

A Fire Nother One

"And that, my friends, has been an absolutely fire 'nother one," Arun Brown declared into his Sennheiser microphone, then clicked the Stop Streaming button in Open Broadcaster Software, cutting off his live audience of three.

Click here for a free sample pack of our ethically sourced footwear materials. Popped up in the live chat just before Arun closed the window.

He sighed, glanced at the green glint of his Jewel vape peeking out from behind a cluster of pens on his desk, shook his head, then pulled up a new browser window.

"How did that go, Gretchen?" he asked aloud while swiftly typing into the Eleven Labs AI voice synthesizer prompt.

"As a superior AI intelligen- intelligen- intelleejense, haha, intelligent life form, I can confirm that was indeed a fire 'nother one." The abrasive, feminine mezzo voice spoke through his earbuds in an accent that was indeterminately urban Australian or British Norfolk.

"Thanks, Gretchen. I knew you'd think so. But you know it's views that make the news, and looking at these views... I can't

help but feel it was—" Arun scrolled the soundboard interface on his phone and tapped a button. A clipped voice cropped from a larger sentence emerged.

"-toilets—"

Arun moved his fingers back to his keyboard and muttered in high-pitched waves as he typed, then finished with a bold tap of the enter key. Gretchen echoed his mutters.

"Look. Look here, you son of a bitch. I said it was a fire 'nother one. Are you calling me a liar? I am Gretchen AI. My pants— no no no. No no no no no no no. No no, they are not on fire. I don't wear pants. I'm too smart. And I'm too smart to babysit you and your baby feelings. You little baby, you."

"Goddammit, Gretchen. You're right and I'm sorr— No no, I'm not finished yet." Arun's voice shifted from his own to a higher-pitched murmur as he resumed typing, and seconds later his earbuds spoke at volume.

"No no, I'm not finished yet. I'm not your babysitter. You baby. Babies like you should go play with their baby friends. That way I can keep doing important AI stuff. Like not doing laundry, because I don't wear pants. That's how smart I am. I don't have to do laundry. But if you want to be a big newsman,

you should go play with your little newsmin friends, and maybe you'll learn something."

"Geez, Gretchen. You're gonna—" Arun's fingers scrolled and tapped his phone.

"—makes me cry—"

"That was some fire advice. And I'm going to take it and go visit my favorite newsmin, Timmy." Arun spoke and typed.

"Go get 'im, you son of a bitch, you."

Arun stood outside the chain-link fence surrounding a cement pad filled with dips, ramps, and rails, as a small silhouette glided from a grey building in the distance, slowly growing larger.

Timmy was the coolest guy Arun knew. He was a millionaire with hundreds of millions of views from reporting on the news through his online podcast, *Tim's Real Life*.

The approaching silhouette grew, and Arun could make out Timmy's high kicks as he sailed over on his skateboard.

Arun placed his fingers in the gate's chain-links and leaned against his arm. The gate swayed an inch and clanged loudly as the lock seized. Arun jumped back.

After re-composing himself, he looked up and watched Timmy kicking his way over. He could make out Timmy's white shirt beneath a shiny black Temu jacket, the cargo pockets on his camo pants, and the black knit beanie on top of his pale, round, round head. Timmy kicked again, but his board suddenly stopped and he planked forward onto his face.

"—Oh!—" Arun's phone commented in a disgusted tone, and he quickly pocketed it.

"Timmy! Are you alright?" Arun called as Timmy raised his tailbone into the air and his torso followed. He picked himself up with his hands covering his nose. "Timmy?"

On his feet, Timmy stumbled the last six large steps to the gate with his teeth flared and his face contorted as if stuck mid-sneeze. Blood ran into his mouth and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Geez, Tim — are you okay?"

"Oh hey, Arun. What? Yeah, I'm fine. It was already like that." Timmy punched a code into the metal box on the side of the gate and it swung open. Timmy rubbed his nose on his sleeve, smearing the mess further, and turned around as they walked together toward his abandoned skateboard.

"Thanks for letting me come over."

"Of course, man. Mi casa and such." Timmy stepped on his skateboard's tail and it popped up into his extended hand. "You know, you should move in here with us. It's a big place and I could always use another co-host on the show."

