

Chapter 1

John Yodmacher was a champion. A real, bona-fied, dyed in the wool champion. But how was he a champion? Was he exceptionally bright? No, he repeated the 3rd grade for coloring outside the lines. Was he exceptionally athletic? No. He was the first person cut from a recreational volleyball league anywhere. He must have had some special talent or skill then that set him apart. Again, no, he stunk at pretty much everything, if you had not noticed a trend. As for his appearance and other physical traits, they were totally unremarkable. He even smelled rather neutral- so some close sources purport.

Then how exactly was he special? The answer is startling. The majority of decent, law-abiding citizens report severe depression upon hearing the answer.

One even had a nosebleed, but she was sick. And John was sick too; but then he got really sick.

He had an idea.

Before our story, John led a fairly normal life. That is to say, it sucked pretty hard. With all the evidence mounting against him, even John began to admit that he was not, in fact, special. The suspicion faded as he entered adulthood and he resigned himself to a life that landed somewhere on the left of the Bell curve.

John's father, John Sr., made his living as a small time pelt trader operating in the hamlets and outposts of the Texas Hill Country. Cowboy fashion requires turquoise, silver, fur, and, of course, leather.. John Sr. knew exactly which furry little fuzzball would provide the ideal template for each rhinestone bedecked monstrosity. Belts, earrings, bracelets, boots. Calf, ermine, rabbit, chinchilla. John Sr. supplied them all. It was quite a blow for him, then when the animal rights hysteria gripped the usual customers for such things, clubs of suburban housewives. Operating a national network stretching from Martha's Vineyard to a Denny's in El Paso, they distributed leaflets across the country lamenting the fate of poor little animals and praising artificial fur and leather. John Sr's market evaporated overnight.

Too poor to manufacture fake pelts, he sold real fur as knockoffs. Desperate, John Sr. turned to the native fauna to supply the raw materials for garish fur boots and fur trimmed coats. Squirrels, javelinas and even poor armadillos fell victim to his gruesome financial situation and even more gruesome fashion sense. All fads pass, though, and eventually the fear mongerers were replaced by fur mongers again. John Sr.'s fake faux fur business floundered, and, in the grand tradition of capitalism, only after the venture ceased to be profitable did John Sr. consider the ethical implications of his trade.

In penance for the misery he visited on various furry woodland creatures, John Sr. found work at the People's Zoo of Austin, accepting only the most menial tasks to maximize his contrition. Feeling he left some work undone with the onset of gout and his first year of social security eligibility, the father insisted that the son take on this burden.

Not that John Jr. particularly objected to this unchosen occupation. The job took out of the equation the two things he disliked most: choices and social interaction. He much preferred

shoveling crap from elephants than people. The arrangement suited him and he had no intention of changing it for the foreseeable future.

The foreseeable future probably didn't include acquiring a megalomaniacal beaver guru. But it's funny how life works out like that sometimes.

Chapter 2

Something about the Austin heat makes you want to move more quickly. Maybe it is so your thighs do not stick together. Or maybe you hope that you can generate some sort of relative breeze by your motion. Or maybe the preponderance of brown clay buildings, along with a few dark mirrored high rises, makes you feel as if you are in a giant pizza oven. John knew better than to move too much in the afternoon heat as he oozed down The Drag, a street-cum-pedestrian free-for-all in the center of the city. On one side was The University, on the other an eclectic mix of shops and restaurants that did not really seem to match tastes of the university students studying at The University. Every few minutes, herds of students rushed across the street like wildebeests crossing a river. Traffic started again when they had finished, although nobody wanted to test the brakes on the busses or the nominal safety training of the bus operators. Fidgeting in front of a boutique, John absently wondered what sort of animal supplied the fur for the trim on the jackets adorning the mannequin, or were they back to synthetic now? Then he wondered why he cared. His father had been so passionate about fur. John mused on a fur related question to ask his father to gratify him, but his will power faded. He had come to The Drag with the intention of wandering around aimlessly for a while, but it started to seem pointless. Perking up, he stuck his hands in his pockets and paced up the street.

When man crawled out from the cold dark and saw the stormy night sky, an urge awoke in him to rise above primitive superstition and to understand the forces at work in his world. This urge passed in some form from parent to child, gnawing at the souls of the geniuses of each generation: A pyromaniac's obsession to seek the flame of knowledge.

John Yodmacher was not one of these people. The only thing gnawing at John at the moment was an unquenchable desire for soft serve ice cream. Peanut butter with gummy bears. That shit is good. And so following in a long and illustrious line of frozen dairy product aficionados- Thomas Jefferson and Roman Emperors included-, John boldly ventured to his local creamery. He did not recall the name of this particular ice cream shop because it had only existed for a few months, replacing another ice cream shop that had left after a few months itself. These trifling details did not concern John, though, for he had an advantage over his noble forebears: a Preferred Members card. And on this particular day, John had 9 holes punched out, 9 tributes to dedication, 9 out of 10 labors completed toward a free ice cream and immortality in the annals of extruded frozen dairy confections.

It would seem, however, that John would pay for flying too close to the sun. For his hubris, the crime of seeking a free single scoop ice cream, the Fates would punish John. Even before the cashier had completed the transaction with his Daffy Duck 50th Anniversary debit

card, John took a generous lick of the topmost scoop.

His tongue smashed the frozen product against the roof of his mouth. The highly vascular area transported intense cold deep into his brain, causing a rapid constriction of blood vessels. John's eyes rolled back into his head, which could be confused for ecstasy to the casual onlooker, his tongue lolled and blackness engulfed his vision. In the middle of that blackness a white speck appeared: John focused on that speck, curious. He absentmindedly took another lick of the ice cream, but there was no ice cream, or head or tongue for that matter, deep in his unconscious subconscious.

The speck grew, or maybe it was just getting closer. John remembered learning about perspective in an art class he took in high school, but there was no time to consider artistic theory because it was definitely getting bigger, or closer, and it flattened as it expanded. Like a bright white sun dawning over his retina, the light flooded across his vision, brilliant. At the edge of the light, tendrils writhed and pulsed, infringing on the last bits of darkness. There was no heat but a terrible pressure from the light as if the photons themselves drilled into the bridge of his nose. John felt blinded, but this was the complete opposite of blindness, he couldn't escape the brilliant light. There were no lids to shut it out and no shade to turn to.

And then salty taste of blood and the cold ice cream shop floor.

'Waaagh', groaned John, frightening nearby children. Pushing himself up, he stumbled towards the bright sun shining through the window, holding his hands up in fear for a moment before he realized it wasn't the same intense light. Ignoring the concerned employees of the ice cream store, John departed the establishment, but not before quickly invoking the 3 second/2 out of body experience rule for his rapidly deteriorating ice cream. He scraped the part that hit the floor off with his finger and slurped the rest up. Yum.

With a disoriented walk and euphoric expression John staggered out the door.

John pondered consulting a primate veterinarian at work about the possible symptoms of brain tumors or the side effects of rapid ice cream ingestion, but he soon forgot the incident because the next day was a big day. It was the day of John's biannual visit to the dentist. By biannual I mean occurring twice a year, not once every two years. That would be gross. If there was one thing John felt passionately about, it might be dental hygiene. He took the whole day off and wore his best clothes. After all, where else could all men sit in equal judgment? That guy in the business casual suit? He's gonna scream like a little girl when he gets that tooth pulled. And that woman in the corner in the tacky floral skirt? Yeah, batting those eyes ain't gonna solve a necessary root canal. Maybe John even felt a little smug, thumbing through the back issues of Sports Illustrated left on the waiting room coffee table. Maybe he felt like this was a little cosmic justice served with nitrous and fluoride. Whatever the case, John sat there grinning like an idiot while the man in the suit fidgeted and the woman crossed and recrossed her legs. The receptionist called the woman in.

Alone now with just the professional looking man, John got a big banana grin on his face. This man did not know his foolishness, John thought. Why did he waste his life pursuing his vain obsessions? He didn't know what was truly important. He was not special like John.

John brought the Sports Illustrated up to his nose, clearly engrossed in an article on last year's soccer postseason, to hide his mirth. Hearing the rustling of the magazine, the man

oriented his head towards John momentarily (That is, for a moment, not in a moment, which is an incorrect usage anyway.) then went back to biting his lip.

The corners of John's mouth slide down. "Did he just brush me off?" John thought.. "He looked at me and then looked away. How dare he! He must think I am not worthy of being noticed. What right does this stranger have to judge me and my life! I may not have fancy diplomas hanging on my wall or a sports car, but at least I'm not selling my soul for a mortgage and a fishing boat!" All this he imagined.

The magazine no longer interested John. He slumped down in his chair, pulling the back of the plaid shirt he had so diligently ironed out of his pants. His zest for oral hygiene gone, John replaced the back issue on the coffee table and, glowering, trundled out of the dentist's office. He went back in a moment later to cancel his appointment.

John had escaped the man in the suit, but there was nowhere to hide on the walk to the Capital Metro bus stop. His eyes burned with shame and he didn't know why. John recalculated: The man had a well paying job, John presumed. He had lots of nice clothes and went to nice restaurants where people respected him, or at least tolerated him. What does that add up to, John? It should add up to nothing. So why did he feel like the zero? John kicked himself for that awful math joke.

"What are you complaining about, John? You wouldn't want that guy's stuff if it was offered to you. You could have done that, right? You could have nodded your head and said all the right things. John stopped. No, you couldn't. Maybe that guy could, but you couldn't. John leaned against the bus stop sign wondering if he could make it back to work and call it a half day. "You did sneer at the man, John, presuming that you were better. That doesn't really make you any better in that respect. But are you better? You eschew the pursuit of material possessions, social status, yadda yadda yadda. What are you looking for?"

"Here are the facts, John: You are a single guy living in a small apartment working as a zoo keeper. What is wrong with that? But you can be much more. Can you be more? What else is there?"

The bus came. John, wondered if he was talking to himself or if this other voice represented some Freudian archetype. Should he ask his mother or is that just what Freud would expect him to do? He shook his head.

"Get a hold of yourself John, you is going loco. Just gotta keep these feelings bottled up inside, that's the trick."

Chapter 3

John kicked at the pigeons stupid enough to get too close to his feet, which was all of them. They were equally lucky enough to evade him, though.

Resting on the bus stop bench following his vehicular disembarkation on Congress Avenue, John pondered his next destination. He needed to snap out of this funk. Useless activity always works. He extended his legs straight out and, dropping them together to a perfect 90 degree angle, he snapped off the park bench in a gesture of vigor and virility. The FDA would approve, as there was zero chance of him injuring himself in this exercise, despite its total worthlessness.

He then, naturally, marched to the nearest chain coffee shop.

History does not record whether John frequented the place with the good donuts or the place that sprays whipped cream on the coffee. Maybe it was another chain that also served hummus that could masquerade as independent until the locals caught on, then stopped caring. The matter is not relevant to the story, though, because John only ever ordered coffee as black as his soul.

John's motivation to visit this particular coffee shop may not be totally caffeine related. He spent the time it took his coffee to turn tepid vacillating between the thick glass window-staring in reverie at the retarded mongrel pigeons- and furtively glancing at the slender coffee semi-professional with the sandy brown hair. And freckles. But they were cute freckles. Sad sap.

You can probably guess from the way the story is going that this was destined to end in total failure for John.

It would be sad enough if John breezed in and out each week without any entanglements, his presence registering in the minds of the fellow coffeeshouse denizens and employees as scantily as in that of the pigeons. Apparently, though, the management wanted the staff to be 'friendly' and 'provide personal service' or whatever. Which usually translated into grudging smiles and pleasantries as dry as the scones. But no, this particular employee felt the need to periodically go from table to table to ensure that each customer was doing just swell and having a great, caffeine-dependant day.

She had, in what was surely a carefully orchestrated attempt to expose John's personal inadequacies, inquired about John's profession when he had come in his zoo dungarees. Thenceforth she dared to address him by the name emblazoned on the uniform: 'Jon'.

That is how a reasonable person would have interpreted the relationship (and by relationship I mean cosmic juxtaposition, not suggesting any significance or shared experiences), sans the heinous plot part. But John, being the sad sack of shit that he is, treasured the memory of each perfunctory, banal conversation as a gift he was not worthy to receive. And so she had attained in his mind that perfect level of graciousness and inaccessibility that makes a man idolize a woman and he ascribed to her virtue and (probably undeserved) intelligence, though he barely knew her.

John squeezed his way through the glass door, hugging the wall. Crouching behind the display of corporate logo embossed mugs, his eyes peeked over to ascertain the location of his quarry. Not here. OK, good. John breathed. He had come up with one idea that required his total concentration.

John Yodmacher was a sensitive guy. The test said so.

He went to The University and asked for a test that would tell him his personality type and it told him that he was the type that wanted spoon-fed answers. He was TMFØ, to be precise. John doubted that last part of the diagnosis because he had never been to Norway. The test also told him he had failed to self-actualize.

Approaching the desk, John slid the test form in front of the proctor. "What's self-actualize?," he asked.

The proctor, not used to test subjects addressing him in such a familiar manner, did not look up from his book. "Self-actualization is the highest psychological state you can achieve,

meaning that you are completely fulfilled as a person.” John did not move. Collecting some scattered papers on his desk he continued, “It means you are totally yourself.”

“So this test told me I’m not totally myself? How am I not myself?”

The proctor used his pencil to turn the test results right side up. “You are concerned with rules and expectations, you desire the company and approval of others, and suffer conflict by wrestling with archaic value systems.” He pushed the papers back at John.

“I see,” said John, lying. “And what should I do to “self-actualize”?”

“Be yourself of course! Accept that you are concerned with rules and desire the approval of others and find meaning in wrestling with power structures!”

John squinted. “But that’s what I’m like already and I don’t like it.”

The proctor paused. He looked back at the test form. After a moment he turned the form upside down. “Do not concern yourself with rules and expectations, disregard the opinions of others and do not follow archaic value systems.”

“So I should go live in the woods by myself...I’m not seeing where this is going...”

The proctor stood and rolled up the test form, using it to guide John towards the door. “Look,” he explained, “Right now you are in conflict because outside forces influence you. You’re told what to do, what to think and who to be. The key to self-actualization is to be comfortable with who you are and be able to resist all these outside pressures.”

“How do I do that?” John asked.

“By making yourself receptive to the energy of the universe. Here, have a mint,” the proctor said.

Be myself, John thought. That sounded like horrible advice. His mother, rest her soul in Florida, had told him that the first day of school every year and John took her advice one day a year. What he thought were friendly icebreakers only elicited confusion and jeers from his classmates. Nobody wanted to hear his fun fact about snails in the fourth grade or his debunking of the lemming myth in 8th grade or his fascinating information concerning gastropods in the 11th grade. Jeannie McLellan certainly did not want a thorough elucidation of the rules of curling on their double-blind date (very scientific). On his first day of work, John resolved to not be himself, and he credited his continued employment to that decision. The People’s Zoo of Austin wanted enthusiastic, outgoing employees to guide visitors and make their experience one to remember. They also wanted employees who would work in the back, stay out of sight and not go anywhere near a paying customer. John figured Not-John was more of the latter type.

“Come to think of it,” coming back to where John stood on the pavement outside The University, “maybe they’re right. I seem to not be me a lot of the time. Do you think this is really messing me up?” John looked into the tinted glass windows of the building, examining his reflection. “Who am I, then? Do I even know?” John scowled. “These people are idiots,” he said, remembering the proctor, “but they are right about one thing.” John thought about what they were right about. “I don’t even know what’s going on. That’s what they’re right about. We just need to do something.” John turned from the window, noticing the staring people inside.

And so putting 2 and 2 together (where 2= a mystical process of self-discovery and 2= the meaning of life and then dividing by zero in what may be a quiet form of rebellion against the patriarchal mathematics community), John said, "I'll just have to have one of these life altering pilgrimages to get some answers."

Actually, the part about a life pilgrimage or whatever was from TibetTours flier he found on a cork board outside The University. But it seemed to fit together so well and who was John to argue with fate?

John quickly realized that as far as "life altering journeys" go, this one would have to be relatively stationary. He had already used up his two days vacation for the year during the big music festival. So basically he spent his vacation standing in line for the toilet.

"I'll have to improvise. There's nothing to say I can't go on a spiritual voyage in my head is there? I think LeVar Burton would agree. Besides, there are plenty of interesting and knowledgeable people around me."

Not that very many interesting and wise people surrounded John. Zoo management kept his human contact to a minimum, insurance reasons they said, and the few friends he had shared his introversion..

And then there was Carl Weathers.

There's a saying in Texas: If you don't like the weather, call Carl Weathers. Or something to that effect.

Every night he issues his incontestable command to tune in the next day to hear his latest prognostication. In every sports bar, pita bar and upscale taco stand, a flat screen television beamed his face and portents into your retinas. From his impregnable citadel at station BATX-5, Carl hands down the unchallengeable edicts of an inscrutable authority: Tomorrow. Partly cloudy. 40% chance of rain. That son of a bitch.

"One day Carl Weathers, I shall cast off these shackles," John shook an angry fist at the sky, which turned into shading his eyes from the burning hellfire that was the Austin sun. "And on that day," he said recovering from his sun-blindness, "I do I shall forge my own destiny!" Until that day, though, it was best to take his threats of unforeseen weather conditions literally.

Carl Weathers was not available for comment.

Chapter 4

The first person John thought to ask was his father. An elder, right, he's seen and done it all, he'll have experience of this.

"Oh, I can't complain. Back only hurts 4 days a week. But it could be worse. I could be dead instead of just suffering from chronic arthritis and lumbago. I could be six feet under instead of up to my eye balls in THESE DAMN HIPPY UKULELE PLAYERS NEXT DOOR WON'T SHUTUP. So I can't complain."

"That's great, Dad."

"Well I know you aren't calling for nothing, so right off I'm not going to give you my famous possum stew recipe just yet. That is not your birthright until I die."

"Oh gee, you guessed it. I sure am disappointed."

John Sr. was no stranger to sarcasm, but he knew that his son was leaving something unsaid. Just like when John had told his father that his vegetables were no longer on his plate or when he reported that the cat was no longer on fire. Clearing his throat, giving his best impersonation of a caring, sympathetic father, he croaked "What's on your mind, son?"

Bypassing the swift interior monologue, John sighed into the telephone.

"I've just been a little disinterested at work lately."

John Sr. jumped in, eager to share advice on a subject he knew about. "We all go through this at some point. It's part of the business. They have you in the Africa section don't they? Too many dull yellows and browns. Work in the aquarium for a few days--"

"It's nothing like that, Dad", interrupting the elder man's suggestions. "Nothing like that at all."

"I'm just wondering if I'm not supposed to be doing something more meaningful than, and don't get me wrong I love it, working in a zoo." A long pause. "Uh...and I wondered," John prompted, "if you hadn't thought the same at some point."

"You're right, John. I should have balanced out my life more. I could have spent a lot more time in bars- maybe even tried some pot. Actually," John Sr. chuckled. "I've never told anyone this, but I had a dream of winning the Bassmaster 2000 Fishing Competition. Oh that would have been the life- rafting down the Mississippi, the spray of the river on your face, your best fishing rod by your side!."

Glad his father could not see the exasperated look he gave the telephone, John held his hand to the receiver and sighed loudly. "I am not talking about fishing competitions. It's not even the zoo. I like my job and there's nothing wrong with my hobbies- or lack thereof."

