

“Its about the flow. We need a hook. Nobody is buying his old books right now.”

“Ok, well thanks guys. Let’s think about it. We’ll come up with something.”

Does Max still have the footage of that protest and interview they did last semester? The real controversy is a good writer can’t sell his book without threat of violence. The Regressive Left is the big story. Carol can smell it. Problem with being a journalist is your born not made which puts them in rare supply at the best of times. When a big story presents there’s this hunger and you have to feed it. Whats happening to Jay Andrew is a crime, whats happening to free speech is a tragedy.

“Thanks for the chat, Carol. Hey...” The rep turns on his way out.

“...Gordon wanted me to send his love to Margo. Welcome her back to the game.”

Gordon Libnezin owns Prairie Press Publishing, one of the oldest publishers in the province, probably should have retired when Margo did, but word is he died years ago and just didn’t tell anyone.

Carol smiles and places her hand on the shorter mans shoulder subtly but politely turning him toward the door as his taller partner is already half way through.

“I’ll let her know, gentlemen. She’ll be pleased to hear it.”

The door closes and the reps leave. They’ll review the contract and Margo says they’ll sign eventually, but Carol isn’t so sure. Jay Andrew is their only author and they need a big sale to attract more. Given the recent events surrounding Love Everlasting, it’s gonna be tough. No one wants to touch a controversial author right now. Not in this economy. Even the online ad systems ignore the content of anyone considered Our Tribal Circles.

It’s not right. Oh, shit. It’s almost 3pm. Margo will be arriving soon and Carol wants everything just right for her.

Fear is a great motivator.

Ben stays as quiet as a mouse. Head down hidden behind frail wall dividers as the police bust through the main door. Luckily, they’re not after him. Some guy standing alone staring into space is thrown hard to the ground, too hard. Ben can’t believe what he’s seeing. The cop takes this poor kid down out of nowhere. Vicious. Intent on not enjoying the same treatment, Ben stay absolutely still.

A second cop forces his way through the door and tries to calm the other one down, Not happening. The cuffs are on and the kid is dragged unconscious from the room. As the silence reasserts itself, Ben just keeps his head down, shaking. What the hell is going on in this town!? He thought University would be a safe place. Apparently, there are no safe places. Somewhere out in the ether his parents cheer and don’t know why.

Ben keeps his head down until he falls asleep again. Maybe it’s all a dream, but he knows it isn’t.

The loudest voices.

“Political noise machine... All about intimidation... You are not respecting his free speech... You use half truths and sounds bites to incite people to believe he is something he is not.”

Paul swims in the heat. Why is this happening? His back hurts, he has fresh bruises forming on his wrists and ribs in unequal measure. He’s so thirsty. The interrogator has been going on like this for awhile now.

Good as new.

Detective Chris Nobody shakes his head. This kid is pathetic. He'd do well in rehabilitation. They'd make a new man out of him.

"...something he is not."

Frank's been grilling him for almost 5 minutes. Look at that trembling lip. Shaking fingers. Guilty conscience. In the old days, Frank dealt with real hard liners. Took at least an evening to let them know their in serious shit. These millennials pop like a ripe pimple as soon as any pressure at all is applied. Though funny at first, Frank now finds it severely unsatisfying.

However, the minister says inmate levels are too high and he's non-violent. Since he has no priors they're to cut him loose once he's good and scared.

Pictures of the victim's x-rays spread across the table. Frank pushes them forward.

"Look at 'em, kid! You did this."

"No...I...I...."

"We tracked your blogs dumb-ass." In truth Frank doesn't know what a blog is. He winks at Chris, this is old school police stuff, the lab team handles the details, Frank handles the man.

"This is federal, kid! Hard time! Hate crime!"

Are those tears....pop...those are tears. Probably the first genuine cry Paul's had in years. Now for the logical conclusion. Frank lets him go for a few minutes then stands.

"You're gonna need representation, kid. You fucked up...bad." He leaves, Chris follows closing the door behind him.

Paul is definitely scared. Forced to face the consequences he naturally adjusts his operating framework. Has little choice in the matter. Evolution is a force much older than his bad habits. He doesn't realize it consciously but Paul changes for the better. The tears streaming down his cheeks represent growing up, which like it or not isn't easy...for anyone.

Throw the net and collect the fish.

The sitting Government reads the Ministry of Finance internal report illustrating the profit pie for community organizers with an interest in the upcoming election. It says they make most of their money online with few employees and even fewer taxable opportunities. Online ads and of course the holy grail, student fund raising from organic web traffic and social media. Blogs, forums, protester culture, it's an epic financial driver, exploiting content they don't own and didn't have any part in creating. All perfectly legal.

A direct end run into the credit cards of thousands of parents all over the world. The latest census results say they feel guilty for having ignored the worlds problems for so long, but in truth most feel guilty for ignoring their kids when it mattered. Now they live vicariously through them. Blissfully unaware of how thoughtless their kids really are and how so much of their money goes into things directly opposed to their own economic well being.

This self governing principle is a key source of revenue for the Opposition parties and the sitting Government knows it. Uncontrollable, nontaxable, ghost-militias operated by foreign interests hell bent on taking it down and establishing its enemy in power. Those egalitarian fools across the floor. No national loyalty, no borders. They have to be stopped...for the good of the country.

Bill 17 would correct this and theoretically usher in a new renaissance of creative production. More

importantly a broader spectrum of jobs to face the dynamic nature of the information age...and undercut the Oppositions traditional support by bringing the entire production class over to the Ruling Party's side.

The sitting Government approves the proposal presented on behalf of the 4 senior Ministers with attached support from party leaders and insiders. They must now finalize wording in time for a whipped vote the following week. If they can get this passed before the election, they'll have been so successful gaming the political landscape, the electorate will show up in droves to support them. That's what happens when jobs and revenue are both generated while satisfying marginalized yet hugely valuable segments of society.

Well played capitalistic opportunism can earn a lot of credit with the kind of voters the Ruling Party likes to attract. And growth in GDP making electing MPs a lot easier down the road. Well played, Prime Minister. This might just be the most effective Cabinet in history.

A solitary man is more willing to listen.

More junk mail. Stanley rubs his throat. He feels like he's aging a year a week and looks like ten. Could use some water. How many more flyers does he have to get. A well placed sign turns back the solicitors but it seems to have only increased the amount of junk mail. He grabs it by the handful, dropping it in a large bag he keeps nearby for the purpose. At least they stopped knocking.

"There must be some underlying motive...the fact that they don't see this... Circle Rehabilitation Network... private jails and forgotten people...that they don't care about women..."

What's this one? A ministers report on digital content and its effect on producers. Lack of talent incentives. Advertisers overreaching. Dangers of open internet distribution devaluing authors. Digital monopolies with no oversight. Recommendations for changes in content royalty regulations as it applies to the written word. Proposal to share ad revenue through a state controlled mechanism? Bill 17.

Stanley stops for a second. They're doing it. They're sucking me in. He forgets for a moment about his sore throat and keeps reading. The wicker chair he keeps on his front porch for this very reason finally gets some use.

A sweet old Filipino man brings a fresh glass of water and leans his cane against the wall out from under foot. Stanley ignores him. The Caregiver doesn't seem to mind as he shuffles down the stairs and out of sight. Stanley sips the water. Swallowing hurts more every single day.

Failure is normal.

Paul cries for a long time. He just wants the girls to like him. He didn't think about the consequences because he's thoughtless. People got hurt and now he's paying for it. By the time the police kick him out on his ass he's fully convinced he'll be violated by morning. The older cop chuckles when he hands Paul a document of information about a mandatory hearing next week.

Fucking soldier of the establishment pushing him around. His chapter sisters abandoned him. It hurt him deeply to realize, he's expendable. All the rituals and talk of loyalty...just marketing. He finds his apartment trashed, his computer gone. Muddy tracks through out his living room virtually guarantee he won't get his damage deposit back when he moves out. Paul sits in his second hand lazy boy, lets his head fall back and stares at the roof silently.

Indians are people too.

The Ministry of Indigenous and Northern Affairs arranges funds with the Ministry of Finance with support from Justice and Labour. It negotiates with the appropriate tribal council to decide which

members will run the Nêhiyawak Rehabilitation Circle. The first of its kind. Having approved the suggested test case offered by the Ministry of Justice, Trisha Brownbear is transferred to the prototype facility built in a decommissioned mine on depleted Reserve land.

Expectations are high, and though the Assembly of First Nations is in full support, they've laid out several pragmatic benchmarks to help ensure this isn't just another useful photo-op. The local chief has stuck his neck out hoping to gain favour anticipating another win for the Ruling Party, but his loyalty is still with his tribe.