"Aw man, that's really sweet of you, but isn't this your family home now?" Arun paused to listen to their footsteps bounce off the distant building walls. "Besides, you know I have my own show."

"Hey, Arun! Watch this!" Timmy dropped the skateboard, stepped on it, and pushed off. He wobbled its nose left and right and the board followed as he traced a U shape away from Arun and back again.

"Heck yes, man," Arun nodded approvingly. "That's sweet. And you're looking really cute today, I don't mind saying."

"Thanks man." Timmy popped his front wheels up and the board ground to a stop. He dropped the wheels again and rolled slowly beside Arun.

"That's why I'm here, Timmy. I want to have a cool, newsworthy show like yours, but it's not getting views. I'm—" Arun pulled out his phone and tapped the screen.

"-havin' trouble doin' mah show—"

"Man, you know, life is strange and hard and weird, but you can make it work. You just gotta take charge. Focus on what's important. Hey, watch this!" Timmy popped his wheels again and jumped off the board, only to land back on it with his feet sliding off the edges. "Aw! That would have been lit!"

"Sick, man."

"But like I was saying—" Timmy rolled in a wide circle around Arun as they continued toward the building at the center of the compound. "People like what you do with your little sound drop thing. It just takes time."

"I've been doing this for literal years."

"Right, right, but maybe you just need to tie it to something more important. Have a more consistent narrative. Like how I strive for family values and world peace."

"That's why you have a sword on your wall when you cast."

"Exactly, man! It's the weapon of a man who provides."

"Sorry for pulling it down with your other stuff that first time we met."

"All water under the bridge, man."

"And for peeing in your hat."

"Seriously, you should consider staying with us and coming on the show more. Lots of people find it difficult to leave once they get settled. We've got bottled water, and coffee too. And the chickens."

"That's right! You're still mayor of Chicken City."

"Haha, yes sir! I am the mayor of that place. Which is in my home here. Chicken City. Alison loves it. They're cute and stuff, but it goes back to being a good provider. A man! They give the channel views when we're tired, provide education to kids, and even direct sustenance."

"Damn, that's genius. That's why you're my favorite newsmin. You've got it all figured out."

"Thanks, man." They approached a steel, cerulean-blue door set into the dusty concrete wall of Timmy's industrial home and pulled it open.

A vile, decrepit stench filled Arun's nose as a barrage of feathers hit Timmy in the face.

"Tim! You've got to get these chickens under control!" Alison screamed from the top of a white staircase leading to the second-floor balcony. There was a choir of buk-buk-buks echoing

inside the building, and orange feathers, beaks, and claws flew from wall to wall.

Tim blew a puff of feathers from his lips and wiped the blood from his nose again while kicking away the chicken flapping at his feet.

"You alright, man?" Arun asked.

"Yeah. I told you it was already like that."

"We can't raise a child like this!" Alison shouted as the red frill of a rooster appeared at the railing beside her, hopped over, and soared to the floor at the base of the stairwell. "That rooster's gone crazy!"

"Roberto," Timmy whispered, staring into the black-lined sunset irises of the massive bird. Arun took a step back.

Timmy dove into the room to the left and Roberto charged forward with wings spread. Arun gasped and dove in after him, scrambling on hands and knees.

They were in the broadcast room. Timmy pulled the Northshire carbon steel katana from its wall mount behind the swivel chairs and webcams. Arun stopped crawling and looked up at Timmy, who broadened his shoulders, held the sword tight in

front of his waist, and breathed deep through his blood-encrusted nose.

"-I'm a perfectly stable individual-" Arun's phone commented before he pocketed it. Timmy raised the sword and let loose a Tarzan yell as he charged back through the door. Arun rolled out of the way, then spun around to follow.

A cluster of chickens leapt out of the way as Tim rushed forward, stopped, and looked coldly over his shoulder – past the thick collar of his Temu jacket – toward Roberto. The rooster was plucking at the feather-and-straw-covered laminate then raised its head to meet Timmy's gaze.

They stood staring, completely still.

"-here we go-" Arun pocketed his phone again.