"Then what are you talking about, eh, if it's not about work or hobbies?"

"That's exactly it! My entire life is about work and then doing mind-numbing activities to kill the boredom!" A long pause. "Yeah, I don't hate it, but is that all there is? I don't feel particularly...what do people say? Fulfilled? What does that even mean?!"

"Well there's an easy solution for that son!" John Sr gleefully pronounced, glad he had a nother prepackaged answer. This conversation had taken a turn for the weird in his opinion and he was going to need some Steven's after this. "Why you haven't even started a family yet- there's lots of significance and fulfillment and whatnot in that."

That sounded like more work to John, but he didn't say that to his father.

"I wondered about things too once, son, but then I met your mother and decided it was time to move on and focus on more pressing matters. I'll let it lie for the next generation."

"Er...I am the next generation," John pointed out.

"All the more reason to work on getting your mother grandchildren," John Sr. laughed jovially.

"Thanks for the support, Dad.", mentally resolving not to go home for Thanksgiving this year.

'Sup, dawg- it's Mikey.' The phone call came during the 'pigeon cycle'.

"Mikey- You're German and I'm Scotch-Irish and not black Irish either, so, no, I am not your 'dawg'".

John sometimes regretted his patronizing attitude towards Mikey but he was pretty much the only person in the world he could talk down to, so he better take advantage of the opportunity.

"Why you always gotta be frontin'? You think you're better than me?"

"Little bit." John admitted.

"Whatevah. Me and the gangstas are going bowlin' tonight. You down, or you got somewhere better to be?"

"Sure, I will join you in your exceedingly gangster activities."

"Whatevah."

John didn't have any more education than the rest of his friends. He had no outward reason to look down on them. He didn't even have the best job among them. Gerald worked in Internet Technology. Mikey worked for the City in public works. Jimmy was an accountant.

Lately, though, a sense of irritation with whatever they were doing grew in him when he was with them. What had previously been favorite past-times- smoking and bowling, then going to bars and betting on who would pass out first- now seemed boorish. Consequently, his participation had declined, eschewing bowling and drinking for reading on a park bench or wedged into a corner at the coffeehouse mulling over steeped tea. You know, nerdy loser stuff.

John wondered if he would have been friends with them if he knew any other types of people. They were 'friends' in the sense that they grew up together and now hung around each other because everyone else who had any sense had gone. He pushed these uncharitable thoughts away sheepishly.

Really, John should count himself lucky. This sort of ritual of meeting together for a specific activity each week has died out in most places. Reveling in the freedom to associate with who they want and where they want, the new enlightened generations respond by hardly associating with anyone apart from a few tolerable people and occasionally family, provided they maintained the proper political views, mostly preferring to submerge themselves in their professional life. After all the greatest virtue, freedom, is acquired with money and the only way to make money is to shackle yourself to a desk.

Luckily for these fine fellows, John and his friends are too stupid to know that.

Yessir, a few frames at Magritte's Bowling Alley and a few pitchers are just what you need after a long week of shoveling crap from elephants and your manager. John was a happy drunk. Instead of sulking morosely in the corner like usual, he became an approximation of sociable.

"Hey Jimmy- let me tell you something. I respect you man, I respect you." John grabbed hold of a nearby shoulder and tilted forward.

"Oh God, John is turning into a bro."

"No, man, you guys just don't understand", John waved his arms in protest. "I just wanted to let you guys know that we are on this adventure together."

He paused for dramatic effect as the others stared blankly, a little disturbed to be honest. "I think we need some harder stuff if John is going to keep talking like this," they agreed. Actually, the plan was to just get John piss drunk before he started rambling too much. Upon arrival though, he seemed to forget whatever the hell he had been thinking of and again retreated into a dark corner, as bars are wont to have, muttering nonsense to himself. Billy Joel lyrics, they conjectured.

"Looks like some down time is doing you some good, eh John?", Kenny sidled up to John at the table

John grunted.

"I remember when we both wanted to work at the zoo. We'd herd the neighborhood cats and try to spray down dogs. Still seems fun. Seeing all the cuddly-wuddly animals all the time.", Kenny tried to be as warm as possible, but in his semi-inebriated state it came off as a little manic.

John continued to stare vacantly ahead. This had nothing to do with the zoo. Why did everyone think it had something to do with the zoo?

Kenny cleared his throat and looked nervously around the bar, hoping no one heard him, before continuing. "What I'm saying is that I don't think you have much of a reason to be glum."

John did not respond and Kenny made a face at his drink, signaling that he had given up.

"Kenny," John said without looking up. "You went to college didn't you?"

"Yes, for a few years," Kenny replied. Slightly surprised at the question, but, curious as to where John was going with this, he leaned forward interested.

"You think any of that stuff you learned helps you any?"

"Oh yeah, education's great- I get paid quite a bit more for that education. You interested in going back to school? I'd highly-"

"Nah, I don't mean money. I mean does it help you figure stuff out?"

"Sometimes it helps me when I'm figuring out my taxes- Is that what you mean?"

"Nah, I guess what I mean is, did you learn anything about life?"

Kenny squinted at his drink. "I think I knew some people who talked about stuff like that. I didn't see how it was going to help me make money, though, so I never listened to them."

"Ah, never mind then." John gave up.

Chapter 5

"YODMACHER!!!" Do we pay you to sit around petting goats all day?!"

"No ma'am, I'm only scheduled to massage the goats for two hours this week," John replied, snapping to attention smartly as if in a paramilitary organization that only had a dim idea of the procedures of professional militaries.

Existential crisis or not, it did not pay to get lackadaisical when Assistant Warden Bertha Brunder was on the rampage or you would soon lackajobsical.

"I don't need to hear about your sick fantasies Yodmacher. There's a high-priority crate in Domestic!"

"Oh noes, not a mutant guinea-pig from the mountains of Guatemala!." John glanced around to make sure no one heard him and grinned maniacally.

John's current malaise had not dampened his enthusiasm at work. At least for 10 hours a day he could submerge himself in manual labor and forestall his impending mental collapse.

"Busy hands keep the mind at peace," John Sr. used to say. John Sr. must have approached the serenity of St. Francis of Assisi as he never passed the 3rd grade. Apparently he couldn't color inside the lines either.

The service room of the Domestic Animals Section resembled a loading dock more than the scientific facility that these parks-cum-petting zoos purport themselves to be. Most of the animals displayed- sheep, goats, ponies, etc- only stayed for a short time before returning to

their native abodes or they were already so old that they just up and died after a few months. Consequently, the zoo allotted few resources for their upkeep.

A few bags of feed, a few bales of hay and in the center of the room stood a large wooden crate. Unlike the other crates filled with goats and guinea pigs, this one had iron bars on the sides and top. Large, yellow warning stickers warned: Danger! Contents Volatile! And then a smaller white sticker: Castor Horribilis.

John did not speak Spanish, so he ignored the second sticker.

"I don't care what's in that crate. I haven't met a problem yet that couldn't be solved with a crowbar."

A scenario in which John marched into the coffeehouse with a Paleolithic club and came out with the coffee girl over his shoulder flitted across his mind. John violently shook his head to dislodge the ridiculous and highly tempting image. He needed all his concentration for this delicate operation.

John hacked violently at the top of the crate with the pointed end of the crowbar, wishing that he could solve all of life's little annoyances this simply like a free man. Woodchips flew as John imagined he saw the face of Asst. Warden Brunder in the cheap pine. At last he found an opening to lay down the laws of physics on this impudent crate. The side panel of the crate exploded outward as if pressurized; John took a moment to admire its trajectory across the concrete floor. Ah, sweet destruction. Kneeling down, he peered into the darkness. A tawny, furry cannonball torpedoed into John's stomach. "Blargh," John jackknifed then his head whip lashed onto the floor. He really should see a doctor after all these repeated head injuries.

"Aaaargh," John retched, still not capable of forming words yet. A weight shifted on his stomach. John assumed the position taught to him by the herpetologists if cornered by a dangerous animal: stiff as a plank, breathe as little as possible. Aw crap, that was for snakes. The threat was definitely warm and furry- and moving slowly up John's torso.

Warm breath cut short John's panicked thinking as two yellow eyes, whiskers and buckteeth came into John's view. What is that smell? Sawdust? The creature stared in disinterest at John's fearful face before shuffling off his body and back to the crate.

John laughed. Ha ha.

A damn beaver.

Wiping the sweat away on his forehead, John picked up the crate panel, casually strolled up to the crate and slammed it shut again. This specimen would get no more opportunities. Usually John would delicately leash the goat or sheep or pony, bribing its cooperation with carrots or sweet grass and gently lead it to its new environs where a rubdown, food and a soft bed would welcome it.

This time, John jacked up the crate on a dolly wheeled it into the enclosure, dismounting it unceremoniously, kicked open the crate with a steel-toed boot and ran.

John had heard that there were books in the library. He couldn't be sure though because he had never been past the first floor, dedicated to slow running computers and racks of back issues of Cosmopolitan. Drawing on his knowledge of wilderness adventures gleaned from

cable reality shows, John prepared rations of granola and nonfat yogurt. Thence he trekked fearlessly to the 5th floor with nothing but a dubious elevator directory to guide him to his remote destination.

There, nestled between the "Ripley's Believe It or Not" collection and the "One Hundred Best Offal Recipes" John found a section ominously and succinctly labeled: PHIL.

In one moment, everything he had been led to believe about the card catalog system was shattered: Hobbes, Plato, Sartre, Rousseau, Nietzsche. It was as if someone with otherworldly clairvoyance had known that someone might want to read all these authors in succession and had placed them together instead of the usual custom of throwing them in opposite corners of the library.

John wiped off a thin sheen of dust from the bindings. Such a shame.. A treasure trove of wisdom collected over millennia now entrusted to a stagnant matriarchy of technicians with their 'library cards', 'card catalogs' and extremely misleading hours of operation. The books must be liberated.

Well that was easy. It's amazing how little attention people pay to a man wearing dark glasses, a black baseball cap and trench coat carrying a large duffel bag out of a public library. John dumped the contents of the bag out on his bed. Now let's see- picking up a book of Locke's- he examined the back. "Am I emerging from the jungle seeking to establish a social contract with my fellow man? Eh, I think they've already got that covered." John chunked the book to the back of the bed where it fell behind the crack.

"Am I interested in taking over a small city-state/place of occupation/passive-aggressive family with intimacy issues? Maybe I'll read you before Thanksgiving, Macchiavelli."

"S/W/Communist? Never looked good in red. No thanks, Marx."

"Hmm, The Republic. Ooh, snazzy, a forward. It's worth a shot I suppose. Now, John, so as to keep my mind and spirit pure during this, I shall eschew any low forms of entertainment or pleasure. No more carousing or bowling- no big loss there- and definitely no more trips to the coffee house." John bit his lip.

"Freakin' caffeine addiction", John relented 3 days later to the cold, drizzly air and the feeling of constant annoyance that could either be caffeine withdrawal or a sign of deepening malaise. John sequestered himself in the corner of the coffee shop, jacket collar up to avoid detection from she-who-must-not-be-engaged-in-conversation, John appraised the newly conquered tome before him. Drunk off the contents of the book, he could not tell if he was gaining enlightenment or would very soon be violently sick.

He pictured the dialogues described therein, substituting his friends for the Greek interlocutors. Their favorite bar had apparently replaced the tables and booths with many divans. Everyone was wearing a white sheet that only covered half their chests and it wasn't weird at all. Naturally, they all spoke in British accents, but he substituted Lone Star beer for wine.

"Hey, Mikey," mental John yelled at imaginary Mikey.

"What?", Mikey imaginarily replied.

"Of what use is justice?" John cringed at the pomposity of even the fictional question.

"Justice? That's what my sister kept screaming about when she lived in a tent for two

weeks at the capitol. I never could figure out what she was yammering on about.”

“Well, shit,” real John said to himself. Imaginary Mikey had supplied about as good of a response as John had to any question the book posed.

“That looks like an interesting book. What’s it called?”

Ambushed. John swore at himself. Not waiting for a response, coffee girl, I hope you guessed, kept on, “If you’re trying to impress a girl, you should go for poetry instead- try Neruda,” she suggested in a friendly tone, sticking her tongue out a little.

“It’s a, um..” John began, what could he say that was cool, glancing at her green apron then back to the swirls of his coffee. “It’s actually a book about poetry,” he lied.

“Oh yeah? What kind of poetry?”

John did not come to the coffee house expecting the Java Inquisition, and the first lie had already sapped his daily supply of nerve and imagination. But then he thought, “maybe I can use this opportunity to get some feedback. I’ll have to think of something quick though before she notices how long it’s taking me to answer.”

Either John thought a lot faster than he thought or she did not appear to notice his slowness. Or maybe she just thought he was slow.

“Actually, it’s a book that questions the aims of poetry. Whether or not poetry can be used to consider truth or if it’s only a diversion.” Damn, John thought, you can sound smart when you want to.

She responded in a half sing-song that John could not tell if it was mocking, “and what conclusion did they come to?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” he said. “The author said that he thinks it depends on the person. That if you look for meaning in poetry you can find it, but that if you aren’t interested in it, even the best poetry can’t give it to you.” John had no idea where this was coming from. He did not even know if it made sense, but the words seemed to make a reasonable sounding sentence.

“Meaning? Like what?”

If you’ve ever seen a beaten dog suddenly receive an unexpected pat on the head, you know how John reacted. Holy Saint Christopher, she actually might be interested! Here was a chance to impress!

Turning confidently to face her and smiling, John forgot to think. “Well, for one, it can teach the meaning of justice.”

“Justice”, she repeated. “Like who goes to jail and who should pay taxes?”

“Mmm, partly, but in a broader sense that everything does what it’s supposed to do.”

“What does that mean?”- she screwed up her lips and tilted a hip to the side, akimbo.

John leaned forward and started intently, “See it’s like this”. He thought for a moment. That was a mistake. John was screwed. In a moment of rare clarity, he realized that he was discussing something that was not, even in the unlikely event that it was understood, of any interest. But it was too late now.

Before he could think of anything to end the conversation, she bailed him out. “It sounds like the author is bullshitting you a little bit.”

“You know you’re probably right.”, he agreed with a little chuckle. With that he spun back to the window and buried his nose in a random page of the book. She walked away.

Chapter 6

Returning to his apartment, John hurled the book violently at the wall in retaliation for the failed flirtation. "Fuck you Plato. How is studying about 'Justice' or whatever supposed to help me anyway? What am I on the Supreme Court? Am I going to explain to the Warden that it's Just to give me the second shift and weekends off?"

The book did not respond.

John found lying face down on his bed with his nose scrunched into the sheets always calmed him down, possibly an effect from the diminished oxygen. After a good period of semi-consciousness, John raised his head up sleepily. His forehead hurt. Dangit, was sleeping on a hardback. "Rousseau huh? *Emile*. Might as well; I need a break from psychobabble."

John paced the narrow hall between his bedroom and the rest of the apartment. He had blazed through *Emile* and thanked his luck for finding *On the Origin of Inequality* also in his pile. Oh Mr. Rousseau, you and I get each other- so John's inner monologue went. How you have opened my eyes. My parents and friends- they are useless. They don't know anything about this. They are not the few like you and I, right J. J.? May I call you J. J.? Also, I am not crazy- well, not necessarily anyway- I just think things faster than other people so my thoughts appear random and crazy when they are just a few steps down the line. Ok, I stole that from Hobbes, but it sounds reasonable right?

John gave the old dusty mirror in the hallway a cracked smile. Drawing himself up, brushing his hair back he beamed a relaxed, confident smile that proved once and for all to the world and the hallway mirror that he was not crazy.

"Hrm. Maybe. But maybe", John epiphanized, "the world isn't so bad. There is plenty of wonder and beauty out there. We shall have to investigate. You and me, Mr. Rousseau. I mean J. J.. Now where shall we search first? The University? How could I forget?!"

"I could easily slink in there and eavesdrop on the students. Surely there is at least one among them who shares my vision. When I have identified a comrade, I will reveal myself. I will practice slinking back to my room....but first the kitchen. I'll do that as soon as I finish reading this book."

This book. This freaking book. *On the Origin of Inequality* now lay with *The Republic* behind the bed, parallel to where John slumped on the floor.

"J.J.!", John moaned. "Why? What's the point of having a world filled with joy and wonder ready to be explored if you're just going to give it back to the idiots." J.J. had not buoyed John's hopes of finding solace in knowledge in his second book. In fact, he pretty much killed it. "J.J., are you sure you're not secretly friends with Hobbes? Because according to you, my life is going to be nasty, brutish and suck."

"How am I supposed to figure this stuff out if a single author cannot even keep his opinions straight?! One minute the world is a happy fairy land, the next it's a barren hellscape! I give up.."

Humans are creatures of history. Every action is not done only for the moment, but in expectation of future utility. Crops are planted so that there might be food next season. Buildings

are raised so that more actions can occur inside of them. Plans upon plans. The most career-less of workers layers his thoughts in a succession of shorter and longer goals. Only 2 more days until Friday. Only 3 more weeks until Christmas vacation. Get married in 5 years. Have children, go on vacation, retire, etc.

Lying on his back that evening, the sweat pooling around his back, John could not think of anything in the future. Job, friends, family. It was all frozen in place. Even history held no consolation. "Welp, there is only one thing to do now," John thought.

John went to work the next day. There was no reason not to. His friends called him to hang out that night. Might as well accept. This was not a ploy for attention, he told himself. It was simply a conclusion that had been reached. The more outwardly normal, John normal anyway, he appeared and the more he stuck to his daily schedule, the less he would disturb those around him. Instead of growing terror, John devoted his mental energies to planning the practicalities of the matter of...finishing this. First he had to settle on a method, one easily at hand.

The recent Supreme Court case *Carson vs Duhickey* decided that the right to open fire indiscriminately with a handgun was a power reserved by the federal government, so buying a gun was more trouble than it was worth. He could borrow a hunting rifle, but those people were such sticklers for "safety courses". John was not going to spend his last days on earth studying for a test. Besides, there was something unsettling about hurting his face. His mother wouldn't like that.

Poison? Too painful and John hated Chemistry. Jumping from a building? John did not like heights. Maybe it hurt. He hadn't jumped off of a tall building before. He fell off a pony sprained his wrist once. That hurt. Drowning? Again, possibly painful. Living is hard, John mused, but dying is just inconvenient.

Hanging? Hmm, that had promise. You can engineer it so that your neck breaks instantly, right? But you would need the right spot. John's apartment did not have any rafters, sadly. The pole in his closet did not reach his eye level.

Foiled again.

Unless.

The Australia exhibit was darkened for some reason. The bats liked darkness, sure. But what about the kangaroos? Was it somehow always night in Australia? Did the opposite rotation of toilets repel sunlight? It didn't even matter; the animal cages were lit, interspersed through the labyrinthine corridors. It was the rest of the building that was dark.

John had cursed this building before, but today he embraced the darkness. On the leftish side of the gloomy tunnels, towards the back, a tendril of the maze curved to make a secluded pocket of privacy. Only the light from one terrarium illuminated the area and it was not visible from outside of the main hallway. The hallway was easily overlooked, probably because visitors were too busy making sure they did not trip in the darkness to pay careful attention to the walls. It should be enough time for John to execute his plan, at least.