The Prime Minister is well aware of the stakes and makes every effort to show it. For the first time in over a century, Indian issues are front and centre.

Several locals are hired both for the construction and maintenance of the facility and surrounding estate. Wages are set at 25% above minimum wage due to its remote location, and the requirement to shuttle staff to and from the facility on a daily basis. In addition the facility has several live-in positions for experimental immersion therapies based on traditional teachings of the elders.

Internal memos confirm the Sitting Government is very pleased. Several bureaucrats get promotions and a renewed sense of purpose runs through the inner chambers.

Gotta do what mans gotta do.

It's money. That's what Ben keeps telling himself. The Ministry of Labour's Manpower program pays by the day plus a small nutritious lunch. Passing out political flyers isn't fun, and it isn't exciting, but it pays enough to stay fed, buys his smokes and a locker to store his stuff. He discovered his student ID still gets him in the gym and thus the pool and showers.

A local coin operated laundry frequented by international students takes care of his cloths. At least once he bought a second shirt and jeans and discovered cloths can last a couple days between washes given the smell of students generally. No one challenged his sleeping corner and apart from cops busting in last week, it's been quiet. He's only really there at night anyway and to pass the time, he sketches in one of his many empty binders of loose leaf.

Figures if he works all week like this he can buy some powder on the weekend. His parents have still not returned his calls, but he's sure they'll be back by then so he'll have his own bed again soon. He lights another smoke, thinking about the weekend. Thinking about that sweet powder.

Reconstruction is as good as re-conception.

The shelves are dusted, the books arranged in proper order. Sunlight streams in through yellow tinted glass. Dark oak reading tables and low sitting benches adorn the room. Freshly polished. The centrepiece; a massive colourful throw rug with thick brown frills. Max stands at the entrance admiring his work and also trying to gauge the experience of first walking in. It should be classy, like Carol... sophisticated yet engaging.

When Margo walks through the door Max greets her warmly.

"Welcome to Douglas & Porter, ma'am." He offers his arm which she takes gratefully. All this walking is supposed to be good for her, but it takes its toll anyway.

"Can I get you some tea?" she nods. "Thank you, Max."

"Carol is expecting you, of course, I'll let her know you're here."

He leads Margo into her office. It's set up more like a tea room, but it suits her schedule and she doesn't have the hands for writing a lot or the back for sitting at a desk. She settles into her favourite chair, an open book waiting for her on the simple round surface beside her.

When Carol is ready she'll come visit. No rush, she might be on the phone with a publisher or an author. Maintaining relationships are the most important part of the agency's daily operations.

"Margo!" Carol beams from the door. She didn't make her wait at all.

They hold hands briefly, Carol bends forward so Margo doesn't have to get up. Max comes shuffling in a few moments later balancing two cups of tea and a sugar bowl on an elegant silver tray. Neither likes cream. Carol finds her seat, and then asks Max to bring her the Jay Andrew portfolio.

Margo places 3 spoonfuls of sugar in her tea and then warms her lips.

"First let me say, I love Jay's new book."

"As do I." Margo replies.

"And you know what a fan I am."

"I do." Margo holds her tea comfortably in cradled fingers.

"But I don't know how we're gonna get Prairie Press on board."

"Oh?"

"With all this controversy with the feminists right now...damn it there has to be a way...they are destroying his career and they know it!" Carol shakes her head in frustration. Free speech has been weaponized and it's pointed directly at those it was intended to protect."

"I know, I just spoke with Jay this morning. He's all banged up."

"What?!"

"They attacked him on campus." Margo keeps her eyes steadily on Carol's and sips her tea calmly.

Carol is shocked. These were her chapter sisters once. How had they fallen so far. She put her tea cup down and picks up the portfolio Max hands her. She leafs through it intently. Everything about this author hits the right notes. Yet it seems hopeless. This is the helplessness that so many agency's feel just before they close their doors. This is what they have to find a way past if they are going to grow again.

"I've got Max researching online options, but so far, unless we're an ad company, not much opportunity there either. Free copies will end up driving web traffic but we don't see any of that. If we publish to a device specific platform our overhead goes up and the distributor makes more than us."

"Keep trying dear, it takes time, but we'll see it through."

Carol believes her. She looks confident. This isn't over yet.

"Now lets give Gordon some time to digest our offer and come back to us. He might surprise you."

They both enjoy their tea and in a little while Max brings in sugar cookies his mom baked for Carol the night before.

Innovation requires imagination.

Several beautiful pieces complete a set of black sapphire book bindings. Bert and Dynasty have brought some of their flashiest options for the photographer to choose from. There's money in vanity books, and Bert has fashioned several lines of interchangeable configurations designed to appear unique for each client that wants a book developed for their content. The appeal is in the lighting and the natural reflections real metal and stones produce at higher definition.

An afternoon can bring in several hundred dollars depending on how much the author appreciates their

pieces. Truth be told it often makes more than selling them directly. It takes more client relationship, for example at the moment, Bert and Dynasty still have to “consult” during filming. Bert would rather be making more product and Dynasty wants to scale, get in more cities, more provinces, more productions.

The author goes crazy for one of Bert’s newest bindings. The ‘blue mist’ coin twist. One of his more unique and complicated works. A profitable afternoon. On good days they sell a binding or two for their trouble. They ask for more when that happens because these are show pieces not meant for the common shopper. Bert’s learns to smile more and talk less. Always stand when you’re selling. Dynasty has raised revenue significantly. The shop and manpower is covered, profit may be just around the corner.

Dynasty continues thinking about new revenue streams. There has got to be more opportunities she isn’t seeing. Social media? No, the marketing is a nightmare and too many screens with bad colour definition giving an inferior impression of the work.

Besides they want customers who drive new ideas not higher volume at lower prices that eventually turn the business into a faceless distributor. They want to bring in other content contributors as soon as possible so Bert can take it easier, spend more time managing and teaching. He doesn’t have the benefit of youth to drive him all the time and Dynasty can see the fatigue building.

They’ve taken risks and have built a stable productive system and a clear clientele with a good reputation, now they must complete the ritual. She’s earned back her initial investment and they’re building equity. However, to grow they must position themselves better, diversify. Dynasty has an idea.

This is what it means to collaborate.

The last one remaining in the staff room is Jimmy. Bert and Dynasty have gone off to discuss broad plans and Jimmy remains to actually make it work on paper. Produce our own content? Terrible idea, gonna cost a fortune, where’s the return. Every one of these thoughts and more keep running through his head. Where is he going to find the kind of people they need?

Not to mention who’s gonna put a curriculum together? Dynasty has many skills but illustrative layout isn’t one of them and Bert is good with his hands not computers or cameras. All of this is gonna cost money. Lot’s of money. Nobody is gonna pay to learn the craft of distrusting literature if it doesn’t look high end. Once he gets a hold of himself, reminded that he gets paid either way, Jimmy considers the variables. Dynasty prefers they start local, make their own brand.

Adults only. That fits right in the wheel house of their current clients already. Apparently Dynasty has no interest in anyone under 25 unless they sign some kind of strict waiver. Wouldn’t talk about why. They’ll need a classroom set up. They’ve got the room, Bert leased a large shop so some minor renovations should handle the need.

This could work. He’s got this.

Orders. Orders. Orders.

“Magazines and flyers. Go. Periodicals and letters. Go. Anthologies and Short Form. Go. Long Form. Go. Everything else, your in the back!”

Gordon barks orders like a battle field commander. The small room full of people scuttling about reminds him of the old days. Several new staff members, courtesy of the Ministry of Labour have compensated for traditional operating deficiencies while improving credibility in the Aboriginal community. The Ruling Party has approved tax free status for the company given its close relationship to the Ministry of Indigenous and Northern Affairs and for all the good work it does supporting the

Assembly of First Nations in its efforts to strengthen a proud and important culture.

Prairie Press Publishing now has the exclusive contract with the federal government for publicizing its most ambitious jobs generator since the pipeline was shutdown. Of course Gordon's real motivation is Bill 17 and the revenue stream it promises. Thanks to his timely input, the role of publishers and agencies are grandfathered in respecting past royalty relationships.

The development of a new market in strategic derivative works from online activity and everything else is essential to the future of the economy. He wants to put authors and the industry that surround them back in their rightful place. A prominent part of the cultural fabric of a society where social media doesn't represent all culture. The current path isn't sustainable. Like a canary in a coal mine dropping dead, Gordon has already realized the tech industry is holding everyone else hostage. Things need to change or free enterprise is dead.

Short One brings him a proposal from Douglas & Porter. Something about digital translation services and their last remaining author's latest manuscript. Very forward thinking actually, impressive.

"What happened to Stanley?"

"Dead, sir. Cancer."

He grunts.

"Who's Porter?"