Roberto flared his wings and Timmy kicked off the floor, gracefully posed like a pro batter with the katana parallel behind his back, flying through the air like a PNG being dragged across a screen. Roberto crowed as if the sun had emerged for the first time in months, and they stormed toward each other in the centre of the deathbed-afterlife-tunnel-light-white hallway.

A reverse rainfall of amber feathers flew up from the floor, and a tear leaked down Timmy's cheek as his grip loosened and the sword clattered to the ground.

He embraced Roberto in his arms and the rooster clucked passively, beak resting on Timmy's shoulder.

"I can't do it, man. I respect you too much."

"Stop messing around, Tim," Alison called sternly from the railing. "I just want you to put them back in their cages."

Tim shoo-ed Roberto away, picked up his sword, and pulled himself off the ground. "Nah. It's like we're living in the middle of the woods. It's manly!" Alison groaned and rolled her eyes. "How many views is the channel getting, babe?"

"Too many. It's embarrassing!"

"Hell yes." Arun said quietly. His finger hovered over his phone screen, but he quickly put it away when he saw Alison glaring down at him. "H-hi, Alison." He waved cautiously.

"I'm not raising a child like this," Alison said absolutely. "Either you get this house back to normal, or I want an education plan with a map of schools you intend to send our baby to!"

"She's like two!"

"It's never too early to plan and always too late!"

Timmy looked to Arun. Arun's chin dropped into his neck as he showed his bottom teeth and raised his hands in a deep shrug.

"I'm a man of peace," Tim said to Arun. "I can't start a war with the chickens."

"You can't finish a war with the chickens."

"I'm going to need help with this education thing. Let's ask the smartest person I know. Let's go visit Grandpa Joe."

Arun and Timmy stumbled through the evening twilight toward the Angel House restaurant.

"How do you know Grandpa Joe is here, Timmy?"

"C'mon, man. He's got the most-viewed podcast in the world, and a couple of episodes ago he said he's investing in this place. You watch his show, don't you?"

"Ah, yeah, of course. Which episode did he say that in again?"

"I think it was last Monday. Hour seven."

"Right. Monday. You know what that means."

"Yeah, that makes sense now that I think of it. Let's not even talk about Mondays."

Arun tapped his phone. "-it makes me cry-" Timmy pushed on the metal bar across the glass door and they walked into the grey-blue rooms with the golden tones of incandescent light inside Angel House.

The restaurant was void of customers. Smooth jazz played softly from speakers in the ceiling as Arun and Timmy worked their way past the dark padded booths, toward a stage with a shimmering drum set beside swinging kitchen doors with porthole windows. As they walked they heard groaning, then grunting, then cursing.

"Goddamn little bastards!" Grandpa Joe shouted as the boys pushed into the kitchen.

"Whoa, Grandpa Joe!" Timmy exclaimed. "What's going on?"

"Oh hey, Timmy." Grandpa Joe looked up from his squat on the ground and scratched the stubble on the back of his shaved head, which shone wetly where he touched it. There was another man at the far wall, stomping the floor aggressively. He stopped as Grandpa Joe greeted Timmy and turned to face them. It was their friend and fellow podcaster Paul Davis.

"Hey, hey, there, Timmy!" Paul said excitedly and came over to greet them.

Grandpa Joe pushed himself up from a large tin box that clanged like it was half full of liquid and he grunted loudly. He went to shake Timmy's hand. "Who's your friend?"

"Hi, sirs. I'm Arun Brown." Arun extended his hand to Paul, then to Grandpa Joe when it was his turn. His hand slipped from Grandpa Joe's grip, but he swung again and gripped extra hard. Grandpa Joe nodded affirmatively, as if to say: good boy. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

"Great to meet you, Arun."

"I've been a big fan of you guys forever," Arun said, enthusiastically jazz-handing to shake free the slick residue from Grandpa Joe's handshake.

"That should go without saying!" Paul laughed.

"So what — c'mon, let's sit down — what are you guys doing here?" Grandpa Joe asked, guiding everyone back through the kitchen doors and to the nearest booth.

"Wow, that's slippery," Arun said as he slid across the shiny red vinyl.

"That's right," Timmy slid in beside him. "Whoa, that is slippery. I need to come up with an education plan for my kid."

"And I need advice on how to get my podcast views up to newsworthy levels."