John set down his folding chair. Standing on the chair, John flung the end of his locally sourced hemp rope over the pipe. Tying the rope to attach it to the pipe was easy. John laid his

book on knot tying on the floor and peered at it in the semi-darkness. He had not decided between the gallows knot, the hangman's noose or the double windsor. It was too dark to look at the diagrams. The single exhibit in the room offered some light and John held the book next to the glass.

The beaver rustled about his wood chips and eyed John. It didn't seem so tough behind half an inch of Plexiglass. Still hurt to cough where the rodent had rocketed into John's chest though. Stupid beaver.

"Is that Mills you're reading?" A distant sounding voice asked.

"Yeah," John replied without looking up. Much too friendly to be a zoo employee and he wasn't allowed to speak to zoo visitors.

"No, it's not, you idiot.." Ok, maybe John spoke too soon

John glanced around. The nearest bipeds were the kangaroos. The large lizard in the opposite display stared at him unblinkingly. Hearing a rustling, he turned to face the glassy enclosure where the beaver huddled in a pile of saw- er..- toothdust.

"Were...you talking to me?" John ventured. John didn't know a beaver's face could contort to show so much disgust.

"You ruined my joke you idiot. I ask if you are reading Mills- when I can clearly see that it's a book on tying knots-, you say no, and then I say, 'well I'd be trying to hang myself after reading Mills,too'. Bwahahaha. Ok, it needs a little work, but there's promise.." John could not recall if they had trained beavers like parrots, but he decided to play it cool. Shortly thereafter he became incensed.

"Hey you attacked me!"

The beaver shrugged. "I'm an animal, what do you expect?"

"Then why did you just go back into the cage?"

It looked away and sighed. "Oh, I don't know; it just all seems so futile," it trailed off sadly. "The real question here is why some bumbling idiot who doesn't know an echidna from an echinoderm is trying to reenact the Tower of London in the Australia exhibit."

John's temper flared. He may be a bumbling idiot, but he certainly knew the difference-

"Hey, buddy relax, it's just a figure of speech. Be cool, be cool."

John slumped against the wall. "I don't know...I just don't know what to do. Everything seems so pointless, but I can't figure out what it is I'm supposed to be doing, so I'm stuck."

"Oh," the beaver said, "you're having an existential crisis. How ordinary."

"Ordinary? Well, if I'm so ordinary, then why the hell is this world so unaccommodating? It seems to be designed to make me nauseous."

"My dear boy, first, I said the event was ordinary. Whether or not YOU are ordinary remains to be seen. Second, yes, very many people go through periods of questioning like you do and I happen to have a great deal of experience in helping them to find the answers they probably didn't know they were looking for. And, third, it's 'nauseated', not nauseous; you are not the thing that induces emesis."

John's sinuses burned. He looked at the chair then he looked at the pipe. Still looking, he asked, "so you think you can help me?"

"Oh, most definitely my most delightful moron." John turned to the beaver. It tapped its paws together. It grimaced in what John thought must be a beaver smile.

"How will you do that?", John asked.

The beaver puffed up. "Well, first, I must determine the nature of your psychosocial dysfunction."

"My psycho socials? I'm not dysfunctional!"

"Of course you are. You aren't rigging up a deathtrap in a dark hallway because you can't understand Heidegger. You're here because you feel isolated from society and are maladjusted in some way. I need to find out exactly how. Tell me, did you wear a lot of black as a teenager? John frowned. "Thanks, little beaver, but I don't think you can help me. I wasn't...I'm not...doing what I'm doing because I don't like my job or don't have a well adjusted car. I've come to this conclusion rationally. Or, rather, since I don't think there is any meaning in it, I've decided that it's not worth living."

The beaver straightened up and folded its forearms behind its back. "Well, John. I'd like to believe you, I really would. I have met, unfortunately, too many people who were fairly mediocre in their intelligence and took on airs to excuse the lack of fanfare they felt they deserved. How do I know I can trust you?"

"Well, I've read some books."

"Books. Pfft. Anyone can read a book. That's usually where it starts. You read one paragraph of Hobbes and suddenly you think you can analyze anyone."

John was casting a sidelong glance when he realized he was being insulted. "I didn't just read a paragraph. I read the whole thing and a bunch of them!"

"Oh, and did they tell you that there was no point to living anymore, is that where you got that?", the beaver sneered.

"No, actually. Actually I was a bit disappointed. I thought they would be helpful. Help me understand. But it was all so abstract. It was kind of my last ditch option, too." John and beaver looked down.

"It's decided, then.", the beaver said. "I can't promise everything, but I can promise that I will try to help you understand this predicament you are in, starting with your evident confusion with great intellectual works."

"I told you I already read them. I don't think you looking at me while I read them again will help."

"Pfft, you didn't 'read' them. You might as well have read the Butte Notes and the Albatross Centennial Classics Editions for High School English teachers. You won't learn anything from reading those books all by yourself. Thousands of students read these books every year in universities and look where that gets them!"

John conceded the point to the beaver.

"What you need is a teacher to give you some context. You need someone to explain what the authors were talking about, where they were coming from, where they were going, point out all the implications. Yada yada yada. That's where I can help. I've developed a program called The Snuffles Occidental Course in Criticism, Etiquette and Reasoning, or SOCCER. Snuffles is me of course."

"Huh."

"Ignore the name, I had to think of something snazzy for the marketers. Those people get nervous if you start throwing the 'Ph' word around. Think people aren't ready for it. But now for a limited you can get this great program for only 3 easy payments of \$59.99, but wait there's more!" The beaver seemed to snap out of a trance. "Ignore that last part, a night guard was

watching Ron Popeil infomercials last night. Of course, I could only imagine what the savory rotisserie chicken looked like..."

Awkward pause.

"So...what exactly do you want in exchange for this?"

"Get me out of this damn cage of course, you dimwit! I can't be discussing the eternal while I'm swimming in my own feces!"

Chapter 7

Who knows what made the administration of the People's Zoo of Austin think that a beaver would be a popular attraction. Maybe they thought that anything designed for water and cold weather, neither of which exist in central Texas, would appear as an oddity. The public did not seem to agree. Maybe the beaver just looks too much like the nutria, a large aquatic rodent dwelling on the mighty Rio Grande that some people swear tastes just like chicken jerky. But at least no one noticed Mr. Snuffles (he insisted was his name) gone from the beavaquarium. As they say, a beaver in the backpack is worth two mutant ones roaming abandoned subway systems. They probably say that in Russia, right? And in this way John secreted Mr. Snuffles to his apartment. With all those kids' backpacks of moronic cartoon animals with glassy-eyed stares and vacuous grins, no one paid a second thought to a small head poking out of a pink girls backpack, which he had liberated from lost and found, carried by a young man. Although John swore he heard some teenagers laughing at him. Haters.

John dumped Mr. Snuffles unceremoniously onto his bed. Whoops, that was a little too hard.

"Sorry!"

"Do not touch me!," Snuffles protested, pushing John's meddling hands away. The beaver stood up straight and smoothed his ruffled fur out.

"Well you do have a nice little collection here, I admit." Snuffles rummaged through the pile of books. "Enough to get started with anyway."

"When will we begin?" John rubbed his hands together excitedly.

"Don't do that. It's creepy."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize."

"Sorry!"

"You are very stupid I can tell."

"Yes, I know."

Snuffles appraised John for several moments through what must surely be the beaver expression for contempt. He must have decided that there was nothing for it.

"Very well. We can make a little progress tonight. The first step in the process is to determine your goals."

"Right, good idea," John said, looking at the beaver.

"Well?" Snuffles drawled.

"Oh, I thought you were going to tell me."

Snuffles smacked his paw against his brow. "No, you tell me what your goal is."

John blinked. "Goals? Do I have goals? I guess I hadn't really thought about it exactly that way."

I was just sitting around one day and realized what a meaningless existence I was living and how I wasn't fulfilling my cosmic potential-"

"Ok, that's enough. I don't need a frickin' autobiography. As pathetically humorous as no doubt it would prove." Snuffles cleared his throat. "I understand. You are not used to verbalizing your feelings and ideas. You're like a toddler who wants graham crackers. We're going to try a method I've borrowed from those abominable psychoanalysts. Now I want you to sit down- the floor is fine- in fact lie down, it's not berber but it will do. Pretend you are about to go to sleep or doing nothing in particular. Clear your mind at first. Try not to think of too many things at once. Just let the strongest impression you have float up to the surface. The idea is we want to find out what is the strongest motivator in your life is. A recurring question that bothers you. Usually this motivation associates with a particular event of which you have a vivid memory. It might have been a conversation with a friend. A book you read years ago. Maybe you were meditating in a Japanese garden..."

John stared at the ceiling, not sure if he was supposed to get some sort of epiphany from all the blood rushing to his head. He wondered if Plato got his ideas while lying down on carpet, or marble, or whatever they used for floors in Rome. Ow, have to not look directly at the ceiling light. Oh well, he was tired of holding what he hoped was a contemplative gaze to impress the beaver anyway. Ooh, cool, those little red spheres were floating around in the darkness. This is boring.

Was it the dentist visit? That annoyed John a lot. No, it was before that. Was it last week's bad bowling night? What was before that? John's memory retrieved the appropriate image: him sitting on the park bench, legs splayed, kicking at the dumb pigeons. Wistfully glancing at passers-by, maybe hoping that one of them would approach him and do or tell something life altering. But they just all passed by oblivious and John was left staring at the cement.

John opened his eyes. "What am I supposed to be doing?"

"Just relax and clear your mind." The beaver sounded like a very bored motivational speaker.

"No, that's my answer. That's how I ended up here. I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

"I told you to think of a memory. That's not a memory," Mr. Snuffles said.

"I know," John insisted. "I tried to think of a memory but every memory I could think of was about me being confused and lost."

Mr. Snuffles narrowed his eyes. "John, can I ask you, before we met, what sort of long term goals you had? Career? Hobbies? Love life? Other?"

"Well that's the thing." John sat down against the wall. "I didn't really have any goals. Never have. I think that's why I ended up...going into the Australia exhibit. I just didn't know what I was doing with myself."

"May I suggest that perhaps," the beaver said as he picked at the pile of books on the bed, "you aren't really interested in the high pursuit of enlightenment, but are, as I explained earlier, experiencing psychosocial distress and looking for outlets?"

"Is that a fancy nice way of saying I'm a loser?"

"Did that sound nice to you? I didn't go out of my way."

"So I'm reading books because I'm a loser?"

"You can't find an answer in your life so you look for them in wherever you think there might be wisdom," Mr. Snuffles flipped away the book he was holding.

"How often do people...in my situation do this?" John asked.

"It is a fairly common occurrence. It is the underachiever, the C student if you will, that looks for a flaw in the system. Look at all these books. You look like a debtor searching for a loophole in tax law."

John frowned.

The beaver peered at him through narrow eyes. "You didn't think you were special now did you."

John's shrinking expression confirmed that he did, up until a moment ago, think he was special. He picked up a random book and held it out for Mr. Snuffles' inspection. "Well none of these books mentioned that possibility," he protested. "

"Sure, they did. Almost every one of them makes some sort of discrimination by class, talent or intelligence. Not everyone can be at the top of the layer cake, but everybody always thinks they are talking about everyone else. Your filthy race is remarkably adept at making sense of any situation. That sense requires that you are not the stupid one. So whoever you aren't are the stupid ones."

"So I'm the stupid one."

"Probably."

"That's very comforting." John focused on his breathing for a few moments. "So this psychotic malfunction."

"Psychosocial dysfunction."

"Yes, that. Can you help me with that?"

"I'm not a therapist, John. I'm not sure what I could help you with."

"I don't need a therapist... I just need a...Can you give me a reason to, I don't know...something to look forward to."

The beaver selected a book from the pile. Thumbing through it, he presented the book to John.

"What does this guy say?," Mr. Snuffles asked.

"Um, that I am selfish and greedy, I guess."

"Good! Not unlike those little piggies you take care of I daresay. And what does he want you to do? Does he want you to repress your selfishness and greed?"

"No, not really."

"But he doesn't want you to be selfish and greedy all the time- that would make a mess of things, just in your little pig pen right?"

"Yeah, sure."

"And what is this pig pen that he proposes for us. "

"Society," John shrugged.

"I suppose that's like putting 'C' down for every answer on the test you didn't study for, but it is in this case correct. Thomas Hobbes: inventor of 'The Man'." Snuffles paused, pleased with himself so far. "So he wants to be a selfish little piggy in your pig pen, and magically we get a 'well ordered society' as they say. Now you can debate all of that, but, on an individual level, you could say that his goal for you is to be a good citizen. Agreed?"

"I guess." John hoped his projected boredom would make the loquacious beaver get to the goddamn point.

"Hardly a unique notion though. I think Lao Tzu would agree with the basic point. That the role

of man is to be a good citizen?. How about Marx? That sound good to you Yodmacher? Don your Phrygian cap and extol the party ideals.” The beaver put on his chummiest expression and mimed poking John in the ribs with his elbow, even though John was standing 5 feet away.

The expression disturbed John a little, frankly. “Is this is a trick?”

“Nonsense! It gives you everything you could ever want!” Snuffles puffed out his chest and marched up and down the promenade/bedspread. “Ideals, purpose, a sense of belonging, freedom from doubt or uncertainty”.

“Well I’m sure that is great for a lot of people”- you should never insult patriotism, even in your bedroom to a beaver- “I don’t think I’m like a lot of people though. I think I need something else.”

“The Party is wide though! We can accommodate people of all stripes. Vive le difference!”

He was definitely hamming it up.

“Heh”, John laughed nervously. “See...that’s the thing. People..generally don’t like when I start wondering things aloud.”

“You mean they don’t like a know-it-all who asks too many questions for their own good”, Snuffles had somehow grabbed John’s shirt collar and they were now nose to nose.

“Um, something like that”, John gulped. The beaver released John. He massaged his neck. “That wasn’t really my point though.”

“And what was your point, you tedious man.”

“Those people you all mentioned. They were all talking about large groups of people.”

“Nations or societies.”

“Yeah, well, that’s great and all, but what does that have to do with me?”

“Surely you don’t think you can live all by yourself. Do you?” Snuffles peered at John almost suspiciously. “Some people think you can. However in my study of natural history, humans are not one of those species that can live solitary lives. A bee by itself isn’t completely a bee is it?”

John thought about Rousseau. “I’ll grant that, but that can’t be the end of it. After all, the whole must be made of component parts, and political life can’t be the whole of human existence.”

“Where did you get these words from?” Mr. Snuffles squinted. He was running out of expressions of exasperation.

“Books I guess,” John gestured at the bed. “Ok, I’m too dumb maybe to learn, but maybe you could tell me if there’s something else. Your little speech about fitting in. I’m fine with that. I’m not out to change the world, but there ought be something else I can apply myself to. Can you at least help me with that?”

Mr. Snuffles rotated the book in his hands. He flipped it open to a random page. “Look, John, I can’t choreograph your life for you. People could have all sorts of motivations that they pursue...”

“Right, but most of them are worthless, so you just need to tell me about the good one.”

“ ‘The good one.’”, Mr. Snuffles repeated, flaring his little beaver nostrils. Then the expression left his face and he dropped to his elbows, propping up his chin.

“Yes,” John insisted. “The good one. The one that will make me a satisfied person.” John

sprang up from the floor and pawed through the books. "I'm sure I read that somewhere in here."

"I believe the expression you are looking for is 'the good life'." Mr. Snuffles said, staring at the wall John sat by.

"Yes, that. Tell me how to find that."

"I have to admit," the beaver said, still not looking at John, "despite your crassness, I'm slightly impressed that you managed to get from Point A to Point B. It shows spirit, but we're not quite out of the woods yet."

"Wait, what are Points A and B?", John asked, kneeling in front of the bed.

"Don't interrupt! I merely meant that you exhibited some resilience in persevering when I crushed your pathetic worldview, perhaps prematurely. You may not be the shiniest apple in the barrel, John, but you, at least, have your curiosity. Unfortunately, unlike the cat, you only live once. And praise the heavens for that."

"Gee, thanks. Now what were you saying about woods?"

"Shut up and I will tell you." Mr. Snuffles rolled on his back. "But first rub my tummy." John hesitated, but the beaver simply lay prone and motionless, so he reached out with two fingers and touched the beaver's side. He had not forgotten their first meeting just yet. "All 4 fingers, please, and right in the middle.", Mr. Snuffles commanded. John obeyed the beaver. "Oh yeah, right there." The beaver's head flopped back, exposing his underchin. "As I was saying," Mr. Snuffles said. "I have decided that maybe you are not totally useless. You are, however, incredibly stupid, so we will still need to explore your fallow mind for a starting place, however low it may be."

"What? The meditation thing again?", John asked.

"Forget the meditation, it's bupkis. What we need to get out there and find some questions that need answering."

"Won't this affect what we talk about? What if we find the wrong questions?" John thought this sounded a little chancey.

The beaver shook his head. "It's not terribly important. In any event, we only need to use our experiences as a springboard for discussion. We have lots of exploring to do and you will need a wide education if you wish to be avant garde and forge new ground in whatever subfield you plan on taking by storm."

John had to assume the beaver was speaking cryptically with these strange words. He thought it best not to pry.

The beaver continued his explanation. "Answering whatever first question we happen upon will set you on a line of inquiry." The beaver continued. "We aren't interested in the final answers so much. In fact, you don't really ever get a final answer, do you?" Snuffles smiled, maybe just to himself.

"Huh?"

"Huh, what?"

"No final answer?"

"Of course not. One question leads to another and on and on we go!"

John considered that for a moment.

"You were expecting something different," the beaver eyed John.

John wrung his hands. “No, I guess I knew that. But I was sort of hoping that it would,” he stuttered, “give me some answers?”

“It will. It will.”

“Yeah, but not just not, like, theoretical solutions, but, well, you know, USEFUL answers.”

The beaver looked confused. “I don’t see how this is- Wait a minute!”

The Encyclopedia Britannica describes the beaver as having a very strong jaw, capable of gnawing through feet of wood and able to cut through even an inch of steel. As a result of the incredible tension generated by the jaw, the mandible naturally tends to a closed position at rest. A skeletal sphincter, if you will. Thus, the expression corresponding to the primate ‘jaw drop’ is more of a snapping motion where the mandible and maxilla separate then clack back together. This is often repeated several times for full effect.

Seeing this for the first startled John. He half expected the beaver to go into convulsions or to start frothing at the mouth. He grabbed his wiffle bat for protection.

The beaver, however, did not physically assault John, that would have been too kind. Instead, he chose the far crueler route of verbal abuse.

“You aren’t interested in enlightenment or achieving metaphysical transcendence!?” As if that was the most normal thing in the world. “You’re not even interested in contributing to the literature are you? You’re just looking for a quick fix for your miserable little universe.” The rodent shook an accusing paw at John.

John gripped the bat to ward off mental attacks. “Is there something wrong with that?”

Apoplexy might have been the more restrained reaction. “Something wrong with that?! Why you imbecilic ignoramus! You insult the memories of the greatest minds- of their pursuit of the Truth for the betterment of the human race!”

The pomposity of the beaver compelled John to defend himself. He took a lot of crap from people with physical and societal advantages over him, but to take abuse from a 3 foot furball was too much. “Hey, you’d still be in that cage if it wasn’t for me!”