"Carol Portal, sir. Ms. Douglas has acquired a new partner. She is also literary agent for Jay Andrew."

"Hmmm." Gordon remembers that name from a long time ago...and his book Love Everlasting. It was a great comfort actually when his father died, but that was 20 years ago.

"And Margo is really back. Did you see her?"

"No, sir."

So Jay has written another book...well isn't that...

"Marketing has appended a report, sir."

"No doubt they want it tossed in the slush pile."

"They actually want him off our roster entirely. Disavowed was the word they used."

Gordon turns.

"Disavowed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get me Taller Two."

Now we can begin.

The Ministry of Justice completes the terms of its deal with Prairie Press Publishing gratefully accepting suggestions for improvements to the original proposal. The final wording includes several provisions for handling legacy royalty arrangements that respect author, agents, and publishers alike. There's also wording to publicly recognize the harm poor regulations online has been having throughout several industries to act as background for why these regulation are necessary and cross the broad spectrum of content.

The Ministry of Finance moves money in such a way as to ensure the jobs programs appear cost neutral, both for the right and left, continue uninterrupted until two years into the next term. Who ever

wins this election will be stuck with a new reality that includes both private jails and radical changes in how artists are paid for their work. In the case of the Sitting Government, this is very good, for its base and the economy, and especially for sticking it to the Opposition. For the Opposition, it's very bad given their traditional support among tax dodging egalitarians looking for even less taxes and more services.

The second reading of Bill 17 goes as expected. The Ruling Party with clear sitting majority in Parliament, passes the regulatory reforms easily. The Opposition dares not challenge it, when the heads of every major publishing association in the country come out in favour lead by the venerable Prairie Press Publishing. The lack of online ad companies headquartered from the country leaves almost no one to descent beyond those that appose everything the Sitting Government does on principle.

Thanks to the Internet's general lack of interest in Government affairs, the law changes before anyone in the private sector can interfere. By the following morning every major media network has extensive literature in every format ready for convenient digestion by the masses. Friendly faces explaining Bill 17 and its connection to job growth. Digital memes, and sounds bites, and video snippets and podcasts.

Everything that needs content gets it with government support so nobody resists. The Sitting Government is the Country's majority employer one way or the other. The peoples own money is going to re-elect it while a new deal between old partners is renewed. That's real politics.

The Ministry of Indigenous and Northern Affairs conducts weekly inspections of the Nêhiyawak Rehabilitation Circle once it becomes operational. A representative from the local community does a walk through and system check before a regular interview at Prairie Press Publishing to inform the record. Gordon has insisted on centralized control on all publications involving the Sitting Governments work with the facility.

Prairie Press Publishing has a month long propaganda program running with full platform spread for maximum saturation in the run up to the election. Everything has been crafted to compliment the political activities by the Ruling Party and its efforts to raise up the First Nations people to the dignity they've long deserved. Gordon revels in this kind of thing. His father would be proud.

Nose to the grindstone.

The unassuming young man in the dark hoodie walks quietly with his head down. His grades are good, so Paul doesn't have any problem slipping back into his life...for the most part He stays away from politics and tries to ignore the constant pleas from those handing out pamphlets in the main campus square. Stop Bill 17! He doesn't care about any of it anymore. He's already shut down his social media accounts and wiped his phone history.

When he sees a former chapter sister he goes the other way, instead choosing to focus exclusively on his classes. He's determined to graduate on time and get the hell out of this place. They sometimes laugh at him as he walks. Everyone knows what happened. I guess it's not bullying if the whole group is in on it, he thinks to himself. It's institutional.

Reaching his destination, he stops. The Campus Common board offers a place to advertise books and other misc student stuff. Paul puts up a sign looking for a room mate to help cover bills. Someone his own age looking for the quite life. No parties, no bullshit. He figures it's a long shot given it's mid semester and most people are settled in.

Realization of ones status.

Finding himself in the Campus Common, Ben has to cover his mouth to hold off the bile. The smell coming from the homeless man shuffling by is unbearable. He hasn't showered in forever. And his cloths, all holey and salvation-y. How do people come to that? How can he just let himself go, has life

failed him or had he failed life?

Ben's parents are not back and he still has no permanent place to live. This could be the first time in his life when he actually worried about something for a sustained period of time. Even if it is mostly about himself, it's a start.

Working every day and eating on the cheap has paid off. However, it's looking more and more like his little powder run won't be so fun after all. NO NOISE, NO SMOKING, NO GUESTS. Sigh. He's gotta do what he's gotta do. He thumbs in the number on the poster offering a room for rent near campus.

Counting his bills he has just enough to cover the room, but the end of the month is coming up in a few days so his phone will need a bump. He might lose service for a little while. One thing at a time. The internet hasn't been his friend for awhile anyway.

He suddenly realizes he has to set priorities. That means sacrifices his parents aren't their to cover for him. Vaguely, he remembers his grandfather talking about this kind of thing when he was little and unspoiled. Ben misses his grandfather and wishes he were here right now to tell him more.

He might kick him in the ass or he might confirm he's heading in the right direction. Something. Ben feels hopelessly driven by necessity. No internal compass and a lot of bad habits. What is he really trying to accomplish. What's the point? For now...survival.

The unmistakable bang of a dumpster lid slamming shut drives the point home. Ben watches the foul smelling, holy man shuffles out of sight. Not me, bro. Not gonna be me.

Professional frenemies.

The taller man enters after Short One. Taller Two is a practical and astute observer of human nature. He can tell Gordon is not pleased. As is customary in such situations his hands are held passively at his belt, his most attentive expression on his face. Borderline patronizing, actually.

“Sir?”

Short One inches his way to the side, anxious to step out of the direct view of his mercurial boss.

Gordon is postured such that his chest points accusingly while his arms don't have to. He snorts and turns dismissively. Taller stands his ground, he's fought this battle before, he expects to again.

“I want Jay Andrew's latest manuscript marked up and on my desk by the end of the week.”

Marking up is one of the secrets of Prairie Press Publishing's success. It's also a time consuming and thus expensive process. Often described as auto-tuning for literature, marking up a manuscript subtly realigns the pacing to better match the word length and genre type given last cycles analytics. It's not as extensive as editing, and isn't applied until the final version is ready. Virtually guarantees 10–25 percent bump in consumption rate in most cases though.

“But...”

Gordon turns and gives him a long stare.

“Problem?”

“Well...it's just that the staff, sir. They follow this stuff online and they don't want to be associated with a...”

“...a what?”

“...a misogynist, sir. He incites violence.”

“What are you talking about? That's all just online bullshit. It's not real, Taller.”

“Well, sir, it’s real enough. He’s been in the news recently and the protests keep getting bigger. They’ll call for boycotts, they’ll protest us too. The Social Warriors will declare war on us. They’ll put us under.” As they should, Taller thinks to himself maintaining his straight faced attentive posture.

They’ve been through all this before and it always goes to the same place. Nowhere. This old man and his old ideas of free speech putting authors first will be gone soon enough. It’s about politically correct speech now, putting the ideas first, that’s how to make money in publishing. Pretend the ideas have rights and then narrate.

When he’s gone Taller intends to run things quite differently. He’ll treat ideas as they should be, which divorces the connection to the artist driving a more controllable conduit for the content. The money is, as Gordon keeps going on about, in the strategic derivatives.

“War?” Gordon paces back and forth thinking, as he always does at this point. “So be it.”

“Thank you...”

“It’s war we’ll give them.”

“...sir?”

Short One, smiling quietly in the corner, hands Taller Two several documents. A blueprint for something called Bill 17 with appended reports and background. It details an alignment of political interests of the First Nations people with the economic interests of the Sitting Government driven by a desire to offset GDP reductions. While new rehabilitation facilities ramp up in time for the first Throne Speech post election, regulatory reforms will usher in a new era for artists and their gate keepers. Analysts suggests this will ensure they stay in power while undercutting non-taxable income which serves the egalitarian Opposition.

“As we all know these so called ‘Social Warriors’ have been exploiting an inherent weakness in the Internet’s ad regulations to fund their endless crusades. They know our Country is unwilling to address it directly out of fear of threatening the open nature of the Internet and it’s obvious importance to the free world.”

He slams his fist on his Churchill desk. Right were he imagines the man himself might have.

“But there’s a middle ground! Since we’re not high enough on the list of victims to matter, I have little choice but to fight for my own interests. That or it’s death by a thousand pin pricks, Taller.”

Taller Two reads the dates at the bottom of the cover letter. May 15. It’s already late April. There’s no way to stop this. What will his wife think of him? How can he stay working for a man who publishes the hate speech of men like Jay Andrew.