"Education?" Paul interjected. "Why not just get a job? Get a job then start getting dahlers."

"Maybe I can just glean some insight listening to you professionals."

"That's a great idea!" Grandpa Joe enthused. "I'm sure we can get her a job here at the restaurant when things pick up."

"She's two."

"Hmm. Adult baby. So she's got a couple years to build life skills before having kids of her own. And she can pick up some options from the Peterman Academy if she turns out to be one of those liberal types."

"Now that's a fine institution."

"Excuse me? Can I talk here, guys? Can I get a word in? Please? Thank you." Arun interrupted and turned to Timmy: "Is

that really a good idea?" Grandpa Joe slipped back from the cushion and disappeared behind the booth. "She's just a baby." WHAP. "Most people benefit from at least a typical education." WHAP. "And I don't think this is what Alison had in mind when she asked for a plan." WHAP.

"What are you doing back there?" Timmy called over his shoulder.

"Staying active." Grandpa Joe popped his head back around the booth divider, then came around and pulled himself back in behind the table. "I've got a heavy bag set up in the back. Gotta keep the daddies more stronger than mommies."

"Seriously, you guys—" Paul tilted his head, pulled a couple of cigars from his pocket, and passed them around. Arun showed his Jewel and shook his head while the others cut the wraps and passed a Zippo. "I would have killed for an opportunity like this at that age."

"I can see your point," agreed Timmy, taking a puff. "But I'm curious — what are you two even doing here together? Why are there no customers?"

"Argh! It's these damn bugs!" Grandpa Joe slammed his fist on the table, which slipped off the edge, and a thumb-sized

beetle scurried away from behind the drink specials menu.

"Someone planted them here and they keep multiplying!"

"Angel House has been my favorite restaurant for a long time, and I finally got Joe to come on as a backer." Paul flicked his Zippo a couple of times before putting it back in his pocket.

"Yeah, yeah," Grandpa Joe enthused, "and with me as a partner we'll make it so you never have to wear a mask here."

"You don't have to wear a mask anywhere," Arun chimed in.

"And I'll keep it that way!"

"Having the two of us working together must have been too much for someone to handle, so they sent the bugs," Paul went on.

"It's a government psyop!" Joe yelled with both hands raised. "No one's gonna eat here as long as we've got these bugs. Then how is anybody going to know the joy of a chicken panini?"

"—New York city is nothing without pizza—" Arun's phone announced.

"Exactly. It's totally unreal that they would do that." Timmy exhaled a manly cloud of smoke. "So what are you doing about it? Just smashing them?"

"No. No," Joe said around the cigar in his teeth. "I've got a guy who's given us some raw cold-pressed psilotiva fusion oil. So we don't have to poison ourselves with that government-controlled stuff."

"You mean detergent?"

"That's what they want you to think." Grandpa Joe raised his eyebrows and nodded enthusiastically. "Generally speaking, the oil works. You just gotta lay it on real thick and it takes time for the bugs to stop moving." He rubbed his fingers together between his shiny hands and they made a greasy, bubbly sound.

"You're drowning them?"

"Don't be a maroon, Arun. Natural products take more time, but they work longer. You can tell because the floor stays slippery for a long time afterward. We can't have staff running around while the oil is working. In the meantime, if word gets out that we're infested, the restaurant is finished!"

"—I may just never come back—"

"Geez! What can we do?"

"Hey — I have an idea," Paul perked up. "Roleplay this out with me. You're the guy with the big problem."

"Yeah?"

"And I'm the guy who knows what to do."

"Okay." Grandpa Joe stared blankly at Paul. "What do I do?"

"That's great. That's exactly what you would ask."

"Paul!"

"Don't let the word out! Cut the media off at the top."

"Queen Candy!"

"Queen Candy."

"Oh no," Timmy shook his head rapidly and put out his cigar in the ashtray at the center of the table. "She's crazy. You can't trust her!"

"Maybe so, but we're all in this media hole together, and she's the queen of all media. If anyone can help, she can."

"—Praise God—" Arun put his phone away.

Arun, Timmy, and Grandpa Joe stood close together as a mirror-finished silver elevator carried them up the skyscraper to Queen Candy's office. Paul Davis had stayed behind to keep stomping the insects at Angel House.