“I’d stay there too if I knew I was going to help some teenage girl write shitty poetry in a Rose Art spiral notebook! In fact, I think that would be preferable!”

“Ok, yes, that’s it, I want to use philosophy like a dirty tramp, tell me what to do and go about my life like a normal person. Is that so much to ask that it give me some direction instead of just being the urn of my dead grandfather on the shelf?”

Mr. Snuffles looked genuinely impressed at that metaphor. Beavers are well known for their love of figurative language and some expressions are even given dates, like vintages. Indeed, beavers consider Anaxagoras the true creator of the phrase ‘shock me like an electric eel’, but the destruction of Herculaneum erased all record of this linguistic gem, signaling the beginning of a metaphorical dark age lasting some 2200 years.

“Ok, calm down, calm down. I was being purposely over-grandiose. It was merely a test.”

“A test?”, John’s eyes narrowed.

“Ok, it wasn’t a test, but, still, I’m very pleased with your reaction.” The beaver waddled to the edge of the bed and poked John’s shoulder. “My friend, you are absolutely right. This is not laboratory stuff. This is meant to be lived. That’s why you were getting nowhere with these.” The beaver thumbed over his shoulder. “If you want to learn how to think, you must first learn how to live.”

"That sounds great," John said. "And I have no idea what it means."
 "Well I'm glad we sorted that out." And with that the beaver promptly fell over, sound asleep.
 Repeated prodding from the wiffle bat produced no effect. John opted to sleep on the couch.

Chapter 8

"You have quite a lot of books here," Mr. Snuffles. John could not tell if it was a compliment or a rib, but, it being 5:00 a.m. and all, he wasn't in the mental state to formulate an adequate reply to either in any case. Instead he plopped down the Styrofoam takeout container with the agreed upon daily breakfast of lox and bagel.

"Awesome." John grunted without context.

Snuffles removed the bagel in the only reasonable way, by shredding the Styrofoam box and scattering white flecks over John's bedspread. The beaver sighed as he picked off the offending capers from the cream cheese, flicking them into various corners of the room.

John's ears pulled back, his nostrils flaring. Realizing he was mimicking an annoyed horse, he relaxed and took the more civilized route: passive aggressiveness.

"Are you going to be useful this morning or just turn my bed into a pigsty?"

"My we are very grumpy this morning." At least that's what John thought he heard. He didn't have a lot of experience deciphering a beaver stuffing himself on smoked salmon while feeding a ribbon of salmon to his maw. "While you distribute that 'food' that defies the Geneva Convention to the lesser animals, I will attempt to formulate a lesson plan for your edification. But first I need to test your proficiency.." "It's good that I came when I did. First you make a mockery of the contemplative life. Now you want to eschew any teaching that makes you a remotely useful member of society."

Mr. Snuffles reared up, spun and slapped John across the face with his waffle tail. John jumped back but ended up falling on his butt.

"Waaah, why did you do that?!" He brushed his cheek experimentally. It stung.

"Because you disgust me, sir. You're clearly a selfish, egocentric cad looking out for no one but himself."

"You didn't object to half of it of it last night," John protested.

"That's because I didn't know the full extent of your perfidy." Mr. Snuffles paced upright along the edge of the bed, front limbs behind his back. "Maybe you were a shy lad or particularly dull, which I heartily suspected. So you had no interest in writing or contributing to the intellectual procession of humanity. So be it! It's a hard life and not for the weak of heart." Now he turned and pointed at John.

"But now I learn that you are wholly without concern for anyone but yourself. I bring you ingredients for medicine to heal the dark hearts of all men, but you'd rather use them as opiates to dull the pain of your sad life. You are not driven by thirst for knowledge but by the fear of ignominy. What do you have to say to that you blackguard!"

"I think I have a concussion."

"Pussy."

One bag of frozen peas later.

“So, I’m totally hopeless?” Head trauma and ice made John groggy, but he hoped that he might be able to get some insights if he wasn’t totally conscious. So far his biggest insight was that he never actually ate all those frozen vegetables he bought.

“Nonsense.” The air of seriousness had not yet left the beaver. He grabbed John’s chin roughly. “Are you fully conscious, John?”

“Uggh, a little dizzy, but yeah, I think so.”

“I should have lectured you before I struck you. My mistake.” He released John. “What I’m about to say is important, though, so try to focus with both of your brain cells.” He assumed a strangely paternal air. John wished he had a tiny pipe to add to the effect. “Clearly you are afflicted with some extremely stupid notions. This is to be expected. However, one way to describe a reasonable man is that he in one way or the other conforms himself to the universe. Foolish men think this is a betrayal of themselves, but they are idiots who think that they made the universe. When, in reality, you are a product of the universe. Now you can’t bloody well study the universe with your microscope turned on yourself, can you? So whatever inane questions or reasoning that you may have been thinking of up to this point- get rid of them. And I’ll promise you I’ll give you much more important questions to ponder, and, yes, answers too. Do you understand?”

John’s head rolled around a bit on his foramen magnum until he could muster a weak nod.

“Beautiful obeisance. I should strike you more often if this is what it produces.”

“I’m no stranger to sarcasm.”

“But you are a stranger to a proper attitude towards authority.” Snuffles sighed. “Most people these days would rather be independently stupid than to learn from a teacher. Most people think they are smarter than most people.”

John shifted..

Snuffles continued. “They think that they are the most interesting thing and consequently spend all of their time studying their ‘feelings’ or some rubbish. Believe me, you’ll likely find that you are the most uninteresting thing in the world.”

John and Mr. Snuffles fell silent, lamenting the folly of man.

Snuffles pointed at the soggy bag hanging limply from John’s hand. “I’ll take those peas in lieu of payment.”

“I’m going to be late to work.”

The disappearance of Mr. Snuffles only caused a small ripple at the concern. Another missing animal at the revolving door of Domestic Animals. Zoo Security expected the poor beaver was either glue or halfway to Guatemala by then. Beaver cheese is very popular in Central America, so I am led to believe. Nevertheless, protocol obliged them to conduct a perfunctory investigation.

John felt vaguely insulted that Zoo Security did not consider him a suspect- he had fallen lower than the bathroom cleaning lady in the zoo employee betting pool (which he was not invited to), but this only further convinced him of superiority.

“Yes, you think me but a humble gamekeeper (it was his official title). Little do you know that I am free of the obligations that your archaic justice system hobbles you with.” John had himself a

round of diabolical laughter.

"Oh crap, I'm losing it. Think, John, you're supposed to stop yourself from slipping into the crazy." The image of the reclining naked man fluttered across his mind. He spasmed violently to dislodge it.

John didn't mind the mundaneness of his job so much since he smuggled the loquacious beaver home. Not that he didn't appreciate the help, but while in the presence of Mr. Snuffles he could feel those beady little eyes analyzing and dissecting him. He had to be prepared; his every utterance scrutinized and a single misstep would release a flood of abuse. Some nice, relaxing manual labor let John zone out for a while.

Yaaaawwnn. Maybe a little too zoned out. Need coffee. Coffee, coffee, coffee. Not as good as methamphetamine, but it let's you keep your teeth.

The 'staff room' resembled the rest of the buildings intended for human use at the zoo: A big concrete slab with sheet metal walls. The lone light cast heavy shadows in the mostly empty room. A few filing cabinets lined the back wall and in one corner a card table and folding chairs supported a coffee carafe and boxes of too-liberally powdered donuts.

"Thank God Einstein invented microwaves," John exclaimed. "I have to burn my tastebuds off to make this sewage palatable."

"Hmm, 11:25. If I dawdle in here long enough I can just chill out until lunch." Mmm, donuts. Eww, donuts. Dammit- this coffee is decaf. What the hell!

John leaned back in the folding chair, twiddling his thumbs (not sure what that means but I'm just the messenger). The warm uncaffeinated beverage had opposite effect of what he intended, but if Warden Trundle caught him napping, he would be knocked down to the very bottom of the totem pole. Not that that was very far to go. Still.

"McYodmacher!!!," an infuriated voice bellowed through the PA system.

"Yes, Assistant Warden Brinder, sir?!" There was no microphone to transmit John's response back to the Command Center, but John did not want to take chances.

"There's a spill in the aquarium. Get on it Pronto!"

"Yes, ma'am, right away!"

"Why would I ever leave this?" John wondered as he pushed the yellow mop cart through the blue-lit hallway of the aquarium exhibit. "So much fulfillment to be had. I get to solve problems, keep this zoo a well-oiled machine."

No guests lingered near the popcorn and soda mess to claim responsibility or warn others of the imminent slippage danger. No matter. John McYodmacher, with his mop of justice, was on the scene.

"Excuse me, sir." John did not respond to the small voice. Nobody called him sir.

"Excuse me sir." This time John had to turn to see what just pulled on his pant leg. A young girl, maybe 8 or 9, with frizzy brown hair stood clutching a plastic cup with an elephant's cup as its top.

"Could you tell me where my class is, please, sir." She sucked on the straw that impaled the elephant's forehead. The cup was empty.

John looked down the hallway. There had to be someone else to take care of this. No one. A bead of sweat rolled down his spine. He wasn't trained for this sort of situation! He was a philosopher for the love of God, he wasn't good with people!

John was screwed. He gulped. "And what may your name be, little girl." Way to sound like a mall Santa, John.

"Cynthia." More futile sucking on the straw.

"Where is the rest of your group, Cynthia?"

"I don't know one second I was looking at the turtles and I told Tommy Miller not to tap on the glass and he pushed me and I had to pick up my elephant and it wouldn't go back on and when it went back on I looked up and everyone was gone." Cynthia and the elephant looked at John expectantly.

OK, the little girl was no longer a total enigma- it had a name- but what do with her? He could always run away. No way could she keep up with him. They would never trace him back here. Besides, whom would they believe? What kind of idiot would just run away from a lost schoolgirl? Plausible deniability, John, that's the ticket.

"Well, good luck with that." The hallway only ran about 40 feet to the exit and John covered this distance in a few seconds, leaving poor, bewildered Cynthia alone with her best pachyderm friend.

Bloody, blinding sun always gets you right as you come out of a dark building. John covered his eyes, helpless and immobile for the moment. He wondered if this was what an out of body experience felt like. Oh, right, already had one of those. And look there, Mrs. Heddleburg's 4th grade class, breaking about 12 zoo rules around the lion statue fountain. John hesitated. If he brought Cynthia back to her class, he'd have to face her again, but he could forget about her permanently. Uuuuuugggghhhh...fine.

"Oh Cynthia," John bellowed down the dark corridor. "I've found your class- this way!" With scampering feet a small figure burst out of the darkness to be struck by sun-blindedness. "Woah, Cynthia teetered, disoriented. "Thanks, mister.", and with that she rejoined the pack of screaming brats.

"Aww that felt kinda nice." John's chest swelled even as he shoveled elephant manure that afternoon. He had helped someone. Not in the 'to the fullest extent required by law' sort of way but in the 'doesn't matter to me one way or the other' kind of way, and that was meaningful.

"Maybe I'm going about this the wrong way," John pondered as he leaned against his shovel buried to the hilt in elephant dung. "Maybe I've been focusing too much on myself. If I help other people, I get this toasty feeling inside." John felt like playing Christmas songs.

"John, after having nothing to do all day in this miserable apartment of yours but reflect on our conversations, I fear that I have been, if you will pardon the vulgar expression, a little long in the tooth."

John snickered.

"Anyway," the beaver continued, ignoring John's amusement, "it's no use us sitting in here with me trying to gnaw through your thick skull. We are going to go exploring! Now what did you bring me to eat?"

There was, as John discovered, a dearth of information regarding the domestic care of talking beavers at the People's Public Library of Austin and he did not dare ask about it at the zoo, lest they suspect him. In the end, he went back to Mr. Snuffle's old housing in the Australia

Exhibit and endeavored to relieve it of some of the more substantial pieces of wood. He figured that if anyone asked what he was doing he could play dumb or generally be himself. After all, no one would be so dumb as to return to the scene of the beavernapping. Per usual, though, nobody paid attention to John or his pink backpack.

John presented a shoebox full of sticks to the beaver who chewed at the ends of the branches without comment for once. John brought out his own falafel wrap, the official sandwich of Austin, and enjoyed the conversational hiatus.

Mr. Snuffles collected the scattered sawdust and packed it into a ball, depositing it in the shoebox. Then he burped. "Excuse me. I have not eaten venerable wood in front of others for a while. My manners have slipped."

"You're excused," John said, spraying pita crumbs.

"As I was saying," the beaver continued, dusting himself off, "We've had a fundamental problem the last few days in that I've mostly lectured and questioned you."

Mr. Snuffles stared at a spot on the bedspread. John clasped his hands and stared at the ceiling with what he thought was a contemplative gaze.

"You were pretty quick with your answers yesterday when I showed you that book," the beaver started again.

"Yes," John agreed. "I read that book."

"Yes, you did, and we pulled quite a bit out of it." The beaver paused again. "But, as I said, we can't just sit in this cramped apartment. Where do you like to relax?"

John suggested a nice food truck park. There was one near downtown that had sushi and tacos and Ecuadorian food. Mr. Snuffles suggested that that sounded like a disgusting combination. Beavers also do not like to approach the latitude of any cultures that may or may not eat large rodents. His one real suggestion spent, John threw out a bar and then a coffee shop. Finally they settled on Zilker Park, which did not occur to John as a relaxing place. He went there mostly to fume at himself, humanity and life and not be bothered.

For nine months of the year, the Austin sun and the famous Austin granite combined to make the city an oven for organically sourced pizza, which made wrought iron the perfect choice for a park bench. Maybe the park planners wished to discourage sedentary parkgoers from sitting so that they could move off whatever chips and chili con queso they had recently consumed. Luckily, the heat fried John's brain to the extent that he could not gather the mental energy to have a psychotic episode until the hellish weather abated somewhat. And so John and the Mr. Snuffles arrived at Zilker Park in the early twilight of an unseasonably temperate evening.

"Would you like to take a dip in the water?" John asked, gesturing at the slow running river that made the park such an appealing summer destination.

"No, thank you," the beaver countered. "I do not care for warm water."

"Makes sense," John acceded, filing that fact into his increasing reservoir of beaver knowledge. "I think I'll dip my toes in."

"No, John," the beaver gripped the back of John's neck. "Get me away from them!"

"Ow, who is them?", John inquired, pulling the beaver's razor sharp claws from his flesh. Looking around, he noticed several dogs in a fifty foot radius splashing in the water or chasing

frisbees and generally not giving any notice to John or his now quivering backpack. Still, there would be no coaxing the beaver out anywhere near here. so John hiked up the small hill to an alcove with a bench.

Oh, dear. There was a human being there. "Mr. Snuffles, there's already a man sitting on the bench.", and John was not lying. An elderly man in teal denim shorts and a Save the Earth t-shirt wrapped over his paunch sat on far edge side of the bench, legs crossed, facing away from John.

"Good. Not exactly the finest specimen of humanity, but it will do."

"It's a one person bench," John insisted.

"No, it's not. We came out here to have human interaction and we've found it. Now sit."

John took off his backpack and edged towards the bench, shielding the beaver carrier from sight, although Mr. Snuffles had retracted into its vinyl interior. Sitting on the bench, John mirrored the older man, orienting his body away from the center of the bench. He placed the beaver sack on the ground and bent over, hissing near its opening, "Mr. Snuffles, what do I do now?"

"Beat your chest and fling your feces to assert dominance!," the beaver responded. John looked around for poo to throw before Mr. Snuffles continued, "Talk to the old fart. He's a treasure trove; a lifetime of wisdom or, more likely, failures." It was hard for John to argue with this logic. John cleared his throat. "Ah-he-he-he-hem." The older man did not react. John stretched his arms and legs out, hoping to catch the stranger's eye. Still nothing.

"Wonderful weather we're having," John said.

"Hmm?", the older man finally responded. He glanced at John as if that would produce comprehension. "Yes, I suppose it is." He turned back to look at nothing.

"Just out in the park to blow the stink off of you?", John wheedled, hoping the man would save him from having to think of more introductory questions. Instead, he just sat there. John slumped on the bench, defeated.

"Waiting for friends?", the man said.

"Who, me?", John deflected. "Why should I be waiting for friends here?"

The old man made a quarter turn towards him, "why else would you be disturbing me on my bench...if you weren't waiting for some friends?"

"I...I just thought it was a...a good bench," John said.

"Just as well, I had friends once," the old man snorted, "not worth the effort."

John slunk down again, as the stranger continued to stare ahead. No movement had come from the backpack for a few moments and John wondered if the beaver had fallen asleep, or maybe died. His mind turned to how to dispose of a beaver carcass. Could he toss the backpack? No, the pink dragon with googly eyes on the back was too distinctive and too many witnesses could tie him to it.

"I say friends," the old man started again. "I guess if they were my friends they would still be here."

John looked back at the old man, then back to the backpack, then to the park trail heading away from the bench alcove. He leaned forward towards the man, hoping he looked interested and that he would continue without prompting.

"Nah, I guess we weren't friends, but, at the time, I thought it was more than that."

"What were you then?", John asked.

The man smiled at John. "Well it wasn't anything official. It wasn't a club with a secret password or handshake. But we had big dreams! Big dreams? I sound like a cocktail waitress. But we had plans, goals, aspirations! We were going to change the world!"

"How?", John breathed.

The man waved the question away. "Does it matter? It's the same old, same old."

"So what happened," John asked.

"The world changed us." The man frowned, no doubt disgusted by his own campness. John put on what he thought was an interested expression. The stranger wiped his brow. John looked at the trail running away again. "The world looked so different. I'm sure you've heard all this nonsense before about youth before, but you don't understand it until later. We had all the answers. Man, we knew what the world was and how to change it. All you have to do is let the right people make the decisions and you can solve any problem. As long as our voice was heard, society would change for the better."

"But you didn't succeed?", John interrupted.

"Succeed?!", the old man barked.

"You didn't get your voice heard?", John suggested.

The man grimaced. "Oh, we got our voice heard. Loudly and often. We hollered so loud we got sick of it ourselves."

"We yelled and we yelled, but there were so many other voices. Everyone would yell, let's go! and then half the people would yell let's go east and the other half would yell let's go right. And then it was all bedlam."

"Did you try to talk it out and convince them?", John asked.

"We weren't there to talk! We had the answers! Anyone who was trying to stop us was either stupid or evil."

John nodded.

"A lot of them we dismissed. Tools and sheep and slaves to The Man, we called them. But every once in a while I would yell in someone's face and they would yell right back. And I would call them morons and puppets and they would call me the same names. I couldn't call them all idiots and cheats. Some of them I respected, but they didn't see things the way I did."

"Eventually we just petered out...got tired or bored. It's a rough life being a revolutionary with no revolution."

"So you failed.", John said.

The man's grimace softened into a smile. "No, I don't think we failed because that would mean we could have succeeded. I guess what I'm trying to say is that the world is a lot more complicated than you give it credit for."

"So what happened to all of these people?", John asked.

"We dropped off one by one. Most just tried to carve out a little place for themselves, like me, went back to "normal lives". Some still are at it though. In fact, I think some still come to this very park. Maybe you could find them and try them out," the man laughed.

"No thanks, I think I'm fine," John replied.