There have to be standards. It’s about accessibility, making people aware they belong, not whatever some artist “feels” like producing. Equality, and shared experience is the new religion. If that means Gordon and people like him can’t keep a business open, small price to pay. Writers like Jay Andrew can’t be allowed to spread their filth. Someone has to check their privileged.

He hands the documents back to Small One.

“You’re no better than, Joseph Goebbels.” Gordon, being Jewish visibly flinches. ”I quite.”

Where the problem lies.

“It’s because they’ve never faced the real thing.”

“What do you mean?” Carol stabs at her ginger beef.

“The regressives are mostly millennials right, so in a way it’s a sign of progress. They’ve never actually

experienced discrimination for real, so they can't tell the difference."

"I think you give them too much credit, Max. They just figured out a way to be important without earning it." Slippery beef.

"Ya but I mean specifically why'd the Sisterhood trigger on Jay Andrew's book? There's basically a supply and demand problem. They need monsters and when they can't find one they make one. I mean it was published years ago, no problems at all until recently. Is there anything in there actually sexist or have they lowered the bar, as you say, on purpose, to the point where men can't even speak about women..."

"...unless it's to re-enforce the approved message."

"Ya, exactly." Max finally digs into his noodles. "Did you know only 18 percent of women identify as a feminist now?" Carol nods.

"The Sisterhood is always very careful with its message. Looking back, they're pretty well organized. T-shirts, branding. Where do think they're getting their money?"

"Social media." Max doesn't even look up or swallow. He's been researching this very subject lately so he knows. "They make money on ads and they use that money to buy ads asking for more money."

Carol does some quick math in her nimble mind. "If we count all the groups like them as one group that adds up to millions. For one chapter, though, the donations, maybe?"

There has to be more to the Sisterhood, Carol can feel it. They function like a unit, a well paid unit. They always know what Jay is doing and they always show up. The core group especially, always had the nicest shoes...

"You think there's another angle?" Max looks up intrigued. He really likes the way her bangs curl like that.

"Think about those protests, Max." She leans forward. Max breathes in deeply. Cleavage. "They keep getting bigger. More t-shirts, more brand recognition, more cameras. The news media puts them on, and they're rewarded with social buzz. Ads are in there, sure, but there's donations too, and..."

"...and we need to find out who those donors are." he whistles.

"Hhmhmn", her deep chestnut eyes sparkle in the dim light of the tacky Chinese themed restaurant. It bothers no-one that the waiter is Hispanic.

Alone in the crowd.

Paul doesn't see much of Ben. He keeps to his room when he's home which is rare. Works a lot, which suits Paul just fine. He's been writing finals and not having to worry about distractions is exactly what he needs. Occasionally, he leaves the seclusion of his apartment, just to change the scenery. He finds it easier to study if he can take a moment here and there to look around and take in a strange place.

Then there are the grinds. Several hours in the middle of a day glumly pushing through notes attempting to prioritize and retain. Finals can be pretty long, he's gotten through half of them and considers the hardest one already down. It will only take a couple more weeks before he's free to consider his options. A co-op program has offered him a work term, but if he takes it that'll add another year to his degree as he'll be working every other semester.

It's something he has to decide soon, or the opening will go to another student. He pauses, the TV catching his attention for a moment. Protesters have surrounded the local police HQ, angrily chanting their opposition to a new private jail on some Indian reserve. There's a good chance a free concert is gonna form by nightfall. DJs are already spinning up playlists and priming live streams.

A local Opposition Party MP is already pandering to a growing mob of top knots and side shaves. He shakes his head, having cut off his top knot last week. What did he ever see in those assholes. They just look like a small mercenary army now. They dangle their shiny bait to attract new recruits, this whole news story is an advertisement for a multi-headed hydra. One head breaths fire while another spits poison. What is the source of its great power?

Paul angrily throws his book away and stands in frustration. It's eating him up inside. How had he allowed himself to be manipulated like that. Didn't...couldn't see it coming...distracted. If they can con him they can con anyone. One thing for certain. If they are against Bill 17, then he doesn't care what it is, he's now for it.

The front door opens and his new roommate Ben wearily steps in. A lazy grunt and a slight wave directs Ben past the living room into a soft bed. Thus another day has passed in a situation no-one wants yet everyone appreciates.

Progress takes sacrifice.

His shoulders are stooped, he's very tired. Manual labour is building muscles, but it's taking a toll. The first few days on a 2 week contract doing drywall across town was the hardest. Ben couldn't carry an entire sheet on his own, and his hands would ache and throb the rest of the night. Now if he doesn't carry it on his own, his hands will ache from lack of use.

He nods to Paul, who blankly nods back, then Ben goes directly to his room and shuts the door. It's an arrangement of convenience. Ben isn't aware Paul's the kid the cops took down a month ago right in front of him and neither is interested in friendship so they don't talk. A healthy balance formed naturally right away. They keep different hours, yet sleep at the same time. No complaints from either side.

The bed is small, but adequate. Ben undresses and promptly passes out from exhaustion into a well earned if not peaceful sleep.

Political games are always being played.

Bill 17 takes effect only one month before people are expected to vote The Ministry of Justice enjoys a respite from negative media coverage as protesters and other Opposition forces find themselves drawn into a new and unfamiliar narrative. They become divided as more Progressives find themselves supporting Bill 17's regulatory changes to support artists earning the fire of the regressives loyal to the egalitarian Opposition which apposes publishers.

The Ministry of Indian Affairs is impressed with the effectiveness of the Nêhiyawak Rehabilitation Circle prototype facility which has since successfully handled dozens of traditionally hard cases already. Thanks to the wonderful media coverage Prairie Press Publishing has been feeding the news cycle, it begins preparation on more facilities across the country based on the now proven teachings of the elders. The Ministry of Justice has cleared the transfer of non-aboriginal prisoners to the expanded network, fulfilling the vision.

The Ministry of Labour requests high level meetings to discuss the possibility of in facility work programs. The Ruling Party supports such programs and so the Sitting Government has voiced some interest in the past. All agree this a new opportunity to push Party values and grow GDP. An exploratory committee is formed.

The Assembly of First Nations enjoys massive funding increases as expected. A certain percentage of profit from the local Circle is allocated to the hosting band representative at the Assembly for the positive development of First Nations peoples through out the country and another percentage goes to the tribe in control of the Reserve that hosts any given facility. Unlike urban centres, There's no

proximity concern and protesters can't get anywhere near them. In return, the Assembly's powerful voting block has ensured its support.

Friendship carries the day.

"Here you go, Mash." Somehow even darker in the shade of the garden, Mash looks up. Jay has brought him some water. "Don't get dehydrated, son."

"Ok, pops." He smirks. Mash has been helping maintain the garden for a couple weeks now. Jay called him when he realized he could use some help after all, but not with a show, just basic living. Jay isn't so young anymore and with his injuries, it's best he not do too much heavy lifting or awkward bending. Mash is happy to help, having spent many days as a kid helping his own father in their little garden.

He gratefully accepts the water, which makes Jay smile, and then pushes his hands back into the soil searching for any potatoes he might have missed. Jay takes his usual seat in the sun leaning up against the side of his house in a bleached wooden chair still mostly covered in white paint. He sips a beer one swallow at a time.

"Does your family like it here, Mash?" part of an ongoing discussion about immigration policy.

"They used to, I think. Now they just want to retire somewhere quiet."

"Whats holding them back?" Jay squints as he turns his face to the sky sunning himself.

"Money." Of course.

"No pensions?"

"Too small after his employer invested and lost most of it."

"Savings?"

"Drained to keep afloat during the collapse of '08."

Jay grunts knowingly. He's had his own struggles the last several years, no doubt about it this is a common experience.

A courier knocks on the fence around the side of the house. Mash gets up to let him in.

"Certified letter for Jay Andrew. Sign here please." Mash looks back at Jay who doesn't seem to know what it is.

Mash signs, thanks the man and takes the letter over to Jay. It appears to be from the Ministry of Finance. Probably some tax thing so Mash returns to his labour grabbing a small hand trowel on his way.

Jay stares silently at the letter, eyes open wide ignoring the discomfort in his cheeks.

"What is it... Jay?"

"It's a cheque...for royalties earned last month for Love Everlasting under new regulations. Something called Bill 17."

"I've heard of that. Something about the Internet. How much did they give you?"

"\$136,000.00"

Mash drops the trowel.

To those who wait...

"Thank you, Short, and thank Gordon for me directly, please."

Carol hangs up the phone and then quickly calls Margo. Gordon has agreed to publish *Our Tribal Circles* but new terms need to be drawn up. Bill 17 has become the talk of the publishing industry. It changes everything, including the expected share of the author now that long term ad revenue is on the table. Gordon intends to set that standard with favourable conditions for the publishing industry.