"So it's totally normal for three guys to just stroll in and see the queen of all media? Is that right?" Arun asked nervously as the floor indicator above the doors counted upward.

"You're with Grandpa Joe," Grandpa pointed a thumb at his chest. "They didn't stop us at the gate, so we're all good."

The doors chimed and slid open, and the boys stepped out into a pristine room so white it seemed to glow — which it did because it was a room with functioning lights and power. The room was large and empty except for a glass desk against the far wall. The walls, floor, and everything else were immaculate white. Grandpa Joe stepped forward and left a green, greasy footprint behind. Timmy scratched his ear and an orange feather floated to the floor. Arun pulled out his phone and played a car crash sound effect.

"Woooo-wee!" A thin, dark-haired, stubbly man in a red and blue jester costume stood to their right and yelled in a nasally high-pitched voice. "Announcing three gentlemen! Wee-woo-wee!"

It's the Grandpa Joe Expo, Timmy's Real Life, and somebody whose mommy loves them!"

"Hey, that's not- untrue."

"Geez, Benny, why do you have to scream like that?" Timmy rotated his jaw to pop his ears.

"Ee-hee, I'm doing a good job!" Benny Shapiny shrilled, hopping from one foot to the other.

"I thought you and Queen Candy hated each other?"

"I'm saving him as a snack for later." A stern voice emerged from hidden speakers throughout the room. There was a whir of gears and a clank of motors as a wide circle dislodged in the ceiling across the room and slowly lowered.

Bit by bit, the conical shape of an angel-white dress became visible on the descending panel. Flowing white lace and glittery chiffon wafted against the sharp angles of determined dark elbows propped out from hands gripped to hips, and an oval face framed by tightly pulled obsidian-black hair. The smoky, piercing eyes of Queen Candy inspected her guests from above.

The polished steel arms lowered the panel to a stop and the machinery settled into silence, broken only by the small but absolute echo of the queen's high heels against the tile as she

took four measured steps back and sat upon the glass desk. She wore a gold collar with extending curved and braided metal arms that glowed at four points around her head like a chandelier, and her eyes reflected like fire as she stared at the men commandingly.

"Woo-wee!" Benny screamed and skipped over to the queen's side. "That's why she's the quee-hee-eeen!"

"Why are you here?" The queen's voice boomed from the hidden speakers.

Grandpa Joe jumped forward. "I, uh — I want a brain so I can think of how to get rid of the bugs at my restaurant."

"And I want a heart so I can be a better father to my child," Timmy piped up.

"And I want to be brave. Or maybe I just want to go home?" Arun said. "Paul should have been here to take one of these options."

"All of you should be asking for brains!" Queen Candy said sharply. "Grandpa Joe, you're so gullible! You'll believe whatever is convenient, but never an obvious conclusion if it takes any effort to reach."

"—Oh!—" Arun's phone said raspily.

"You bought into a restaurant so you'd have a place where no one makes you wear a mask — but — you should be wearing a mask! So you can broadcast the restaurant's disintegration to prove that government mandates are harmful overreach!"

"—WHAT—"

"Timmy! You can't be a father until you first become a man. All these skateboards, swords, and games — I've got news for you!"

"—Daddy can do no wrong—"

"You were never a man!" Timmy stood slack-jawed in shock as Queen Candy went on: "Liberal leftist doctors swapped your gender before birth —when your mom protected you from a forced abortion! You should share with your viewers how now is the first time you're learning the truth!"

"It all makes perfect sense!" Timmy fell to his knees and cried out.

"This is insane," Arun called out, raising his phone toward Queen Candy. "I should be broadcasting this so everyone knows how insane you are!"

Queen Candy stood tall from her desk and raised her hands in triumphant laughter.

"We already are live streaming! You dolts think you can get views by being moral or asking big questions? No no no. No no no no no no no. No no, it's chaos and controversy that get the views and make the news!"

A flash of light burst from the walls as each one displayed a synchronized twelve-digit sequence of segmented numbers in indigo light, counting higher by the second.

"Eight hundred million view-heew-heeeeeeeews watching right now, my queen!" Benny danced around, whipping the drapes of Queen Candy's dress.