"Well these old bones are getting stiff," the old man said standing. "Thanks for listening to an old coot." and with that he ambled away down the path.

John pulled the backpack to his feet and bent over. The furry ball inside expanded as John unzipped the backpack.

“WOOOOF!”, Mr. Snuffles exhaled as his head broke free of the nylon. “Hot in there!”

“Did you catch all of that conversation?”, John asked him.

The beaver continued to pant. “I caught enough.”

“What did you think?”

“I think we will be coming back here. But first we need food.”

Chapter 9

“Do not poop in my backpack.”

Mr. Snuffles greeted John on his return from work the next day with the announcement that they were returning to the park. He had, somehow, conducted some research while John was away and had turned up some promising leads. The pink backpack had received more mileage than John had expected.

“Don’t worry, John; talking to you makes me constipated.”

John could tell that even after just one trip Mr. Snuffles shared his hatred of the park. Apart from the the dogs, every patch of grass teemed with masses of humanity. Children misdiagnosed as not having ADHD pranced with disturbing exuberance. Sickening displays of affection.

And of course the pigeons. If crows are the harbingers of woe, then surely pigeons are the poopsacks of stupidity. Perhaps this is why John came here to sulk; so much material for misanthropy.

“Over there.” Snuffles indicated with his paw, guiding John through the throngs toward a gap in the treeline. Entering a clearing, John spied a huddled gathering.

The throng appeared mostly young and not poor, but they were not dressed as though they had anything particularly important to do or anywhere to be. Not that they had the stupid brands that hipster wannabes wear either. John half wondered if these were communists. He had never seen a communist before.

A young man at the head of the crowd gestured wildly, trying, with marginal success, to (pardon the cliché) ‘whip them into a frenzy’.

“ They were here first! Long before fish had crawled out of the primordial muck, plants ruled the land in peaceful harmony!” The crowd gave a half-hearted roar. “Then came the vicious tyranny of Kingdom Animalia- and was the birthright of the grass and tree became the dunghill of insects! (The crowd jeered), arthropods (boos) and most devilish of them all- Phylum Chordata (even louder boos)!”

“What is this I don’t even- .”

“Quite possibly the most retarded thing you’ve ever heard in your life?”

“Yeah I think that about sums it up.”

Snuffles nodded sagely, then added some oregano for flavor. “They were once like you- so young, so full of promise...you know. Morons.” Snuffles ignored John’s reaction. “They were better educated- biology graduate students mostly. The world made sense and they were happy. Then the one in the middle there, Casper Spohn, started thinking.”

“That was his first mistake,” John chuckled.

A spasm of annoyance contorted Snuffle's face, but he moved on: "As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted- He started to question the whole social order, if you can call it that, of organisms. He freed his mind from the arbitrary restraints of the evolutionary hierarchy and glimpsed the true order of things."

"Unfortunately, underneath all those layers of study, social refinement and carefully honed technical skills, Casper Spohn was a fucking idiot."

And thus the Tree Party was formed to emancipate plants from the oppression of Kingdom Animalia."

John stared blankly at the spectacle. Many of his superiors at the zoo had university educations and even the most duncey of them put it to better use. His eyes burned with anger. Heresy.. If he had a B. A. in Natural Science he would put it to far better use, and yet here were these privileged nincompoops squandering their gifts spouting drivel. It was like smashing a Faberge egg filled with confetti on someone's head.

"What's the matter, John?", Snuffles purred. "I thought you wanted everyone to think for themselves? Wouldn't it be great if everyone had the bravery to make their own values? Why look at that guy- he's awesome."

A distance from the crowd, a totally naked man reclined on the grass, oblivious to the hubbub.

"Go talk to him." Snuffles ordered.

"I think I'd rather eat glass."

A sharp pair of teeth on the neck commanded obedience.

John shuffled sideways to the nude man. "Hi there, " John smiled weakly trying to, not too obviously, avert his eyes.

"Yo," the man replied.

"May I ask why you are naked?" John ventured.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Yes, of course. Well, no, not really."

"Clothes symbolize the shackles of society which I have thrown off," the nude man explained.

John remembered from some zoo exhibit placard that some societies didn't wear clothes, but thought better than to mention it. "You, uh, aren't with them?" gesturing to the clothed crowd, which it seemed had tuckered itself out and was gorging on a purely carnivorous diet.

"Those eggheads?", the nude man said with a small sneer. "They're ok, I guess."

"So you don't worship plants?"

"Well no." the naked man replied thinking. "And yes. But not for the same reasons that these guys do," he clarified. "I was Casper's lab partner in grad school when he started...thinking outside the box..let's call it. And you see where that led him," he gestured to the crowd, who were now gorging on an all meat buffet.

"He came to our study group, ecstatic over his revelations everyone was so eager to help him put his plans in motion- only I saw what was really happening."

"What?!", John leaned forward then swiftly back a safe distance.

"Casper saw the system for what it was- a means of control. But he just reinvented the

same system. He's rearranged the details a it, but the result is the same: artificial restraints. Instead of plants subordinate to animals, he wants to make animals subordinate to plants. Not much of a difference in the end. Pick your poison. So I hang around this bunch but I don't drink their kool-aid."

John had to admit that despite how totally batshit ludicrous these propositions were, the nude man had a point.

"No restraints? So what do you believe in?"

"Nothing. And anything. Make your own rules man."

John nodded contemplatively. "What rules have you made?"

"None worth following, why the hell do you think I stay with these schmucks?"

The nude man rolled over and flatulated loudly, indicating the end of the conversation.

"Wasn't that just illuminating?" Snuffles opined.

"I hate you," John spat. He turned back, heading for the treeline.

"Woah there, partner. We're not done yet!" Mr. Snuffles announced.

John did not stop. "I'm not talking to any more of those nutsos."

"No more of them, I promise." Snuffles purred.

John stopped. "Ok, who then?"

"Turn around and go left," the beaver directed.

John followed the edge of the clearing until he found another muddy trail. Stumbling down it, he came to a trickling stream. A hunched figure dressed in rags squatted on a rock, splashing its hands in the water like a racoon.

John turned his head to his shoulder where Mr. Snuffle's perched his chin. "You're trying to get me murdered by hoboes, aren't you?"

The beaver scowled. "You know nothing of the Hobo people, John. That isn't even a hobo. Now get closer and let me do the talking."

John tramped to stream. The form shifted, orienting towards the duo. It pulled up the makeshift hood covering its face, revealing a leathery female visage. "Victor? Is that you?"

"It is I, Maria!", Snuffles called back.

"Victor?!" John exclaimed.

"Just go with it." Mr. Snuffles whispered.

"I see you've moved up in the world," the crone cackled, shuffling forward.

"Har, har. We've come for information," Snuffles stated.

"Information? I have none! I live in a dirty stream," she insisted.

"Yes you do," Snuffles shot back. "We just want to know about Casper Spohn."

The woman turned her back to John. "I suppose that's my fate now," she yelped. "To make amends for my sins."

John thought the whole thing melodramatic. He also found it unnerving that the crazy hobo lady had not even looked at him. He remembered the beaver's command, though, and remained silent.

"There, there," Mr. Snuffles said, rolling his eyes at the sniveling woman.

She finally swiveled back, wiping mucus away from her face. "What is that you want to know?"

"Just tell your story, yadda yadda yadda." Mr. Snuffles instructed.

The old woman loped over to a tree where she leaned against its trunk. "All my fault...all my fault..."

"Did you see that gathering coming through the park?," the woman looked at John for the first time. "I know what you must be thinking. Their message is very alluring. It sounds so appealing, their vision of a utopia." John blinked.

"Don't be seduced by their arguments, no matter how reasonable they may seem," she said, wagging her finger. "It's all gone awry, horribly astray! and there's no one to blame but myself."

John squatted and crept forward. "How?" he whispered.

"It was my fault," the woman sniffled. "I was Casper's professor at the University. He helped me in the laboratory. Several of them did. I told them about how mankind was a greedy parasite that preyed on the rest of the planet. I told them we should rise up to protect the plants and animals."

"That sounds perfectly reasonable," John said.

"I know right?," she said, looking up at John. "I went about it all wrong, though. All wrong. I should have trained them to be patient, to work consistently to spread their ideas. Most of all I should have taught them patience, to work slowly through their conclusions. It's my fault. I set a bad example."

"Aren't they doing what you taught them to do?," John asked.

"Yes, yes they are. I taught them to love nature and love it they do. Unfortunately, they don't understand it. They, they turned against me", the woman bawled. "Casper announced that he had come to the conclusion that our revolution needed to go farther. That we destroy the animal collaborators as well as humanity. When I objected, he called me an animalist kulak and drove me from the society."

"How...how sad.," John stammered. The woman fell over, her head in the dirt, sobbing.

"Leave her, she is broken," Mr. Snuffles commanded and pointed the way out of the clearing.

John sat on the edge of what used to be his bed, flipping encroaching books away. The day's conversations ruminated in his mind as he unpacked the Ecuadorian salad he had snagged from a food truck (Snuffles did not come). His stomach was ruminating pretty hard as well.

Sating his initial hunger he glanced at Mr. Snuffles, who was nibbling suspiciously at some potatoes. "So that was the seamy underside of revolution," he tittered.

"As it were," the beaver replied for the sake of replying.

"I never thought that well meaning people could create such an abomination. I mean those guys were bonkers," John said. He paused. "They were pretty smart too. Smarter than me."

Snuffles scrunched up his nose, still holding onto a nugget of potato. "I thought you wanted to wave the iron rod of your intellect to improve yourself and society? You were so adamant that if you were just allowed to do that everything would be peachy, "

"Oh I do want that!...but maybe not everyone should." He pursed his lips.

Mr. Snuffles narrowed his eyes. "That's not very democratic of you."

"Ideas are not democratic," John pronounced.

"Oh aren't they? You seemed pretty buddy-buddy with Mr. No-clothes."

"Well, he made more sense than the plant-heads, I'll give him that."

"Yeah, the James Dean method, how did that work out for him? There's no rules, what do you do next?"

"I have to be careful," John said. "If I can't find anything to replace them with I get to hang out with Mr. Naked and sit around in the park doing nothing."

"He wasn't all bad." Mr. Snuffles purred. "He didn't fill the hole with a crappy replacement."

John chewed on the inside of his cheek. "I'm not sure that isn't worse: I think I'd respect someone who believed in something, even if they just picked it at random, more than someone who decided to believe in nothing. Really he was worse because he hung out with those guys even though he didn't believe in what they stood for. He was just flavorless and picked up the ideas of whatever happened to be floating around him, like fat."

"So any belief is better than no belief."

"No, I didn't say that," John insisted. "You just have to be careful. "

"Sage advice, John. Why am I even here, you don't need me at all."

"Shut up , beaver. I am saying, I am saying that you just need to slow down sometimes."

"I guess I can't argue with that," the beaver choked out from behind potato.

John sighed. "So what crazy people are you going to introduce to me next? And should I buy life insurance."

"Pah!," Mr. Snuffles puffed. "You were safer with those lunatics than you were attending to the elephants and boa constrictors or what have you. And I wouldn't hold it against some snake for eating you."

"Your friendship means a lot to me too," John sneered.

"We do have a busy schedule ahead of us, though, but it will require leaving the city. When can you get time off from your work?"

"Leave the city?," John sputtered. "Can't we stay here. And have adventures in our imagination?"

"Nah, I prefer to teach by example," the beaver explained, " and I don't have many contacts in Austin- I was forcibly transported here, if you remember. Don't worry, though. We'll only have to go to some neighboring cities. I don't relish the idea of trying to fly on a commercial airplane. I usually travel by private jet. So get some time off and we'll go from there. Meanwhile, you can take the next week or so to mull over your experiences. I'm going to sleep."

John had never taken a vacation before. He had never even asked about it. He would have to ask Warden Brunder. John contemplated stepping into traffic instead.

"John," Mr. Snuffles called to John, who was still sitting on his bed. "While you're up, can you get the light?"

"Sure," John replied.

"So he's complaining to me that the models were too fat because they didn't slit between models and controllers properly," Gerald said to John. "I say that's what happens when you try to turn a tool for rapid prototyping into a full-fledged application." John nodded in agreement. Gerald worked in IT, which John was pretty sure meant Internet Trouble. Nobody had explained it to him. There were sliding trays down an aluminum counter, in line for burritos- rice and meat tubes as thick as your neck wrapped in aluminum foil tissue paper.. Mikey glanced at his phone, either checking for missed calls or calculating how much longer he would have to listen to Gerald.

"Then he just complains that that's the timeframe management gave them." Gerald banged his tray down on the table. "You know what I'm talking about, John. You must deal with the same garbage at the zoo." John tilted his head and shrugged. Gerald glanced at Mikey, who's burrito demanded his full attention.

John ripped his burrito in half, shoveling half of the cilantro infused rice out of the tortilla and removing the offending balsamic vinegar red onions. "Luckily I only have to deal with the animal's shit most of the time!" John laughed. Mikey glared at John, swallowing.

"These management types only care about their own problems," Gerald said.

John chewed on the nugget of beef he had separated from the rice and tortilla in his mouth. "That's reminds me of that joke," he said, coming up for air, pushing the ball of partially digested ricemeat to one side of his mouth. "You know, if the world was run by programmers this is how it would be."

"I don't know about the world, but if I had total control of my programming, instead of having to take commands from ignorant marketers and inept management, I would make the most elegant applications. "

Mikey snorted and sat forward. "Listen, I have to deal with techies sometimes when we're trying to fix a light stop or digging around the power grid. I know you want to make your little machines in way that works for you and it's a model of machine efficiency, but, come on, you don't take real people into consideration. Like when you have me waiting at a red light for 10 minutes.'

"Models suggest that less frequent light switches are more efficient," Gerald said.

"Yeah, but it is freaking annoying to be late to work when I'm stuck forever at a light a block from work."

"You should get up earlier. And if the utilities ran the city, we wouldn't have roads, we'd just drive over endless manholes," Gerald drained his Mexican lemonade.

"That's the difference though." Mikey said. "I know that things need to be fixed after they're built. Unlike you, who makes a huge deal about changing one little thing!"

"It is a big deal!," Gerald yelled.

"If I were in charge of the zoo," John said. "If I were in charge of the zoo, There would be no hot dog or icecream stands."

"Wait, why no icecream," Mikey asked.

"Too much litter," John answered.

"Understandable," Gerald said.

"No bathrooms either. And no guard rails. You fall in, that's your problem. Of course, they won't be necessary because nobody will be allowed into the zoo. Ahh, the perfect zoo."

Gerald raised his now empty glass. "I hope your dream comes true someday, my friend." his beeper went off. "Dear me, I have to go. See y'all later."

"Bye," they chorused. John gathered his ephemera, preparing to leave.

"Hey, John," Mikey said. "Can I ask you a favor?"

John froze. "Shore you can ask."

"See, my cousin is coming in to town this Saturday. He's from New York. And I haven't really talked to him in a while, and I'm not really great with conversations and you always seem to enjoy talking to new people. It's just for a few hours, while he's waiting for his flight We'll hole up somewhere and have some drinks on me"

"Sure, Mikey. I'll come and talk to your cousin"

"Thanks, John. He's freaking weird."

With all the turmoils, what John needed was distraction.

Mikey needed a distraction too. Mikey and his cousin from Up North, John gathered, had about as much in common as a psychiatrist and a psychologist: The names look similar but one of them has pills.

They met on Robert Louis Stevenson Drive, a road aptly named because it meandered through half of the city, changing directions three times. This particular block housed cheap dining establishments for those unfortunate enough to work or study near the city center.

"Robert Sausage", the cousin introduced himself. "Pleased to meet you.", he said, and he was not lying. A big banana-grin spread across his face, as he strangled John's offered hand.

"Uh, hi, I'm John."

"So what's the plan boys?" Robert asked, putting his hands on his knees and leaning in close between John and Mikey.

"We'll need alcohol," John said.

"Yep," said Mikey.

Going to a bar at 11 a.m. had its benefits. Good seating, excellent lighting, and no cardigan wearing nincompoops that John would have to compare himself to. Although, they did have to weave their way through many of them and their female fake fur boot wearing counterparts who were making their morning migration to The University.

"This is fun," Mikey said in a tone that did not suggest fun at all as he dropped 3 frothy mugs onto the table. Did I mention the excellent seating? German settlers had a substantial influence on Austin culture, and, in the tradition of the biergarten, this bar offered a small deck with wooden picnic tables and yellow nylon umbrellas. John and Mikey eyed each other. Robert eyed everyone. Not since they had shaken hands had the corners of his mouth descended from their perch about his ears. His eyes roved from Mikey, who stared suspiciously at his micro-brew, to John. John smiled back until, unnerved, he glanced around at nothing. If their lack of mirth disappointed Robert, he made no sign of it, content to smile and stare, stare and smile.

"So...Robert...What is it exactly that you do?" John ventured.

"Newspapers, my good man, newspapers. All the news that we see fit to print."

"And what exactly do you do in the newspaper business," John asked.

"I am the editor of the politics section of the Metropolitan Tribune," Robert replied, like he might have said he bussed tables at a pancake restaurant.

John did not pay much attention to politics. He had voted once, but as it produced no discernible effect on his life he suspended the practice. He looked over to Mikey, who was hiding his face behind the amber prism of his mug.

John considered how to liven up the conversation. He could rib Mikey about whether or not he read his cousin's section, but Mikey's pained expression indicated that now was not the time. Not in the middle of a crisis of this magnitude. Nonetheless, John chuckled at the thought. He looked at the lemon salt shakers for inspiration. John knew that you should not discuss politics, religion or anything else of importance in light conversation. Still, you could make jokes and observational humor about such things. John understood that many television shows from the Northeast employed this gag. Surely Robert would enjoy such things. He had heard a really good priest and a rabbi joke earlier that week, but he lacked comedic timing and he knew it. Better play it safe.

"How about these politics, eh?," John said. He waved his elbow at Mikey.

Robert furrowed his eyebrows, but kept smiling. "What about politics?"

John was not ready for the trick question. "You, uh, write about it."

"Yes," Robert said. "Mostly I edit and direct the other writers, but sometimes I write."

"And you, uh, know a lot about it?" John continued. Mikey snorted into his beer.

"What's funny? Is something funny?" Robert's smile dropped into frown. That could not be a good sign, John thought.

"I was just saying," John said. "I was just saying, it seems like a mess."

Robert froze. The banana-grin reappeared. It stretched up his cheeks until it became a plantain. "I know. Isn't it wonderful?"

John leaned back in his plastic chair. "I don't know. I guess it gives you plenty to write about."

Robert Sausage leaned forward. "Don't you see though? It's all by design."

John blinked. "You're saying that it's by design that politics are a mess?"

"Precisely," Robert rubbed his hands together. "How would you describe politics at the capitol? Intractable? Deadlocked? Quagmire-like?"

John knew a few of those words. "I would say they are progress-less-ness. They are in a state of progresslessness. There's not, there's no progress."

"And why is it that there is no progress? What is it that they are not progressing in?" Robert's enthusiasm reminded John of Mr. Snuffles. It was a little scary.

"I don't know. It just always seems that they are shouting the same things at each other and their arguments never really get any where."

Robert beamed. "And here I expected to find no one but morons in this place. Mikey, I applaud you on your excellent choice of friends."