Margo doesn't answer...

Carol commits to trying again in a little while. In the meantime, she calls in Max to bring her the Jay Andrew file and to get him on the phone. She wants to tell her first author the good news personally. They're gonna need more staff.

Max is on it.

Reborn like the phoenix, brighter than ever.

Dynasty enjoys applying her creative side. One of the workers is pretty good with a pencil so she brought him on board to assist Jimmy. He's quiet and works hard. A little sad maybe, but Dynasty sees him smile enough not to cause concern and Jimmy seems to like him.

Should be college, but frankly she's refreshed to see a young man working hard again. He's troubled, but that's healthy at his age, he should be. It's a troubling world, what does denying the reality serve. A comfortable day dream at best.

She's happy to invest in his future, though he may not realize that's what she's doing. If he keeps up the work ethic, and does good work on the blueprints, he's got a chance at something real. Not just with Dynasty's operation, but with anyone who appreciates talent and needs real things done.

Useful leads to happy because it begs an inevitable reward.

In order to leverage his years of experience to generate a new revenue stream, Bert lines up apprentices in preparation of the first class. The renovations should only take a couple weeks and a rough curriculum is already in his head, but he fully intends to put it all down on paper as he goes.

Glancing up from his desk, he chuckles as he surveys his kingdom. Jimmy and Ben are over on the west corner inspecting a surface discussing who knows what. Dynasty is in her office working phones and messaging clients. Thanks to Jimmy he has absolutely no paper work to worry about. It's good. It's really good.

His connections down at the University worked out, too. A regular supply of art students will be spending 3 hours a day down at his classroom and binding studio as part of a co-op program. Even Bert has to admit he's surprised how respect the market has been to vanity book covers covers. It's time for some fresh blood and new ideas. To sell a product based on its intrinsic value it must speak to contemporary tastes. By applying traditional artistic expressions, books become display pieces without the bookshelf.

Bert doesn't feel contemporary, he feels functional...and old. He's anxious to pass on the skills, teach rather than do. If they work it as Dynasty describes, it should be fine. He'll keep a share and have a steady income, plus thanks to Bill 17 all those photos they've been taking now earn him a small royalty check every month. \$214.32 this last month alone. For the first time in his adult life he'll be voting for the Ruling Party. He's as shocked as his friends who are also going to vote for the Ruling Party.

His students will go on to make their own great works and it'll be his name on the studio they produce from. He'll have a legacy. Dynasty's father would be so proud of her. She is honest and kind and thoughtful. He thinks about his friend and lowers his head sending his thoughts to Kobo-san. A good man who raised his daughter well.

Then he stands up and crosses the studio into Dynasty's office.

“Bert? What’s up?” He has a strange look in his eye. He doesn’t speak but he motions for her to come over so she does. She can tell once she gets close that his lip is trembling. He reaches out and pulls her into a very long grateful hug.

Precious things.

“Take this book, and seriously Ben, if you lose it...” His prized copy of Love Everlasting. Signed by the author and everything.

“I won’t lose it...” Ben is pushing double duty. He’s doing the drywall and also helping Jimmy with the blueprints. Both pay well so he’s secure enough. He finds he really likes architecture.

“I’m not kidding, man.” He really means it.

Ben takes the book and carefully put it in his backpack. Makes a show of it.

“See.” It’s just a book. Sheesh.

“Thanks, man, now I promise you it’s worth reading. It really helped me through some stuff, ok?”

Ben is actually startled by the look in Jimmy’s eyes. Reverence. It’s not the book exactly, but what it was to Jimmy in his actual life. Context. Timing.

“I’ll read it, Jimmy.”

“And...”

“...and I’ll pass it on to someone who needs it when I’m done.”

He nods. Satisfied.

“Good.” He moves the clutter away from the table exposing the plans they’ve been putting together. Now about this west corner...”

Ben takes out his pencils and compass set and starts drafting, that’s what calls trying to draw the ideas Jimmy expresses. They’re careful not to go beyond the scope of Dynasty’s agenda. Ben is quite talented actually and Jimmy knows what he wants. It’s working and Ben realizes for the first time in his life that he really matters because his work will live on for years and effect people lives for the better. It’s the missing piece for a restless soul. Relevance.

Betrayed by inevitable causality.

The Sisterhood is incensed. The police didn’t give in at all. They spent the entire weekend protesting the HQ and though there was some news coverage and a few new recruits, they didn’t make much money. The donations are coming in but not like they were. It’s operational money at best, in fact the chapter sisters now have to wear last seasons shoes to keep the doors open.

Bill 17 has reduced them to just another lobby. An even playing field has shown them to be relevant, but not all important. If you aren’t first you’re last. It’s not a situation they are coping well with, though ironically it’s a situation they were instrumental in creating. They liked the internet attention, they liked being the most important thing in the room. It was better than fair, they were favoured. Affirmative action was working...for them. Now it’s over through some back door ad policy no one saw coming.

As the Opposition ramps up its negative attack ads toward the Sitting Government, the Sisterhood makes a convenient ally. Their interests have always been aligned so it’s time to make it more formal. An invitation goes out to the local unions. They must unite to defeat the Sitting Government and repeal Bill 17. A common defense against micro aggression. Visible minorities only.

The United Anti-Front is born. A super PAC dedicated to taking down the Sitting Government. A

Political Action Committee isn't subject to the regulations that normally govern elections. While the Governing Party and Official Opposition are restricted to an equally low campaign budget paid for by the public trust, a super PAC can spend as much as it wants.

The United Anti-Front quickly centralizes the influence of all urban anti-government forces. It virtually ignores rural issues and people, however, including Indian Reserves and other distant Territories. In two weeks the country will vote on its future and the choice couldn't be more obvious; the parties are more polarized than they've ever been. As fresh donations and online revenue comes in, the United Anti-Front forms an executive council stacked with Sisterhood loyalists. There may be multiple interests under this tent now, but only one primary mover.

Soothing the inner struggle takes character.

Carol pours herself some tea, Margo's late for their regular meeting and she hasn't been able to reach her for a couple days now. Max leans in slowly. A question on his face. Nothing out front either, though in a few minutes Max will be interviewing a potential new staff member. Their first staff editor in years according to records.

Jay Andrew had been absolutely elated when Carol told him the news about Our Tribal Circles and with the prestigious Prairie Press Publishing none the less. Currently, the most talked about publisher in the Country thanks to its recent work with the Sitting Government. They're looking for someone who's skills compliment Jay's style to elevate the best possible aspects of his manuscript for the audience.

As soon as Prairie Press Publishing accepted Jay's book, it's like a flood of energy poured into the whole operation. There was nothing happening by comparison. Jay is happy to let Douglas & Porter deal with all that excitement. He prefers his simple life and his garden. Rumour has it, Our Tribal Circles is his opus. Something unlike anything he's done before.

The Ministry of Health has already inquired offering whatever support they can on such an important topic. In truth, they want a seat at the big table with Justice and Labour, and they see a connection in the content. Our Tribal Circles is literary fiction, highly illustrative of the convergence of mental health and homelessness though Indian eyes.

Budget increases would happen in response to such works. If they can finally get some real money for their portfolio then great. It definitely increases support for the Sitting Government when political realities on the ground align with platform promises...and the election is only a few weeks away.

"Oh my...the weather is frightful." Margo shuffles in shaking rain drops from her jacket.

"Margo!" Carol is visibly relieved. "Please sit." With Max preoccupied in the other room, Carol takes Margo's jacket and finds a safe place out of the way for it.

"Dear me, that Gordon Libnezin is a stubborn man."

Carol find her seat and pours tea for two satisfied Margo is comfortable. She knows how she likes it.

"Pray tell."

"First he is brilliant, can't argue with that, like his father."

Carol nods, as long as he's publishing our stuff, so be it.

"I've spent more time down at his office the last few days than I think I spent all my career. All he can talk about it Bill 17, changing everything, bringing back publishing. Would you believe he even told me Our Tribal Circles inspired him, suggested how to do it. And Love Everlasting is one of his favourite books which probably the only reason he bothered reading it."

Carol is transfixed. Interesting hoe small the world really is.

“He’s a big Jay Andrew fan. Who knew? Long story short...”

“No go on, we have time.”

“...well he really just wanted help with the numbers. I have to commend that man, he wants a fair deal.”

“Deal?”

“For authors, and agents. Bill 17 gives the government control of the spread so Gordon is making sure the spread properly reflects the healthiest ratio for the industry. Something that makes sure everyone involved is paid properly.”

“And what did you come up with?”

“Well it all starts at the author and trickles up from there. First to the agency, if their is one, and then to the publishers.”

“Really?”

“We also tuned down the advances since monthly ad revenues helps fill that space to keep writers fed in their early days.”