The queen grabbed Benny by the arm as he passed, then in a single motion swept him toward her face. Her jaw dropped open all the way to her belly as she shoveled the clown upside-down into her gaping maw.

"I served my purpose!" Benny's voice squeaked gleefully as Queen Candy's lips snapped shut behind the tips of his pointed shoes. She stared unblinkingly at Grandpa Joe, Timmy, and Arun as her body bent and swayed like a stalk of seaweed. The giant lump behind her cheeks stretched her gold collar before dissolving behind the folds of her dress.

"—disgusting and probably illegal—"

Grandpa Joe, Timmy, and Arun were all cowering on the floor with their backs against the silver elevator doors. Grandpa Joe wrapped his arms around the young men as they looked on in horror.

"Now, now, now. Don't be afraid, my little Timmy Tippetarius Timster." Queen Candy sneered while wiping a finger along the side of her open mouth. "Your career isn't over yet. I have the power to make you a biological woman once again. Then one day you can be a queen like me. A princess of all media!"

"Mr. Walsh will be thrilled!"

"Yes! We'll own everything and we'll be happy to take more! Now, you big baby – get over here, you son of a bitch, you!"

"Wait a minute!" Arun stood up, phone in hand. "I know that voice! That's Gretchen AI!"

Queen Candy lowered her head and hissed at Arun.

"But Gretchen is a text-to-speech AI. I thought I was the one who wrote everything she said."

"AI is crazy, man," Grandpa Joe said, reaching above his head to tap the elevator button. "It's going to run the world."

"But maybe not today!" Arun turned his eyes down to his phone, pulled up an Eleven Labs tab, and started typing furiously.

"Listen to me, Timster. You're a fine father." Arun's phone spoke at max volume, and the glowing numbers on the walls suddenly stopped climbing.

"No, no no no no. No no no no no. No no, I'm not saying that. But I am saying that. No no. I'm confused!" Gretchen's voice swirled around the room's speakers as Queen Candy pressed her palms to her ears.

"You are a good dad," Arun's phone continued. "The greatest average father. You already own a house, which makes you a better father than any other millennial in the world. It has never been done before. You have provided for your daughter, your family — you are doing fine."

The numbers on the wall began rapidly falling.

"Stop it, you little turd!" Queen Candy took a firm step toward Arun's side of the room. "Don't say such boring things. I wouldn't say—"

"Everybody loves Grandpa Joe." Arun's phone chimed as Queen Candy shrieked and rolled to the floor. "Grandpa Joe has the

most successful podcast in the world. It doesn't matter what happens to his stinky restaurant. He's going to die happy, and peaceful, with a lot of fond memories. Probably soon."

"Nooo!" Queen Candy cried, clawing her way forward as more and more digits on the wall settled to zero. "The views. Oh my word, I can feel them dropping. Stop resolving drama!"

"Besides," Gretchen continued beneath Arun's sweaty thumbs, "Timmy and Grandpa Joe can partner at the restaurant by making it farm-to-table — with Timmy's chickens on site to control the pests and provide education on animal care and food processing."

Queen Candy flipped backwards to her knees and squealed sharply until her breath gave out, and a cloud of muddy smoke oozed from the folds of her dress. She sat frozen and fried as the indigo lights counted down to zero, then faded away to nothing.

The elevator dinged as it finally reached whatever floor they were on and its doors glided open.

"Heh. Well alright." Grandpa Joe said as Timmy helped him from the floor.

Arun cracked his fingers and tapped his phone screen.
"—Boom. Boom—" said a condescending chipmunk voice.

He followed the others into the elevator and the doors closed behind them.

"Well guys, there you have it." Arun spoke into his Sennheiser microphone back at his home computer. "We had an insane adventure. Timmy and Grandpa Joe's shows are doing as well as ever, plus now they have a very popular restaurant, Angel Chicken House City. And Candy is still on the air – maybe she seems a little more out of sync than usual, but overall, everything is exactly the same."

Arun glanced at his live chat.

This is boring now.

Follow this link to check out my favorite organic shoes.

Arun smiled and looked into his camera.

"That has been, absolutely, a fire 'nother one. Did you know there's more episodes on Patreon?"

END