Mikey put down an empty glass stein next to the others, making it four in a row. He belched. "I sure can pick'em."

Robert turned back to John. "Have you ever had an argument with your mother or father

or maybe a girlfriend where you could continue an argument but that would just damage your relationship, so you break off the argument?"

John could not recall an argument with his parents. He may have said a harsh word about his mother's zucchini bread. He lacked a crucial requirement for altercations with a significant other. He had seen some arguments on television shows though. The same kind he suspected Robert watched. The fights always seemed pointless and silly, revolving around comical miscommunication and overblown situations. That must be what Robert is talking about.

"Yes, I know what you mean," John said, putting on a knowing expression.

"Good." Robert smiled. "It's the same thing. If we were to simply allow our political argument to progress, we would find that we simply could not resolve our issues, that they run too deeply. This would result in political breakdown, civil war." Robert picked up his stein and took a draught.

"But that hasn't happened." John observed.

"Mmm," Robert grunted behind the liquid. "That's the genius," he said, putting down the mug. "We have agreed to not let it get that far. And we do this by agreeing to not to talk about anything important."

John was in mid-pull when Robert said this, but he stopped the flow of beer so that he could pretend his throat was busy while his brain caught up. He plopped the mug down on the picnic table and wiped his mouth with a long flourish. "Budget cuts and national debt aren't important? I don't subscribe to any newspaper, but I'm pretty sure they discuss those from time to time."

In response, Robert put his forearm on the table and grinned the most measured smile of all the ones he had yet grinned. "Details, details. Most importantly- practical details."

"Practical details," John repeated.

Robert slouched back away from the table, like he was sitting on a plush red chair.. "People will kill and die for their ideals, John." He glanced at the ever sinking Mikey. "Well some people will. But nobody would die for, say, whether to raise or lower the federal interest rate. Get some Keynesians and some followers of Hayek at a punch social and there might be a punch or two thrown." He tittered. "And when was the last time anyone discussed THAT! And those are themselves practical means to an end. Ends, mister...my dear John, the discussion of ends is what we avoid." Robert finished his lone beer.

John gripped his mug handle on the table. What possessed this stranger to launch into a manifesto? Could Snuffles have set him up? Robert looked the type. His eyes were the like the hobo woman in the park's, ranging about until they locked in on something. What he said sounded important, but John could not grasp how it related to him. "And how do we do that?," John said, finally remembering the last thing Robert had said. "Avoid the ends."

Robert blinked at him. "By focusing on the practical, of course. We focus solely on the practical and discourage the discussion of ends. That sort of talk is for fundamentalists. It's all crystal clear." Robert whipped out his mobile phone and inspected it for a moment. "It seems our time is up. I need to get to the airport." Robert gave a final look at Mikey, with his chin at nearly table level. "I'll take a cab." He threw down a bill as he collected his things.

John pushed the mugs together to look busy.

"There are a few side effects, you could call them," Robert said, stuffing his wallet pack

into his pocket. "Since the ends don't quite meet, if you'll pardon the expression, there is a measure of incomprehensibility between the two factions. Consequently, there could be a tendency to petty factionalism and, well, name-calling. It seems like a small price to pay, though. Don't you think?"

John counted the number of beer coasters in front of him. Only two. He tried to deduce how many beers he would have had to have drunk in order to only count two. More than two.

Sensing John's preoccupation, Robert Sausage waved and walked into the bar. Mikey's head thumped into the wooden picnic table. It was a quarter til noon.

Chapter 11

"You did what?!" the beaver yelled.

"I know," John admitted. "It was early, but I have the rest of the day to work off that beer. You didn't have anything planned did you?"

Mr. Snuffles flung his styrofoam lunch container full of ramen, something he did with some regularity, at John, but, of course, it only went a few feet because of air resistance. "I could give two flips about the beer. Frankly, I'm sad you didn't bring me any! Because I need it after hearing that you were cavorting with ROBERT KLOBASE SAUSAGE!"

John scrunched up his eyebrows. "You know him?"

"That's none of your damn business," the beaver said. "The point is you engaged in an unauthorized conversation and may have jeopardized the entire operation!" Mr. Snuffles put his hands up to his ears. "OK, the best thing to do now is just forget whatever happened. Whatever you talked about, just don't think about it!"

John shrugged. "I'm not gonna lie, I'm not really sure what he was talking about. He kept saying something about ends, but I don't know what ends he was talking about? The end of an era? the end of days? end of the road?..."

"I said don't think about it!" The beaver picked ramen from the carpet while John sat.

"Did you schedule your time off?," the beaver said.

"Yes. I assume it went through. Nobody has said anything to me about it."

"And it's for two weeks?"

"Yes."

"Good. I have almost completed our itinerary." Mr. Snuffles produced a black moleskine notebook from somewhere in the folds of his fur. "Let's see now," the beaver said, thumbing through the pages. "We will depart a week from today and our first destination will be Dallas."

"Why Dallas?", John asked.

"Because that's where my contacts are right now."

"You sure do get around a lot for a beaver."

"Not really. I just station myself at prime traffic channels and hoard acquaintances and information. It must arise from some vestigial damming instinct."

"That makes sense." John had read about the sophisticated methods beavers used to build their dams when researching for the beavaquarium, the jewel of the Australia Exhibit cul-de-sac, but the actual construction only entailed John and Rigoberto dropping a large pile of sticks in the submerged end of the exhibit.

Satisfied, with his examination of the itinerary, Snuffles put away the notebook. He eyed John. "I think I'm going to send you on a field trip. We have nothing left to do before we leave, conversation-wise, so I want to give you a little break. To relax, prepare and clear your mind. You've earned it."

"Cool," John said. "Where are you sending me?"

"To The University, of course."

Bollocks. John brought his metro pass to take the rail, he brought change in case he wanted to buy a pretzel. He even checked with the damnable Carl Weathers to see whether or not he should take an umbrella. He had accounted for every contingency on his way to the University.

What he hadn't accounted for, however, was Gruntha Hildnerman manning the night desk.

"Excuse me, sir. May I see your student I.D.. You're not allowed in after hours without your I.D."

"I.D.? Oh, I must have left it in my car. Let me go get it."

So he stood out on the sidewalk in the drizzle (damn you, Carl Weathers), watching the students laugh gaily as they discussed what must be some scintillating metaphysical epiphany. Mr. Snuffles had told him to go sit in a common room and

"Well poop." John fidgeted in his soggy sneakers and surveyed the area. Oh look, a conveniently located establishment of alcoholic beverages. No sense in wasting a trip.

The interior of the bar lacked high visibility, despite the ban on smoking. Light from amber prisms spilled out onto the tables. John sat at the end of the bar and ordered a beer, hoping they wouldn't card him. The only state issued I.D. he had on him was his animal handling license and he wasn't sure they would accept that.

John nursed his third cheap, domestic beer, fuming at himself and the world. Wet, cold air gusted into the room as the door opened. Two young men, too old to be undergraduates, lurched in together. By their proximity, they were either very close friends or this was not their first stop tonight.

'Let me tell you something, man,' the one on the left said to the one on the right. 'I...I respect you. I want you to know that I respect you, man.'

The one on the right grimaced and smiled, hiding his face with his free hand. They stumbled to the bar. Momentum brought one to the far side of John while the other collided with the stool next to John. Sighing heavily, the duo leaned over the bar and fell silent.

John, dully aware of the flanking strangers, focused instead on his drink and what was in front of him. Mounted on the wall among bottles of liquor, a bronze plaque read *In Vino Veritas*. John scowled. He was getting tired of all these signs being in Spanish.

John heard raspy whispers and then snickers. They were talking behind his back. Literally. He turned to face them, but they artlessly resumed their positions, grinning like idiots.

"Ooooooh, kaaaay." John turned towards the door, preparing to make his exit. An hand took hold of his arm.

"Excuse me, sir." The one on the left said in a pompous accent. "Are you aware that you are not fulfilling your maximum potential?" He leaned in closer. "You are in grave danger of squandering your life!"

The nerve of this guy! "Well, duh," John retorted, "You think I didn't know that? What do you think I'm doing here?"

"Ah, ok, then. The stranger released John's arm and went back to primly sipping his beer.

John thought to make a break for it, but he had come all the way over here. He could stand a little more crazy.

He sat back down at the bar. A swig of beer disguised a quick inspection of the two strangers. The one on the right had his forehead on the bar edge and his eyes stared downwards unblinkingly.

John mulled over the best way to approach this. One wrong word could waste the opportunity. It wasn't that often that John asked someone to reveal the mysteries of the universe.

"Er...excuse me," he ventured. "What exactly do you mean by 'squandering my life'?"

The one on the left stopped drinking, placed his beer on the counter emitted a loud belch. Turning to John he said "It's quite simple, really." He paused. "Well, actually, it's not simple at all." He resumed his beer sipping. "I supposed you'd have to ask yourself, what's the best thing or something of that nature."

John's mind froze. Damn it. He knew he should have studied. Rookie mistake. What's the best thing? Money and hos? Wait, that's from rap music. What would Plato say?

"Um, goodness." Jeez, John, is that the best you can do?

"What do you mean?", the one on the right spoke for the first time.

"What do you mean?," John wasn't sure his gambit actually made sense, but he needed to stall for time.

"You're the one that said it. What is it that you mean by 'goodness' and how is that the best thing?"

"Obviously goodness is the best thing because it's...good." That sounded better in John's mind before he said it. The right one knocked his head on the bar in exasperation.

"Let's look at this another way," the left one interrupted. "How is this 'goodness' brought about? Is it in doing good things or more in some quality of being?"

The blank look on John's face persisted.

The left one furrowed his brow. "Hmm, how else to put this?" Then, after a moment asked, "What would make you say that a person is good?"

John jumped at that. "I'd say they were good if I saw them doing good things." His chest swelled at contributing something to the conversation.

"So it's just the action that's important?," the right one queried.

John paused. "Yes."

The right one smiled. "If you were walking down the street one day and saw a man give a homeless person ten dollars. Would you say that is good?"

"Yes," John nodded.

"Now what if the man was walking with a woman with whom he was going on a first

date? How would you interpret that action?"

John's face fell. "I might think he didn't do it for a very noble reason."

"Or what if you meant to tip a waiter ten dollars but accidentally gave him 100 dollars?"

"Ok, ok, I get it!" John's face burned in defeat. This felt like some sort of trick. The right one knew what he meant, he was just being difficult.

"Ok, it's just not the action itself. But if the person means to do it and does it for a good reason, then it's good."

John winced, expecting a barb, but, to his surprise, the right one just stared ahead.

The left one finally finished draining his drink. "Pshah. Now that hit the spot. -s." He cocked his head towards John. "But there's just one thing that confuses me." He took a deep breath.

"Sooo- what's confusing," John asked.

"Oh right," the left one snapped up. "Mmhmhmhmhm. Where was I? Ah, yes. So this hypothetical person. This good he's after, whatever it is, is he going after it because it's good for him? Or because it's good. In the same way that people say that you should do something because it's right or just, we ought to do good." He took another sip. "I know that's not a very good description, but bear with me."

"Oh, no," John assured him. "I think I know what you mean. You mean, does the person do good because that's what ultimately will be best for him or because it's good itself Is that right? (The left one nodded.)" John furrowed his brow. He was about to use some big words. "I'm not sure you can separate the two completely. Even if someone did something out of a sense piety and not for any good for himself, however indirect, he's still trying to adhere to what he perceives as the proper cosmic order."

"True, true," the left one agreed. "Though this good may not be strictly cosmic. Remembering to use the small fork for your salad is good in the sense that it prevents social discomfort, but it's not a universal good."

John chuckled. He never remembered that.

"Or marrying multiple wives, for that matter," the right one chimed in.

"Yeah, that too. But suppose there was a person who thought he was doing good but wound up doing bad things?" the left one proposed.

"I might say there were pretty stupid," John laughed, "and not doing good, but I don't think I'd say they were bad."

"I don't know about that." The right one pushed himself upright, looking green. "If he accidentally delivers venomous snakes to a YMCA and puppies to the zoo, then, yes, he's just an idiot. What about the gangster who does a drive by on another gangster because he 'disrespected' him. Isn't he doing good according to his warped sense of honor? I don't know how you distinguish 'evil' from 'stupid' in that scenario."

"So, we don't just have to try to do good, we have to know what it is?", John suggested. "But how do we learn?"

"By education, obviously. Though I'm not sure sending criminals to college is the solution, is it?," the left one winked at John.

"It is an education, though." The right said, looking greener still. "What sort of education did that gangster receive? A good one from bad teachers. But it didn't have anything to do with

his times tables or verb- hiccup- conjugations.”

“I guess that means he had terrible parents and friends. My parents taught me enough to not do drive-bys (Even though Mikey does disrespect me a lot.), but who teaches me about other things?”

The left one frowned, “what other things?”

John shrugged. “I don’t know, important things?”

“Oh that’s easy!,” the right one volunteered, and then lurched from his stool away from the counter, evidently rushing to the bathroom.

“Well, friend,” the left one said, finishing his beer. “I’d better go see...”. He staggered away after the right one, leaving John alone.

Chapter 12

John stood in the shallow rapids of the stream. The icy water swirled around his feet. Mountains loomed in the distance, dwarfing even the mighty evergreen trees that carpeted the lowlands. Crickets on the bank chirped annoyingly. Very annoyingly. God they were annoying. A salmon leapt into John’s arms, smacking him in the face with its tail. “Wake up, stupid,” it said.

John woke up. Mr. Snuffles squatted on his chest, with his tail raised to deliver another blow.

“Aaaaaaargh,” John yawned. The beaver scampered to the floor. John rolled over onto his stomach and blindly reached for the alarm. Failing to find the off switch, he pulled it off the nightstand and yanked out the cord, letting his arm fall limp to the side of the bed.

“Hey, idiot,” Mr. Snuffles yelled from the next room. “It’s time to go. We’re going to be late.”

John flung his lower body off the bed and raised himself up. His legs were still entangled in his bedsheets so he sat down. He looked at his clock, but it said nothing anymore. It was not light yet, though.

“The bus doesn’t leave until nine-o’clock- why are you in such a hurry?” John shouted.

A pink nose and two beady eyes peaked around the doorframe horizontally. “We have to be the first ones there. It’s part of the plan. Now get dressed.”

John lurched out of his bedroom, dragging his suitcase. His eyes panned the room. The beaver was nowhere to be seen. But there was a plate on the card table he used for meals. A grilled cheese. Cut into foursies. John wondered how the beaver reached the stove.

“You’ll have to take it with you,” Mr. Snuffles said. Scampering past John’s legs to the door. “Now put me in the bag.” Mr. Snuffles had insisted that John buy a more suitable means of conveyance for the beaver. John thus bought a green knapsack to replace the grotesque animal children’s backpack.

John held open the mouth of the knapsack as Mr. Snuffles backed into it. He handed the

beaver a package of cheese and peanut butter crackers and snapped the clasp closed. "Are you ready to go up?," he said.

"Yes, yes, this is much more comfortable than that nasty plastic backpack. Forward march, John! Set sail for adventure, and what have you!"

Predictably, nobody else stood on the sidewalk in the muggy dawn waiting for the bus that would not arrive for another hour, but at least John could spend it leaning against a sandstone building. The main clientele of the shuttle bus was college students, so the "stop" was adjacent to The University. Few walked the normally busy sidewalks now in the early morning. A few gymrats scraped their sandals on the concrete a block away.

"Mr. Snuffles." John sat on his suitcase and swung the green knapsack around to his knees. "I was thinking." The beaver poked his snout outside the flap inhaled the morning air. "I was just thinking," John continued.

"What about? What could you possibly be thinking about? We haven't even discussed anything important in like a week." As the beaver talked, he sprayed cheesy cracker bits out of the opening. "By the way, have you got any granola bars? Also, there are crumbs everywhere in here. Could you give it a shake?"

"People will talk," John said.

The beaver snorted again. "Fine. I will listen to your ridiculous inquiries if you save me from these confounded scratchy crumbs."

John opened the bag and turned it upside down, pinning the beaver between his palms. A cascade of orange bits pelted the sidewalk. "Ooooh, ho, ho, John," the beaver gasped. "That tickles." Righting the beaver in the bag, John deposited the bundle on the sidewalk and resumed his seat.

"Now what ignorance do you feel compelled to share with me?," the pink nose said.

John hugged his knees. "It's just what Rob- this guy I know said. Something I heard about. Look, I know you told me that I wasn't supposed to...what did you say?...dwell on bananas'?"

"Banalities."

"Right, that. No dwelling. Just keep everything in the moment. Don't go looking for a grand theory."

"Something like that," the beaver said.

"Anyway, I heard something, though, that made me wonder. Just tell me, is something going to come of this? Am I going to come out of this and is anything going to change? Or is this only ever going to be something for myself, something I think about to make myself feel better?"

Mr. Snuffles exhaled again, straining his snout against the airhole.. "John, I assure you I have an expression of rapt concern on my face, constricted as it is by this bag."

"Oh, sorry." John opened the bag.

"Ah, much better," the beaver said blinking. "You're right. I did tell you not to do that. Remember those lovely chaps in the park? They were so interested in where their thinking would take them that they jumped off the boat first chance they got. That isn't to say, though, that it's not a worthwhile question. But I suspect that this is not just something that came out of the blue. What brought that question to your mind?"

John squinted at something across the street.

"If this is about that Robert Sausage character, then I can guess what he might have said, and you're right. You have a very real choice ahead of you. Everything you've learned so far is one thing, but the modality that that man proposed to you would cast a completely different complexion on everything you know or would learn. Essentially, the goal of this hiatus is to discover how the other half lives. Your mission is simple: to decide whether or not our whole experience so far is something purely personal and specific only to your experience, not unlike your previous musings, or is it something which you can share with the world."

John's eyebrows collided like two crumpling buses not unlike the one they were about to board. "I want to answer now."

"I know you do," Snuffles interrupted. "Which is why you are not going to answer. Instead you are going to use every dull sense you have in the next two weeks to observe. Unlike all those other people you have met, you will not be hasty."

"So in Dallas, I'll meet another one of your examples?"

"An example such as you have never seen before. Now gird your loins. I am your furry Beatrice and we are entering purgatory. Also people are coming, so stop talking to the beaver and hide me."

Chapter 13

Per Mr. Snuffles' instructions, after clearing his ticket with an unnecessarily brusque bus driver, John marched to the very back of the bus. The beaver's knowledge of sociology, water buffalo migratory patterns and feng shui paid off and John found himself in sole possession of the back row. He propped up the beaver-laden knapsack on the empty seat and peeked inside. All he saw was a sphere of brown fur gently expanding and contracting and the furball issued no further commands.

When trekking across the wide expanses of Texas on Yodmacher family vacations, a young John had always packed a special bag full of dinosaur books and nature magazines. Now by practicing the adult skill of zoning out, though, he found he could while away a whole day's worth of travel simply by staring out the window. Mostly he wondered if there would be bluebonnets on the way, with only the occasional punctuation of the surly bus driver shouting at someone to be quiet. John was glad he was in the back.

There were bluebonnets on the way to Dallas. Soon the bluebonnets gave way to feeder roads and grassy medians and then the grass disappeared altogether.

The bus deposited John in the center of the city near nowhere in particular. He figured it must be a business district as he was surrounded by many tall office buildings. He looked down the corridor of the street, bound by the sea-gray glass of the dike of towers. The canal, however, was nearly empty of traffic. John approached the middle of the road and saw rutss in the pavement filled with a flat metal line.