Margo looks tired, she sips her tea. This is all a little too much for her to be pushing so hard. The worst is behind her now though, Carol can handle the rest. She hands her a document Short One gave her when she left Prairie Press Publishing yesterday. It spells out the fine details of the expected changes to the contract for Jay Andrew. They intend for Our Tribal Circles to be the standard barer of this new publishers package. Something all the other publishing companies can rally behind give or take to form a sustainable industry.

“Margo, I can handle this stuff now. You’ve already done so much.”

She nods, she knows it’s true. She’s not just tired, she’s wearing out. This has taken a lot more out of her than she anticipated, but turned out much better. She’d do it again if she had too. She looks Carol over with pride. It’s time to pass it on.

“Carol...” She turns her head. “I’ve done what I was meant to do. Jay needs you, it’s your story now. I told Gordon to deal with you directly moving forward. He is very impressed with your ideas.”

“But you have so much more to teach me.” Carol loves Margo. She’s like her grandmother and teacher and best friend...

“Nothing you can’t figure out on your own.” She smiles confidently, kindly. “Trust yourself...besides I’ll still come by for tea...”

They enjoy the afternoon together as they always do talking about the world and all the characters that make it so wonderful.

Research requires a muddy knee.

After hours Max has been watching the Sisterhood, or least those that remain at the old campus HQ. They’ve since moved into a posh office downtown under a new name, United Anti-Front, but Max is certain the key to unlocking the truth about the Sisterhood remains on campus. Call it gut instinct. Several of their legacy members, being students, still frequent habitual Safe Spaces.

This affords Max an opportunity to investigate while remaining off the radar. They aren’t spending any money or effort on security. Assuming as everyone else has that no none cares about old chapter houses or the records that might still remain their should members become sloppy or lazy. As it turns out, students and laziness go together like ham and cheese.

The international students association building is essentially unused these days. Until next semester no new plans for the space can begin, so for now it's in a kind of limbo. Nobody has an official use so only the occasional student looking for a quiet place to sleep uses it at all. What they don't realize is that upstairs behind what should be a locked door is a closet. Max discovers a box in this closet marked research material.

But it doesn't contain research material...

"Gotcha."

Blindsided by the truth.

Gordon is so forward thinking, Taller Two didn't even realize the Our Tribal Circles manuscript was his blueprint for the Circle approach to rehabilitation. It illustrated in such compelling detail how the traditional First Nations approach to tribal misbehaviour could be modernized and applied to the whole Country's mental health strategy and prison system.

He would of realized it if he had read it as he was instructed, but his personal politics wouldn't let him. After everything he'd read online about Jay Andrew, he certainly wasn't about to read his alt-right propaganda. Why give power to demagogues. It is true there are consequences to not doing ones job, and Taller Two has paid the price.

While Short One enjoys a significant promotion as senior editor and the Country's premier publishing house. Thus are the rewards for loyalty and competence. Short One has personal politics too, but he has a family to take care of and leaves his politics at home. Gordon is his employer. He likes Gordon, agrees with him enough of the time that he's comfortable in his job.

He has, for example, already read Our Tribal Circles, and was instrumental in drafting the documents for the Ministries to work with. Gordon was aware of Taller Two's socialist proclivities for years, just couldn't do anything about it. Labour laws forbid him from firing him without cause, and the bank wasn't so flush he could eat the lawsuit.

He figured Jay Andrew would push him too far, but quitting outright because of moral outrage... fantastic. Couldn't have asked for a better result. No pension, no severance. Perfectly within his rights and partnered with the Sitting Government in the process. There's nothing the regressives can do other than quiet or adapt. Taller Two is just the first in a Progressive cleaning house.

Traditional Progressive forces are already coming out from under their rocks, sensing a chance to make a difference again. The Ministry of Health is very interested now that the prototype Circle facility maintains such spectacular improvements in the behaviour of its prisoners. Expanding the program to every Reserve and possibly replacing the current penitentiary system entirely has been discussed.

The Ministry of Health has an even more ambitious idea. Replace the mental health clinics and hospital wards with much needed health care specializations and send their patients to the Circle instead. Everyone wins, except those who profit on these problems never being solved.

Gordon sips an aged whisky by the fireplace...considering. He'll have the first generation of literature on the subject published from his presses. He's changing the Country. His father would be proud.

Hanging in there.

The pile of junk mail reaches Stanley's knee already. He doesn't get out as often and he prefers his Caregiver not disturb his mail. He actually looks forward to a little excitement after so much time in bed. The latest pills help with the pain but some episodes are too much and he's in his last days. There are no bills, he'd seen to that when he set this all up.

A flyer soliciting donations for something called the United Anti-Front. Seems to be supporting the

Official Opposition critical of the Sitting Governments record on Minority Rights. Apparently women are not being considered on equal standing with men for new jobs available at the Circle Rehabilitation Network.

Stanley chuckles, just last week the Social Warriors surrounded police HQ demanding they shut the CRN down. Everyone knows the Country's Charter doesn't allow a women to be paid less for the same job than a man, but their arguing less hours are made available and less benefits. They're adapting their narrative to reflect a more ambiguous message. They aren't trying to prove discrimination, so much as forcing the Sitting Government to prove they aren't.

And here's the Ministry of Finance's latest report on the Sitting Government backed Bill 17. Already over 100 million in royalties have been paid to authors throughout the country. This has trickled up through the agencies and to publishers contributing to a 0.01% increase in opportunities for skilled labour. Although GDP hasn't yet been effected, it's expected to in the first quarter of the next term of office. This according to independent budgetary review. Whoever wins the election will be pointed in the right direction.

A coughing fit takes him and Stanley falls to his knees, blood on his lips, before his left hand comes upon the porch railing. It's getting chilly outside. He shakily returns to his feet and shuffles back inside hoping he'll be well enough to vote next week. The Ruling Party has finally earned it.

Work hard, earn hard.

When Paul decided to take the Co-Op program option, he wasn't expecting to work at the very agency that hosts Jay Andrew. He also expected the work to be harder. Turns out most of his job requires drinking coffee and listening to people endlessly change their mind about what should be on this page or that on the new website. It's Paul's job to make these changes to eveyones satisfaction so Douglas & Porter can see how it looks and then Max approves it.

When Paul met one of the bosses last week, Carol Porter, she seemed familiar somehow, but he hasn't met Margo. From what he can gather Margo doesn't come down very often, and since Paul is only part time, it's easy to miss her entirely. He can't help but notice that no one around here seems to understand anything about the Internet. They don't even want ads on their website. They don't know how to generate traffic or sales leaving it all to the publishers who aren't that enthused about it either.

Leaving money on the table, even publishers virtually ignore online options, but it's not his job to set the marketing agenda. He's had his fill of pushing things and instead patiently listens to pluck the occasional coherent suggestion from the group discussion. Each time he comes back to work, he's made all the changes and yet fully expects most of them to change again or require further adjustment.

"Thanks again for all your help, Paul." It's Carol, she's running off to another meeting. "Max has a few more items for you. Gentlemen."

Max and Carol lock eyes just long enough to give away the game. They're seeing each other. Paul's sure of it. Not that he minds, they keep it professional at work. The strangest thing is that Max and Carol are about his age, maybe a couple years older at best. Kind of inspiring, actually. He turns to Max.

"So?" Max seems lost in thought, but focuses quickly when Paul speaks.

"Do you know what 'Our Tribal Circles' means, Paul?"

Paul shakes his head while Max continues, ignoring him.

"The previous partner here, Stanley Cassowary, sold off the rights to almost all of our books when he left several months ago. Basically, only the stuff he couldn't sell quickly remains. Of that only one

author is still alive to generate new revenue, Jay Andrew.”

The infamous Jay Andrew. Paul doesn't know why, but he suddenly thinks maybe he should have actually read Love Everlasting before condemning the man. Too late now.

“So how do we make any money?”

“We need to expand into new markets. Since Bill 17 kicked in we are anxious to capitalize on new opportunities, online or otherwise.” Max hands Paul a document Gordon had Short One deliver earlier in the morning after Carol inquired about expanding digital translation services with a very aggressive micro blogging campaign.

Paul reads it over, his eyes widening as he goes. When he's finished he looks up, shocked. He has seriously underestimated these people.

“Our Tribal Circles” Paul whispers.

Solutions present when there is a need.

Publishing is complicated and Gordon finds himself with several uncomfortable problems. His recent dealings with the Sitting Government, although profitable, has caused a steep decline in submissions by literary agents. Apparently, Prairie Press Publishing has become typecast as a government mouthpiece specializing in cultural and political works. Critics of course praise their high quality output and credit much of the current success of the Sitting Government's agenda to the narratives supported so consistently this last few months.

Short One sits alone in Gordon's office...waiting. Margo had come in earlier to advise on percentages from an agency perspective for their draft to the Ministry of Finance. Unlike Ministry of Justice which seems to prefer a more hands off approach to dealing with Prairie Press Publishing, Finance wants daily back and forth and a wide net of consultation with what it described as “The most reputable members of the industry, beyond reproach. Spotless.” Who better than Margo Douglas. She's a legend. A national treasure.

On a personal level, no one will speak ill of Gordon Libnezin either, but he's a craftier sort and everybody knows it. His recent political successes have earned new revenue for thousands of authors across the Country. Every back list at every publishing house has started earning passive revenue to help fight declining prices while holding poachers accountable. There's an industry wide renewed sense of optimism. Increasing operational capacity and every new job created is in part to Gordon's credit.

The afternoon is passing, if they don't finish their meeting soon, Short thinks he may have to shut it down for the day and head home to spend some extra time with his wife. Since his promotion, they've been talking about buying a larger house and starting a real family. Short One has always wanted to be a father. He's already in his 40's, and his young wife is approaching 30, but until now it wasn't affordable. Not with student loans, and monthly payments to his father-in-law for the money they put up for their current house. But now...

Voices on the other side of the door bring Short back to the present. They're finishing up, the door opens and Gordon's voice booms through. Laughter and smiles, Margo gives Gordon a long hug, says it's been too long, comments on how much he looks like his father now that his hair is all white.

“Beautiful! Just beautiful, Margo. You tell that Ms. Porter, she's got a devious mind and I mean that in the best possible way.”

The young often see options those of a more seasoned nature miss. Carol and Max had put together a plan for digital micro content as a way to create value from old works given the lack of active authors left at their agency. Even public domain could be “converted” into modern formats as a way to generate

a stable audience. This means new sales and ad revenue above the relatively small amount generated thanks to Bill 17.

“Oh I will, dear. I’m actually late for our tea. Thank you, Gordon.”

Gordon hands her a document to take with her, Short recognizes it as the draft he put together in response to Carol’s earlier suggestions. They share a mutual distaste for the Regressives hounding their authors and together have formed a plan of attack leveraging Bill 17. A cunning way to earn money from the very people who crusade against them.

Social Justice Warriors have weaponized progressive causes, so the goal is to profit from their propensity for sensational short form online and restore balance before the Regressives cannibalize the Progressive Movement entirely. The children of the revolution always eat their parents.

Margo waves at Short through the door as she turns and leaves. What a nice old lady. It’s no wonder Gordon is so fond of her, and to think they’ve known each other over 50 years.

“Go home, Short. Kiss that pretty wife of yours, tomorrow is gonna be a tough one.” Gordon walks around his desk and pulls back the velvet blinds.

“Yes, sir!”

Propaganda is entertaining.

A loud crash, some broken glass, the TV is turned up high so Stanley can hear it from his bed. He can’t stand anymore, but his orthopaedic bed bends so he can see the screen easily enough.

“You broke the window.”

“It was an accident.”

“I bet the Sitting Government is gonna send you to the Circle.”

“What’s that?”

“Why that’s where bad little boys and girls are sent for... ‘reconditioning’.”

Big letters sweep across the screen. The Sitting Government wants to RECONDITION your children in the Circle. Don’t let it happen to you. This message brought to you by the concerned friends of the Official Opposition.

The election is later this week and sadly he won’t be in town to cast a ballot. Instead, his Caregiver is going to vote on Stanley’s behalf. Sort of. As an illegal immigrant, he wasn’t going to vote anyway, but it turns out that all one needs is a drivers license and proof of local residence so he’s going to vote for the Sitting Government as Stanley prefers.

The fear campaign currently being run by the Opposition has thus far been falling flat in the polls. Negative ads don’t seem to be working this cycle. People want to hear what they are for, not what they are against. Conventional wisdom at this point says the election will fall in favour of the Sitting Government. Unfortunately, Stanley never finds out.

Lacking the means, create the opportunity.

“The Country needs skilled labour. For too long our best and brightest have left this Country seeking better employment opportunities elsewhere. Bill 17 has already improved the economic landscape for authors and surrounding industry...”

The radio ad continues as Trisha brushes her teeth. She’ll be leaving the Circle in a few weeks. She hasn’t heard the voice for quite some time after group sessions helped her realize it was all in her head.

Part of sophisticated coping mechanisms caused by poor choices and a series of unfortunate circumstances. The elders helped her see many things.

“...please do your part to fight brain drain...re-elect the Sitting Government. Vote Ruling Party.”

She would if she could. Unfortunately, she isn't allowed to while in state care. In fact none of the prisoners or mental health patients across the Country are allowed to vote...

We are all trapped in something.

All prisoners and patients, with the exception of the political, military, secret, and “extraordinarily high risk” variety are transferred to the Circle network as part of a mass sentence re-determination. The Ministry of Justice finds itself saving hundreds of millions of dollars, no longer having to detain people for long periods. It redirects the budget into law enforcement and investigation directly. Blue collar crime decreases across the country and new class of elite federal detectives loyal to the Ministry, is formed based on an investigative meritocracy. It's affectionately named Overwatch.

Cunning is a trait well earned for the political class.

Wondering if it's possible to exploit a legal loop hole, the Ruling Party sends a memo to the Legal Council of the Sitting Government asking if Circle residents are free to vote for the Sitting Government as they are no longer part of the jurisdictional oversight of the state in quite the same way they were before. The election is still surprisingly close according to polls, though recent news coverage has certainly given the Sitting Government an edge.

A sympathetic judge rules it's acceptable so long as the resident is approved by the local Elders as competent. Public notice of the judge's rule is published without fanfare in all required state documents the morning of the election. This gives no time for the Opposition to notice or react. The entire Circle network, however, now consisting of nearly a hundred facilities, and almost 2 million votes, has been primed to block support the Sitting Government.

Every action has a reaction.

The United Anti-Front finds a sealed letter waiting for it on the front step of its swanky downtown office. Apparently this location used to be an art installation by a local architect several years ago. Now it's zoned for commercial use. The current owner did renovations last year to take advantage of government incentives aimed to curry favour in urban areas. Since the UF is a non-profit, half its rent is covered by grants and the other half donations. All of it is nontaxable.

The vanilla envelope is addressed to something called the Sisterhood of Womanly Concern. It's placed on the Executive Director's. Everyone is getting mobilized for tomorrow's vote. Polls have the race in a statistical tie between the Ruling Party and the Opposition. Attack ads are flying, interviews are being prepped for prime time. The radio is constantly flipping from one message to the next, no one is safe.

The Executive Director of the United Anti-Front used to be the local campus chapter president of the Sisterhood of Womanly Concern. She is due to be on a local news broadcast in less than an hour to unleash the UF's latest round of attack points. Opposition agents have been leaving a bread crumb trail for her to follow which helps her avoid violating election laws. Super PACs cannot directly communicate with Parties. Expecting such an instruction, the Executive Director opens the envelope. She's excited to add more arrows to her quiver.

She chokes. Sputtering, she drops the pictures on her desk. She clutches her hands protectively to her breasts. It's not possible...her sisters cleaned the place out! She gave the order herself. They wouldn't forget to...they wouldn't be so stupid...

The ex-Executive Director misses her scheduled media slot and the United Anti-Front withers. Instead,

a boring panel of staff commentators gathers around a table and discusses the virtues of Bill 17 and the unexpected effectiveness of merging the mental health problem with the prison system using the wisdom of the First Nations. All senior government Ministers are available for comment. They're doing their best to keep those cabinet positions by gobbling up as much media time as possible. At midnight east coast ridings open up for initial voting.

A considered course.

It's Sunday morning. Max stands across the street unconcerned at being recognized or seen. He watches the young women pick up the vanilla envelope, look it over curiously, and then walk inside. As the door closes behind her, he thinks about being a student again, his first job...thinks about Carol. No one is truly innocent anymore. It's the cost we pay to fight for what matters to us.

He takes his phone out and makes the call. Carol answers.

"It's done."

"Now that it is...how do you feel...Max?"

"I feel like...its Justice."

"I love you, baby. Come home."

More welcome words were never spoken.

It's never really over.

"Retirement?" Chris can't believe it. Early pension. Why would Frank pass up a promotion like this? The Ministry of Justice is practically throwing money at them.

"That's right. I'm done, kid. It's not my kind of police force...not anymore. I've got nothing left to contribute. Put in my time...and it is time to move on."

They've both been offered prominent roles in the new Overwatch unit because of their association with the Nêhiyawak Rehabilitation Circle and Chris accepted immediately. High paying, interesting work. A chance to really focus on the worst bad guys. Do some real good in the world and yes there are the private planes and fine sedans instead of signed out cruisers still ripe from some ugly shit earlier in the day and economy class.