"This must be for a tram or a trolley," John said. "Do you think they're electrified?"

"Yes, now step on them and rid us all of your miserable existence," the muffled beaver said from John's back.

John stepped forward.

"No, take me off first!," the Mr. Snuffles yelled. "No, wait, why am I telling you this? I lied. It's not electrified."

John swung the backpack to his front, nose to nose with the beaver. "Are you ok? You seem a little tense."

The beaver stared him down. "I just spent the last two hours in close proximity to some very unhappy dogs and cats in an airplane luggage compartment. I am very tired."

John bought two sandwiches, a roast beef and a vegetarian, at a corner sandwich shop. It was still late summer, but the hellish heat had let up a bit, so John thought it pleasant to sit outside and people watch.

Having found an umbrella-table in a corner where a short wrought iron gate fencing in paying customers met the dark tinted glass of the restaurant, John propped up the beaver-bag against the aluminum base of the table. He slid one of the sandwiches into the bag, but Mr. Snuffles popped his head out.

"Do you think it's safe to come out?" John asked.

"Oh dearie, me, John, you don't see the beaver-police do you?" Snuffles responded.

"I'm no stranger to sarcasm."

"No, you're a stranger to thinking before speaking. Now peel those eyeballs and tell me what you see," the beaver commanded.

John slumped in his chair and chewed his sandwich. Coming up for air, he inspected the seated mass around him. Most appeared to be on lunch break as they wore professional or semi-professional clothing. A lot of black skirts and ugly oversized gold jewelry. Out of season green and purple ties, too. Also, almost everyone was talking. Some chatted with the others at their table, but more than half gibbered into a mobile device of some sort. John reported his findings to the beaver.

"Well what are they talking about, then?" Mr. Snuffles asked.

John focused on a professional looking woman near him with the aforementioned black skirt, comically large bracelets and honey-golden hair tiered like a layer cake. She gesticulated at the empty chair in front of her while directing a stream of words at an invisible audience. A black earpiece seemed to excuse this delusion. John ducked under the table again.

"You know, I couldn't say," John admitted. "I'm pretty sure it's English, but it's just coming out so fast."

Mr. Snuffles threw an olive at his face. "Worthless. Unfortunately, the human safari is no good unless you can interact with the natives." The beaver scratched his beard.

"You mean you want me to talk to someone? I don't know if people like to be interrupted when they are eating lunch."

"Quite right, you silly man." Snuffles took an exaggerated bite out of his sandwich. "Now where can we go that people might converse with hobos- er...strangers."

John thought back to their previous misadventures. "How about a park?"

"We'll get there eventually, but we won't find anyone to talk to in a park."

"We found someone in a park in Austin," John grumbled.

"That was Austin. This is Dallas. Now think, where else. Hmmm. I've got it- a coffee shop," Mr. Snuffles announced.

John frowned. "I never saw anyone talking in a coffee shop."

"That's because you went to the wrong ones."

"Oh I know a place that has good coffee."

"Yeah, we're not going there. We're going to the place that puts whipped cream on the coffee."

"Awww," John groaned. "They stink. Anyway, where do I find this place?"

"Oh, they're everywhere," the beaver assured him. "Let's just look around."

Mr. Snuffles did not lie. They found a trendy purveyor of commercialized coffee on a corner not a block away. As John stood at the counter waiting for his Choco-Grande Coffeeshake, he took stock of the caffeinated patrons. There were a lot more of them than at his usual venue. Austin's layout clustered the degenerate lay about youths in central Austin, sparing the other regions from their beanies and bumper-sticker festooned laptops. No such luck here.

"I don't know if we're going to find anyone here." John mimicked pressing his ear as if he had an earphone on when he spoke to Mr. Snuffles so that no one would notice him talking to himself. He thought himself clever for thinking of that.

"Be patient. Go sit down."

Receiving the cold coffee, John gravitated towards the corner. He liked corners. He was protected on two sides and it gave him a measure of privacy. Not that that mattered here as everyone's elbows and laptop power cords encroached on everyone else's. John wedged himself between a table and the wall. He rotated his head around, because that was the only body part he could move, scrutinizing the crowd more closely. Anticipating the difficulties of discreetly communicating in the crowded shop, Mr. Snuffles had given John his instructions, as well as prepared some pretences to strike up a conversation. For the time being, John was on his own. The beaver, meanwhile, purred away in his spinach-alfalfa lunch bedding.

Three sets of conversations orbited John's: To the left, two young women in the universal uniform of university students- designer t-shirts and sweatpants- tapped at their laptops and bantered without making eye contact. John rejected them and turned again.

Dead in front of him, two yuppies, a man and a woman, took turns looking at some spreadsheet or other. Some problem demanded their attention and they did not look like they wished to engage in casual conversations at the moment. Besides, the dude was wearing a pocket protector on his short sleeve white collared shirt. Nerd.

John turned to the final table on his right. This table was older still, two middle aged business looking men wearing jackets sipped at plain coffees with folded arms.

They did not look like his usual interlocutors, John thought, using a smaller word than interlocutor. Then again, they have been around longer than these other groups. Maybe they have more of a feel for the spirit of the city.

"And that's what's wrong with the zeitgeist of this city."

John cocked his ears towards the source of that utterance. He knew that tone. Someone was ranting.

It came from the central yuppies. "What do you expect from a capital of materialism and self-absorption?" the woman said the man.

They were packing up their laptop and effects; John had to act fast. "Excuse me," he said, leaning, as much as he could, forward. "I'm thinking about relocating here and I was wondering if you could give me your opinion of the city." John did not think he should start the conversation by asking about the spirit of the city or whatever zeitgeist meant.

The man shrugged. "I'm sure you could find work. That's the only thing they do here. Everyone is dedicated to the acquisition of wealth and flaunting their conspicuous consumption."

"Uh huh," John said.

"Initiating a new convert, James?," the woman grinned at the man, James apparently.

James smiled back. "I just think he should know what he's getting into." Turning back to John James said, "Look around. Everyone's in their own little world. Sure they'll let you alone, but they wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire." The woman chortled.

In these cramped confines, their conversation had not gone unnoticed. The businessman in a dark suit nearest the trio made a quarter-turn towards them. John could only see half his spectacled face and half of a bristly gray mustache. "And I suppose you'd go peeing on everyone whether they asked you to or not."

James glared at the older man, "Your appeal to laissez-faire is only an excuse to maintain your own fiefdom of bigotry and oppression." John was pretty sure that was significant, especially as the businessman belted out a laugh.

"Ho, well," the older man said. "It can't be all bad since you're still here."

James shrugged. "I needed a job."

"Not that." The older man shook his head. "I mean you can denounce the whole city and nobody comes to knock your teeth out."

James sneered. "I think that's your foolishness."

The half-glasses returned the gaze. "As long as you're not hurting anyone, besides yourself of course, I don't care what you think." With that, he swiveled back to his stock page.

"I think that anything that causes discussion is good." It was one of the appallingly dressed girls to the left. Of course, everyone ignored her.

"Well that was enlightening," John said to himself.

Chapter 14

What a surprise, John found the same burrito place he frequented in Austin in Dallas. They put even more cilantro in their rice than usual. The adventuring duo walked the humid late afternoon in what seemed to be a civic area.

"You know, I was thinking," John said. He looked at Mr. Snuffles, expecting a smartass response, but the beaver had a large piece of bell pepper halfway down his throat. "About what that guy said."

"What guy?," Snuffles asked, swallowing before ripping off another chunk of pepper.

"Not the James guy, who seemed like a bit of a jerk to be honest, the other guy, the older guy. He said that he would tolerate the other guy, James, until he became dangerous."

"I have to admit, John, avocado just knocks me right out. I didn't hear a word of it," the beaver said.

"But it would be too late by then wouldn't it? Anyone can stay and will be tolerated up to the point where they can just take over? That doesn't make sense. I'm pretty sure that's what

the Nazis did.”

“Well, I guess they did Nazi that coming.” Mr. Snuffles, who had not really been listening, chimed in.

John shook his head. They had come to an expanse of wide steps. John knew what that meant: A museum or exhibit.

“Fifteen dollars? I’m not paying that. The zoo is only eight bucks and their animals are alive. Besides I don’t think I can get you in. Those ladies at the turnstiles are vicious when it comes to backpacks.”

“Cease your yammering,” Snuffles said. “We are not going inside. I just want you to spend some time in reflection and maybe a repository of knowledge will help to focus you. However tangential the relation.”

“What am I looking for? I don’t see any fruit.”

“Just observe,” the beaver said.

According to a metal plaque, this was the Some-Long-Name-John-Did-Not-Care-To-Read Museum of Natural Science. Below that, the plaque listed about 50 more names of benefactors.

“How much do you think I would have to give to get my name on this list?,” John joked. “Or maybe I could just donate one live beaver. Hey, you deserved that for the Nazi joke,” he quickly added before the beaver could strike.

“Fair enough,” Snuffles admitted. “You have to give it to the Dallasonians, they know how to make your name last after your death.”

“Why would you want to do that?,” John asked.

“So that part of you lived on, of course,” the beaver said.

“I always thought that you should live on in what you did and said.”

“A fine sentiment from someone who shovels elephant dung for a living,” the beaver smirked. “Besides, you forget where you are. You shouldn’t go around spreading your dung around too much or you’ll get it in other people’s portion.”

John let the beaver out and they sat on the steps, looking down.

“So what do you think,” Mr. Snuffles said. “Do you think you got the essence of city in one day? Or do you need another?”

“No, thank you,” John said. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure everyone is perfectly nice. It just seems like everyone is doing their own thing. Almost like everyone is ignoring everyone else, really.”

“Mmmm,” the beaver agreed.

“Although, I did like that older man better than that James character. He was not very friendly. What city is he from?”

“Oh are we assigning people cities now? How allegorical.”

“Yeah, sure whatever.”

“Hmm, let see,” Mr. Snuffles put his paws akimbo. “Oh, yes, why he belongs in your own urbs mater, Austin!”

“What? Really? I haven’t met anyone like that,” John protested.

“That’s because you have not had your eyes open. But don’t worry, we are going back there and you will have your fill of it. You are going to get your nose right up in it.”

"That sounds gross. You're gross."

John and Mr. Snuffles agreed that between sleeping in a strange motel room and listening to another psychotic bus driver harangue the passengers, the price of an airline ticket was well worth it, even adding the cost of checking a pet. Mr. Snuffles must have had contacts in the animal trafficking underworld because he had his own papers listing him as a cocker spaniel mix. The customs official took a long look at the beaver before stamping the document. They were home free. And John had an hour to read his Gentleman Zoo Keepers Quarterly in peace.

Mr. Snuffle's lack of expected resistance to pretty much anything became apparent on exiting the pet caddy. While John sat in an upright and locked position, the beaver slept through pretty much the entire process. Consequently, a bright eyed and waffle-tailed beaver waddled with energy across the threshold of John's apartment.

"Now what is next on the agenda?," Snuffles mused.

"Sleep," John muttered.

"Sleep is for the weak! And the dead! And babies!," the beaver protested.

John shuffled in place to face Mr. Snuffles. "You slept for like seventy-five percent of the trip. Shut up."

"Fine, sluggard! I'll be having a grand time without you!"

John awoke to the blaring of an alarm buzzer. "Geez, did I sleep all day and night?"

"No, haha," a malevolent voice proclaimed. "I changed your alarm."

"You jerk."

"Stop whining, you got 5 hours."

John lurched into the living area, hoping another grilled cheese awaited him. Instead he had a supper of cold cereal. "Did you do anything while I was asleep?," John asked.

The beaver rifled through some papers. "I got your mail!" He waved the envelopes at John.

"I can't read right now. Anything good?"

"Hmm, let's see," the beaver mimed reading down spectacles. "Bill, bill, pink slip, party invitation."

"What?"

"! I got fired?!" John put his forehead on the table.

Mr. Snuffles clucked his tongue. "You are so negative. Didn't you just hear? You got a party invitation."

"Let me see that."

"Dear Mr. Yodmacher,

It has come to our attention that you are not a vital part of Zoo Operations. Please refrain from resuming your post effective immediately. As labor regulations prohibit us from releasing an employee for taking owed vacation time, your wage for the remainder of the month will be mailed to you.

Hoping you are well,
Your Friends at The Zoo

"What a bunch of dill weeds. Now my vacation is ruined."

"Nonsense, you're paid through the week!," the beaver said.

"Yeah, but I need to find a job for after that!" John groaned. "I'm going to end up like Mikey."

"Hey, Jooooohn. You got a party invitation."

"I don't want to go to a party. I want to not have to move in with my parents."

"You know, you should be so lucky. Many today lack the social safety net you are so blessed with."

John rolled his head to the side. "What are you talking about?"

"It's sad but true," the beaver jumped up onto a chair to be eye level with John. "People move to different cities. Lose touch with family. Then when something bad happens...Poof, it's out in the streets with them."

"Well that's what the government is for," John said, pulling himself upright.

"Hmm, if you say so. Well the party is a week from Saturday."

"Geez, what is with you and this party? Who is it from anyway?" John snatched the invitation out of the beaver's paws. "Oh this guy. He's ok I guess. He's more Jerry's friend than mine."

"Sounds like a lovely outing," Mr. Snuffles said.

"Doesn't matter," John said. "I have to look for a job."

"You have your whole life to look for a job. You only have one day to go to this party."

"Wow, that sounds like a line from a bad 80s movie."

"John," Snuffles put his paw on the human's hand. "I've been thinking about your job situation. Maslow's Hierarchy of Complaints dictates that you be worried about your current uncertain work situation, and Freud would probably relate that to your probable impotency, but the point is that psychology is bunk for the most part. Sorry, sidetracked, the point I'm trying to make is that if you lose focus now, our entire project may have been in vain. To that end, if you just give me these two weeks that you promised me, I guarantee that I will get you a job. And maybe I can even arrange for some "resources" to float your way. Eh? Wink wink." The beaver winked.

John shredded the corner of the invitation.

Snuffles apparently had more inspirational speech left. "You're letting the mundane world get you down. That's the problem. Where's the sense of urgency? Where's the burning desire for knowledge? The elephant crap can wait, John. This can't."

John looked past the beaver.

Mr. Snuffles crawled in front of John. "You're a lout, you know that. You're a good for nothing. Fight me you blaggard." The beaver put his paws up in fisticuffs and hopped a little. John stifled back a smile.

He looked away. "Ok, you little furball. You win. But if you screw this up," he shook his finger at Mr. Snuffles, "I'm going to see how beaver tastes."

"I'm sure I taste great compared to the slop you eat."

Chapter 15

"Wait, why do I have to make concessions? I'm doing you a favor by continuing on your zany quest. If anything, I should be able to do it on my own schedule." One advantage of public transit was that no one on the bus bothered you if you shouted into a bag.

"First of all, John," the bag responded. "This is for your benefit, not mine. Secondly, I am guaranteeing you a job whereas before that was an uncertainty. I think you should take that into consideration."

"Yeah, well, any moment now, I'm going to realize that I've been hallucinating about a talking beaver and end up jobless, homeless and friendless," John replied.

"That's the spirit, John!"

"Now approaching Congress and 10th Street," a monotone automated voice announced. "No cruze en frente de autobus," a friskier voice added.

"Here's our stop," Mr. Snuffles, who had been in the bag the whole time, said.

John hopped out of the bus, propelled by the hydraulic exhaust of the retractable bus door, into the humid morning air.

"You want to tell me where we're going?" John said to the bag.

"The Capitol, obviously," Mr. Snuffles said.

"Yes, I can see it from here. It's kind of hard to miss." Central Austin sat on a sort of downward slope such that if you looked from the top, where the University Tower stood, you could see all the way down to the Capitol building. John and Mr. Snuffles were at the bottom of the slope so, looking up, their view was obscured by the pink granite edifice, looming like some discarded pumice stone procured for the city's aching corns. "Why are we going there? I guess is my question."

"You wanted to see where James came from. Well, I'm going to show you."

John peered past the parked cars in front of the Capitol sidewalk. He could hear a commotion, some chanting and possibly crude instruments- ukuleles, bongos and whatnot and see a crowd parading in front of the gates.. "Oh God," John groaned. "These aren't the same people from the park?"

Mr. Snuffles pulled himself onto John's shoulder. "Could be. I don't know. There are a lot of them, though, so there are probably some different cliques."

John paused across the street. "I can smell them. Shouldn't you get back in the bag?"

"On the contrary," the beaver said. "I think it will help you blend in."

"Yeah, probably." John took a deep breath and walked across the street. A few policeman stood around, mostly directing schoolchildren away from the unwashed mass and the same mass out of traffic. "OK, same deal? Find some hooligan to talk to and learn a valuable life lesson?"

"Hooligans?," Mr. Snuffles protested. "You are terribly ungrateful for the service these...these...my that is pungent."

John waded through a milling sea of sunbaked, hemp-clad congregants. All extremely busy with diverse tasks. Some waved signs; others chanted semi-rhythmic slogans. Six sat on

the sidewalk handcuffed to each other, forming an ineffectual side-walk block. Many others just stood, sat or reclined, as if their mere presence proved symbolic, or maybe they were just here for the social scene.

"Hey, look, it's your friend," Snuffles pointed to a grassy section near the gate where the nude man John had conversed with at the park lay, blessedly clothed.

"At least I know what I'm getting with this one," John said. He trundled through the assemblage, stepping over outstretched limbs and under flailing signs. "Hey....you," John called. "It's me, John," forgetting that they had not exchanged names.

The not-nude man did not look up. "Society created names as a means of entrapment. By defining you they limit your potential." He rolled over to face John. "Mine's Benjamin. What? You need a name to get a P.O. Box. Hey, Lil' capybara dude."

"I'm a beaver, you dimwit," Mr. Snuffles scowled.

"Woah. What did I just say? You can be whatever you want to be. Don't let other people's preconceptions determine who you are."

John laughed. "Actually, sometimes he tells people he's a cocker spaniel."

The not-nude man did not laugh. "See, there you go. Be free."

"Well," John said. "I see you decided to throw on the shackles of society."

Benjamin shrugged. "I have a thesis defense coming up, so I figured I might as well get used to them again. Still a bit of chafing."

John looked around while Benjamin adjusted his clothing. "Where are your friends? The plant lovers."

"Plant lovers?" Benjamin looked confused. "Oh them. I am so done with those guys."

"So you like, uh," John motioned around him, "these people better."

"Hell, no. Look at them. They're idiots."

John squinted. "So...why are you here?"

Benjamin demurred, sitting up. "It's something to do. So what brings you two lovers to the modern progressive hizzy?"

"I have no idea, really," John said. "To be honest, I just go where he tells me. And I'm not gay." He looked at the beaver. "Or into that."

"No judgments, really," Benjamin said, standing up, shaking the leaves off of his linen pants.

"Over here, tubby," Mr. Snuffles said. "Yeah, right here, the capybara is talking to you."

"What is it, my dentally inclined friend?"

"We need the lowdown. We aren't going to get anywhere trawling in this flea market. You are a self-described po'mo, are you not?"

Benjamin put his hands on his hips and leaned back. "I'll tell you what. You buy me a horchata and I'll give you the rundown on all the odds and Engels."