"I'll miss ya, Frank." He actually means it, Frank may not be the nicest guy but he's been a reliable and honest partner.

"Shut up..." The radio squawks. "We got a call."

"What ever you say, old goat."

Come and get it.

Its election day and as usual Kate's darkly staring into space. Robert doesn't even try to talk to her anymore, who wants to get chewed out. She does her job, she expects him to do the same. They instead sit silently in their squad car waiting for the red light to change. At least she let him drive this time. Apparently, she's content staring out the window for now.

It's election day, mid afternoon, they expect fights and over excited citizens generally, but the worst of it will come after nightfall. There's always something crazy and it's been a particularly contentious season. The radio buzzes. Shots fired. Parliament Ave and Cameron St. Officer response required. Looks like things are starting early today. Robert confirms as Kate hits the sirens and lights. She's awake now.

Revisions and reality.

Paul reads over the final bit of text Carol sends him for the website.

“At Douglas & Porter we publish and make available for sale audio books, or hardcopies of prior works no longer being promoted by original copyright holders. We specialize in books of a provocative or excitable nature.

We do NOT deal in or accept submissions considered hate speech by any reasonable standard as per sections 318, 319, and 320 of the Criminal Code. However, we do error to the side of publishing unless given a compelling reason otherwise.

We use classical ad services to generate revenue through our content channels and actively promote traffic through social media provocateuring. Our business model depends on the reflexively provoking nature of our hashtag friendly titles and our ability to effectively bring them back to life for today’s audiences.

We offer an opportunity for other publishers to maintain rights while distributing their more controversial back list items. We share profit on all ads across all platforms and our comprehensive digital translation services provide a secondary sale opportunity for ebooks, audio books, and print to order hardcopy.

All purchases include downloads of our mobile and desktop experience which connects our audience to even more books and our growing network of participating book stores.”

He makes the final changes, tests the e-commerce process using his own credit card. Once satisfied all is ready, he primes the content management system with their initial offerings. An illustrated expose on the extortion ring being run on campus by the Sisterhood of Womanly Concern paired with a modern edition of Love Everlasting by Jay Andrew. The very book that was their ultimate undoing.

Paul commits the website to go live. He’s already set up an ad service so impressions and clicks earn revenue for Douglas & Porter. Max is so impressed he asks Paul to think about coming on full time once he graduates. They make about \$0.50 per 1000 clicks and \$0.10 per 5000 impressions.

Several professors post responses on the feedback wall. This drives further traffic and ad revenue. Everyone is glad they added a conversation feature. More conversation means more ads, and therefore more revenue. Both sides gather in a feeding frenzy illuminated in the light of a razor thin election.

It’s with particular satisfaction that Paul sends out a link on his social media wall. He’s actually made a difference for the better. A burden lifts from his conscience. He thinks of Jay Andrew as he resizes the thumbnail images for his books, Love Everlasting and Our Tribal Circles, to fit on mobile devices. He’s made up for his involvement with those early protests and now it’s a secret best forgotten or saved for grandchildren. He enjoys his peace of mind and is perfectly ok with letting everyone else keep theirs.

No longer needed.

Ben’s parents finally come home. They’d gotten the messages weeks earlier but they were simply too busy to care. Ben has always been so independent they say, and look how well he has done on his own. An apartment, a good job. Such a remarkable young man.

“Live for the moment.” says his mom.

“Live for the years.” says his dad.

They don’t actually see him in person, preferring a phone call as they are already shuttling to their next flight. They’re going to ride the trains of Europe, explore old family history or some such. Ben wishes them well and returns to his new life. He doesn’t really expect to see much of his parents in the coming

years. Just different people living different lives.

At least they do it together. He pulls out Love Everlasting. Only one more chapter left. Jimmy was right. It explains so much about the world. He's actually happy for his parents. Life is big enough for everyone, and we can all find a place in it, if we know what we want and go after it with earnest and steady commitment.

When his finger runs across the inscription Jay Andrew wrote to Jimmy, a tear roles down his cheek.

.Jimmy, you like all of us, have a responsibility to love yourself. Realize you belong in the tapestry of life, though you are but a single thread in that weave. Know that all people have value so treat them as you see they can be, not as they see themselves or wish they were. Your friend, Jay Andrew.

A big bash.

Mash convinces Jay to throw a BBQ on election day in his spacious backyard. Jay invites Margo and Jimmy. Margo invites Gordon, Carol, Max and their parents. Max invites Paul. Jimmy invites Dynasty and Ben. Dynasty invites Bert. Gordon invites Short One and his family. The rules are simple. As long as you vote you may drink, eat, and be merry.

Mash's parents bring potato salad. Jimmy volunteers for grill duty and Jay instructs him on old world technique for best possible flavour. It turns out Bert and Gordon went to school together as kids. They still share a taste for the same beer and end up arguing over who can drink more.

When Ben sees Paul, they fist bump and laugh at the coincidence having no idea they had anything in common at all. Paul points out his bosses Max and Carol. Recognizing Max, Ben brings him a beer, explains he's not the same guy any more. Max notices he doesn't say 'bro' even once. Water under the bridge.

Dynasty mingles with the families. She can't get enough of Mash's mom. She's hilarious and actually quite attractive for her age. She intends to ask her about her preferred moisturizer later. It's a big moment when Short One announces he and his wife are expecting. Everyone is lifted by the news especially Max.

It gives him the courage to risk introducing his parents to Carol's. He supposes it's unavoidable but doing it on his own terms makes it easier. Everyone likes each other very much. Margo and Jay share a moment when they both notice Carol whispering playful nothings into Max's ear. She intimately runs her fingers through his hair. Margo whispers something of her own to Jay and they both laugh. Jay slaps his knee.

"Everybody having a nice time? Did you get out and vote?"

A dishevelled Taller Two stands at the back gate, a dark expression on his face.

All present can clearly see it's somewhere between hatred and disgust. Short One stands protectively in front of his wife backing her up slowly. Something isn't right and they all know it. It's in the eyes and the menacing bend of his shoulders. Gordon steps forward rapidly crossing the distance trying to draw Taller's attention away from the others.

"Taller! What the hell are you..."

Taller Two pulls out a pistol and starts firing.

Reconciliation.

The scene as Officers Robert and Kate arrive is one of delayed chaos. People are crying, a disturbed man still struggles to be free where guests tackled him and now hold him down. The pistol is laying in the grass near the footpath of a small garden.

Kate shouts approval to the men holding the shooter down. They continue to hold him.

She can instantly assess there are two victims down. The older man is certainly dead, hit directly in the chest. The other...shoulder. Shallow breathing...Mashfiq?

“No...” Kate runs to Mash. He’s bleeding badly. If she doesn’t stop it he’s going to die, too. This is the first time she’s ever used her emergency training. She works like a demon running from hell. Yelling at Robert to bring the kit from the car. She presses hard on the wound elevating his body to slow the blood flow. She slipping underneath him holding him in her arms like a baby, oblivious to the blood soaking into her uniform.

Mash’s eyelids flutter open. He looks up at a badge and then the uniformed officer, fear and panic in his eyes. The officer moves with careful efficiency. He’s been shot? Yes. He’s been shot, he knows it because he can’t move and can’t feel anything but confusion and surprise. He remembers a man with a gun.

Then he recognizes Kate for who she is and time along with everything else stops.

“Is it really you?” he croaks through unbelievably dry lips. The vibration rises inside, from somewhere in his gut, the feelings overwhelm him.

“It’s me, Mash. Katherine.” She whispers quietly into his ear. “Don’t speak, ok. Save your strength. I’m not going anywhere.”

She remembers his name. Mash closes his eyes. He trusts her more than anyone he’s ever known. She holds his hand this time and rubs warmth into them, as he once did for her. Tears run down her cheeks, dropping like rain on Mash’s brow. Robert begins pressing his wound with antiseptic bandages and a sealed compression. An ambulance pulls in. The medic takes over and with Kate’s insistent help they get Mash on a gurney and on his way to the hospital.

Kate stays with him all the while. In fact she never leaves his side again.

The world will never be the same.

The detectives arrive to find the beat cops preoccupied with one of the gun shot victims. It’s up to them to deal with the shooter. Chris nods to Frank who joins him in one last bust. Chris stands with the shooter at his feet, cuffs in hand, while Frank retrieves the gun. Jimmy is sitting on Taller Two’s chest as he struggles, futility, to break free. Gordon has the legs covered so he’s not going anywhere. The rest of the guests circle a man lying peacefully in a garden.

Surrounded by family; Jay Andrew is smiling.

The end.