"Ooh," John said. "We can go to the food truck park."

There is an easy test to see whether or not you might like horchata. First, you prepare and serve the horchata in a glass. Then you grind up tree bark and puree it in water. If you can tell the difference between the two, you might like horchata.

Mr. Snuffles stood on the wooden table at the food park, rifling through his usual

Colombian salad. He had taken a long look at the menus of all of the food trucks and only when he was certain none of them served any sort of small did he come out of the bag. "Listen," the beaver said. "Here's the deal, Mr. Benjamin Person. Ordinarily, I'd have doofus here sort through the dregs of the earth until he found someone worthy to interrogate. Sadly, time is of the essence and we are on a schedule."

"And a budget," John chimed in.

"Yes, the budget only allows for high quality vegetables I'm afraid." The beaver stuffed a kalamata olive into his mouth whole.

Benjamin turned to John. "I usually don't just go blabbing all my secrets, but you did get me an horchata. What is it you want to know?"

"Hold on a second," John said. "Mr. Snuffles, why do we need him if he's just going to tell me things. Can't you just explain it to me?"

"Because, John," the beaver mumbled with chewed up bits of olive in his cheeks. "You need to hear it straight from the source. If I just tell it to you it will just be cold, antiseptic facts. If this fine fellow tells you, you'll understand the context. Have you learned nothing from this? You have to go straight to the horse's ass- mouth, mouth." Snuffles chewed a lettuce stalk.

The formerly nude man stared at John, waiting. "So, we were in Dallas," John said.

Benjamin wrinkled his nose.

"You don't like Dallas?," John asked.

"Like, don't like," Benjamin shrugged. "It's all the same."

"You have a great tolerance for things you don't like," John said.

Benjamin smiled at his drink. "Everyone has their different ways of coping. I don't hate them for doing what they think best. I hate the circumstances that led them there. Also their incredible stupidity, I hate that too. And the dumb looks on their vapid faces." He scowled.

"What circumstances?" John leaned forward.

Benjamin scrunched up his face. "Why the circumstances we currently find ourselves in, of course. Society- as it were."

"You know," John interrupted. "I hear a lot of people using that word and I'm not sure there is a real meaning to it. What society? Wasn't there always society? Could there be anything other than society? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You're getting the hang of it now!," Benjamin wagged his finger. "Question everything. Society is anything anyone tries to do to you. And, believe me, it's always about control."

"Well this guy I met in Dallas. He didn't seem too interested in control. He mostly just wanted to be left alone."

"Sure, that's how it starts. It's quite easy to leave one person alone," Benjamin explained. "But how can you leave a whole city alone? Let alone, no pun intended, a whole country? You can't walk down to the corner convenience store without bumping into someone. How do you expect to run schools, hospitals, labor unions, retirement plans while "leaving everyone alone" and pretty soon those people who aren't letting everyone else alone, let's just say they don't get "left alone"."

"OK, so you're with the other guy," John said.

"What other guy?," Benjamin asked, taking another sip of the foul liquid through a crazy straw.

John explained the encounter at that coffee shop between the older gentleman and James.

"I see," Benjamin said. "I can't tell just from that short incident, but I suspect that he was just as you imagined, and not like me. In particular his use of "lazy-fare", as you call it, gives away his preoccupation. Don't get me wrong, I'm sure I'd hate that other guy too, but in many ways that 'James' character is more dangerous."

"Dangerous?," John said. "How?" He turned to Mr. Snuffles, "How is anyone we've ever met more dangerous than your average lunatic?"

Mr. Snuffles frowned. "John, listen to the nutcase. We're not just talking about abstractions right now."

"Thanks nutria-dude," Benjamin said. "He's right, Jim," he spluttered in excitement. "It's bad enough when I have to deal with them on my dissertation panel. Some of them run for the senate, the presidency or even city council!"

"Who the who? I still don't know who we're talking about."

"You know," Benjamin waved his arms. "Meddlers, schemers, people who've got a plan. A plan for everybody. They've got their whole ant farm arranged. Except they always get it wrong and then just say they need to try again." He gasped for breath and took a long pull at the last of the horchata.

John squinted. "You got all that out of it? I didn't get that at all. I thought he might have been talking about working together, solving problems."

"Oh is that what you thought?," Benjamin shook the empty glass at John's face. "And who's plan for working together will they be using? And what if you don't like the plan? Then you're the problem that needs to be solved!"

"Alright, you're being dramatic," John insisted. "We can have majority rules."

"Majority oppression."

"You can make rules protecting the minority."

"Unless they disagree on something important, like how the state is run. Then you either protect them up to the moment they take over or stamp them out." Benjamin put the glass down, his hands shaking. "God, I need a cigarette."

"Here, take mine." Mr. Snuffles produced a banana leaf-wrapped cigarillo and a match out from somewhere in his fur.

"Thanks," Benjamin said, as he began sucking on the end.

John, meanwhile, stared at the wooden picnic table. "So you've left yourself nothing. You can't just mind your own business but you can't work together. You don't have any other way of going on."

Benjamin made several cutting movements with his free hand while he took a pull on the cigarillo and removed it. "Thank you! Finally! Somebody gets it!"

By instinct, John said, "get what?"

"You finally understand," Benjamin beamed. "The unworkableness of the world. We are destined to walk alone in this sea of irrationality. Incapable of true communication. Truth forever unreachable and anyways inexpressible. All our works will come to ruin and most likely horror. The knowledge of this fact the only true bond between men...and beavers."

"Did I, did I say that?," said John.

"In so many words. Oh it warms my heart."

Mr. Snuffles was silent.

Chapter 16

Having eaten nothing during their soiree, John munched on a kebab as they entered his apartment, yogurt sauce dribbling down his chin. "That was an entertaining conversation," he said. The beaver crept out of the bag and ambled to the bedroom. "I mean, it really changes things doesn't it?," John called. He grabbed a paper towel to wipe himself and trudged into the bedroom, sitting on the bed. The beaver had curled up in the opposite corner, half surrounded by the retaining walls of a book fort John constructed from his library pillaging. "Am I right? Or..." Why as Mr. Snuffles not talking? Had the beavermancy finally worn off rendering him mute? "Yo beaver," John yelled. "You still with me."

Mr. Snuffles unwrapped a crumpled deli receipt and scrawled a message on it with the stub of a pencil. He held it up.

"I'm being allegorical," John read. "OK!," John kept yelling. "While you're dealing with your allergies I'll just keep talking, k?"

Mr. Snuffles looked like he wanted to say something but just curled up again.

"I just need to get my head around this," John said, standing. He looked at the beaver again. He crouched down near the corner and reached out for a book. It was Machiavelli's Discourses on Livy. John had not read it. He skimmed the cover insert. Apparently Old McDonald had read this guy Livy's book and then written another book about it. That seemed like a strange thing to do to John. What would Benjamin say about that? Could Macchiato understand what Livy meant? Did he care? Or did he only want to use him for his own purposes? Was reading Makavelli as useless as his reading Livy?

John rolled onto the bed, clutching the book to his chest. "OK, John. What do you do now?" He did not know, but he had a week to figure it out.

Mr. Snuffles did not speak all the next day either, but a circle around a take out menu indicated his preference of chow mein. John woke up the next day, Wednesday morning, to the same annoying alarm sans beavertail. John prepared his overnight bag but did not see the beaver.

"Mr. Snuffles!," he said. "You around here?" Then he saw a note on the table on purple stationery. "John- Have fun in Houston. Be back Friday." "Great. What am I supposed to do by myself," John thought.

As the University shuttle only ran on the weekends, John had to rent a car. He had not driven in some time and he hoped that his work on the zoo forklift would be sufficient to keep him in practice.

The full light had just come up as John left the city and he began meandering through the hills and winding roads of central-east Texas. He stopped once for a lunch of a pastry stuffed with a sausage and industrial strength cheese. (Some, in their benighted ignorance, persist in referring to these as "kolaches", but that refers to the fruit filled variety only.) and soon the hills turned to the flat grasslands of the coastal plains. John breathed a sigh of relief: Billboards for gas stations featuring a cartoonish small mammal had haunted him all through the backcountry.

After half a day of driving, John's first indication that he approached Houston were tall white pipes of undetermined purpose belching out a white exhaust, hopefully only steam. John prayed he would not see too many more of those things.

Down the road, John spied a cluster of buildings that did not appear agricultural or industrial in nature. Even strip malls were a welcome sight.

Nope. Just a small town. Then a slightly bigger one. Then a proper suburb. John passed through what seemed like six towns before reaching Houston. Slowing at a traffic jam, John lowered his window. The city air permeated the car and John's skin. It was dense, humid and very much alive. John opened his mouth to taste the air: It was not so dirty, bumper to bumper car exhaust notwithstanding, but he could not feel the Austin air going down his nose and throat the same way this air did.

John found his motel and sat in the parking lot, looking around. The humidity and hot night air hung over the city. The buildings sat lower to the ground than in Dallas. Dallas resembled a termite mound; one peak bleeding into the next. Austin had one solitary mountain range. Houston was rolling hills with the occasional peak of a hospital or office building.

"Where do people gather here in public?," John wondered. They certainly liked restaurants. Restaurant after eatery lined the boulevard. "That must be part of the smell," John thought as he took a whiff of the evening breeze. "Mmm, that was either barbecue or pizza. Maybe both."

John guessed people did not like impertinent questions asked by strangers while they were eating so he tried a bowling alley. He sat in the mostly empty dining area, picking at a pizza while two guys in bandanas played pool nearby. A portly man with salt-and-pepper hair made the mistake of waddling too near John.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm visiting here and I was wondering if you could tell me what there was good to do here in the city."

"I don't know," the man replied. "Do anything you like. Bowl?" He walked off to his lane.

Bowling by himself seemed silly, but he had no other ideas, so John bowled a frame, hoping to absorb some essence of humanity or the city from the hand driers.

That exhausted his list of ideas for the night, so John retired to his motel room for the night. "I don't know if man is doomed to spend his life alone, but I certainly am alone tonight. Goodnight, Mr. Snuffles, wherever you are. Goodnight Mom. Goodnight Dad. Goodnight coffeshop girl. I guess you too, Mikey."

The motel lobby pamphlets suggested the Houston Zoo as a popular attraction. The cramped confines of Austin dictated that The People's Zoo of Austin sit on the eastern outskirts of the city, the only direction not threatened by rival municipalities or the rocky outcroppings to the west. The planners of Houston, however, adjudging that they had the whole quadrant of Texas to fill in, planted the zoo right smack in the middle of the city, parking complexes included. His recent termination notwithstanding, John felt a familial compulsion to compare the zoos, mostly favorably towards the Austin zoo. The atmosphere at the Zoo of Houston definitely pandered towards the "fun" aspect, John noted. Anthropomorphic animals on signs reminded visitors to pick up their trash. The Austin zoo put more of an emphasis on education, John noted. For instance, the info graphics at the Austin Zoo noted how many members of that

species a single smartphone killed daily. For class trips, the zoo handed out pedometers that counted down the imminent destruction of life on Earth.

Still, John admitted. It had a certain charm. The layout did not usher you along a straight path but branched out in all directions and the hodge-podge organization invited leisurely exploration. After several hours, John had not seen all of the zoo and he did not care. He sat on a wooden bench dangling his sore feet and eating freeze dried icecream out of a Styrofoam container outlawed in Travis County.

"This was probably the wrong place to go," John said to himself. "Everyone here is either a family with young children or from out of town." John acquired a phobia of children from his job. Getting near them never paid off.

John had pizza again for lunch. Every other storefront seemed to be a different cuisine. You knew an ethnic cuisine was legit when it did not name itself as such: A storefront using Chinese letters and no mention of a buffet. Vietnamese Banh Mi advertised simply as 'sandwiches'. The dizzying diversity of restaurants pushed John to seek the familiar.

He had only half a day left in the city and had spoken one sentence to a person not wearing a nametag. "Where should he go,?" John thought, sitting in the parking lot again. The motel room did not beg contemplative thinking. What institution screamed Houston? John had seen an awful lot of strip clubs around. He had gone into a strip club once with a group of friends. It was hilarious back then, mostly when they laughed at Mikey's awkward attempts at talking to the dancers, but the idea of going in alone seemed sad. Who would he talk to anyway? He laughed again at the memory of Mikey making small talk with the strippers. Finally, he decided, he just did not want to look like an idiot if he messed up some unwritten rule of gentlemen's club etiquette.

"Fudge it." John paid out the motel clerk, grabbed his bag and bolted. If he was going to be bored, he might as well be bored at home.

John arrived in Austin just as the sun set, giving him just enough time to grab his favorite Colombian dish back at the food truck park. The apartment stood as silent as when he had left it. No sign of the beaver. "Maybe it was just a hallucination," John thought. I knew I should have gone to the doctor after I passed out at the ice cream parlor. People who see bright lights should get CT scans. I probably have an inoperable brain tumor. If I had an inoperable brain tumor, what would I do with my last days? T.V. sounds like a good choice." So he watched T.V. for the rest of the night and fell asleep on the couch.

A rapping on the door woke John the next morning. "Aaargh," he moaned. The alarm clock in the next room whined unnoticed. The rapping repeated. "Alright, I'm coming."

"Parcel service," the voice behind the rapping said. John could say that nobody had ever used a courier to deliver a message to him. It was from the Zoo:

Dear Mr. Yodmacher,

Upon further review, it has been determined that your service is indispensable to the operation of The People's Zoo of Austin. Please disregard the previous correspondence and return to your duties following the completion of your vacation time.

Your friends at the Zoo

John stared at the letter. He blinked. The damn beaver was right. Did he do this? How the hell.

The door sounded with another knock, this one much softer. And shorter. John opened the door and in Mr. Snuffles strutted, as best he could, on two legs.

"Well, John, I gather you have received the news of my handiwork by now."

"How in the name of St. Christopher did you manage to get me rehired?"

"Elementary," Mr. Snuffles purred, hopping up onto the couch. "What is it that you do better than anyone else, John?"

John thought. "I do make a pretty good lasagna, but I fail to see what that has to do with the zoo."

"Shoveling animal feculence!," the beaver roared. "So I just paid a visit to the zoo and encouraged the animals to go into double time production."

John rubbed his eyes. "I don't even want to think about that."

"Oh, you should have seen it. They tried hiring three different people and they all quit before the day was over. All of the other staff threatened to quit too if they had to do it. It warms the cockles of my black little heart." Mr. Snuffles reclined, looking like Nero witnessing an execution.

"Sounds like you had fun," John said. "I'm glad you're talking again, too. Are you going to ask how Houston went?"

"Nope, not interested."

"Ok, so what's next."

"What's what?," Mr. Snuffles asked.

"What's the next step in your twelve week program or whatever?"

"I don't know," the beaver waddled off to read the Business section of the newspaper and chew up the rest of it. "But you have work on Monday so have fun!"

"I spent the last two days having fun, dammit!," John yelled. "I ain't doing nothing."

Chapter 17

"Nothing." John repeated the word as he lay on the floor in his bedroom, in the same position Snuffles had ordered him into some time ago. "That's the number of alternatives I have at this point anyway." He reclined in silence except for the occasional crash emanating from the kitchen's direction as the beaver communicated his lack of respect for personal property while in search of food.

"What is Nothing though? Is this Nothing?" Lying on the floor staring at the ceiling seemed as much like nothing as anything else. John wondered if Nothing involved going to work. Probably

not. Luckily, he had all weekend to decide on that. The Zoo did not see fit to employ his services on the weekend when traffic increased. Insurance reasons, they said. Something metallic crashed onto the kitchen floor. "Hey, I can take you back to the Zoo!" Most of their communication these days revolved around threats of reprisal.

"I'll tell them you took me against my will! Who do you think they'll believe?!"

Goddammit.

Nothing probably also did not include beavercide.

As it turned out, Nothing that weekend included delivery pizza, local beer and terrible/awesome late night horror movies.

John woke up to the early evening gloom of Sunday. An old Western was just ending. The mysterious protagonist had cornered the bad guy after a double-cross and was about to finish him off.

"When you get to Hell," the good guy drawled, staring down his revolver at the baddie, "tell them a Texan sent you." John flipped off the TV before the finale and sat staring at the blank screen. Rustling came from the kitchen. An intruder. John picked up his trusty waffle-bat and advanced around the corner. Something four legged and furry hunched inside a half open pizza box.

"You're surrounded!" John shouted "Come out with your paws up!"

The trash that covered the living room floor exploded as the shape bolted along the floor to the hallway. John shrieked and hopped onto the couch. A pink nose and two eyes peeked back into the living room.

"Jesus, John, don't do that to me. I thought they'd come for me."

John hid the waffle-bat sheepishly behind his back. "Sorry, I, uh, didn't recognize you from the back." This seemed to gratify Snuffles. It is still an unfortunate stereotype that all beavers look alike from the back.

"What's done is done," Snuffles mumbled as he pulled the pizza box onto the couch. John sagged onto a sofa cushion next to the beaver.

"Wow, I've let myself go," John said, surveying the trash strewn about the room.

"I'm not sure what ideas, or lack thereof, led you here but I think the results speak for themselves." Snuffles gestured at the wreckage.

"Nothing sucks." John concluded. "I think there's some Hawaiian pizza still in the box by the T.V."

"Ah, thanks very much."

"What should I do?"

"Beats me- my this is exceptional pineapple- but sitting around here doing Nothing seems pretty stupid. And boring."

"Yeah, this is stupid. If I'm going to do nothing, I might as well be out having fun. Life is there to enjoy."

"That's the ticket", Snuffles said, more to the pizza than John.

John rushed out the door coat in hand. He sprinted to the coffee shop and ordered a 20oz mocha cappuccino with extra whipped cream. John had simple tastes.

After downing that, he ordered another. And then another. And then he threw up. It was great.

"Good morning, this is Carl Weathers with today's weather forecast. Sunny. Mid 70s. 10% chance of precipitation. What kind we don't know. The weather is unpredictable, scary, just like life. But, unlike life, you don't have to face the weather alone, so tune in tomorrow."

"Good morning sun!" John yelled in the direction of his painted shut kitchen-window. The caffeine had not quite worn off. "I don't care what you say Carl Weathers, today is going to be a great day!"

"Chipper this morning are we?" Snuffles inquired, drawn to the kitchen by the sizzling and smell of breakfast meats.

"That's right. I've been so wrapped up in these old, dead guys, I've forgotten this is about Me! I need to enjoy life- and bacon. Would you like some bacon?"

Snuffles sniffed at the proffered strip of pork-flesh. "Er...no thanks...I commend you on your inspired outlook on life though. May I ask...does enjoying life include going back to the Zoo?"

"Why of course it does." John now forced egg and toast and strips of bacon into his mouth, breathing and talking in the in between. "If there's one thing this weekend has taught me is that you can't overdo it. Shooting up heroin, fornicating wildly and gorging on junk food seems great at first, but it's not that great in the long run. Plus, they'll be less of it if I keep eating like that, haha."

"I want to squeeze every ounce of pleasure from this life and what I did this weekend will detract from that pleasure down the road. Maximize your potential." John grinned eggily.

"Alright," the beaver said. "What are you going to do then?"

"Eat breakfast, of course."

"Thanks for that deduction. I meant after your breakfast."

"Hmm," John thought. "What AM I going to do?" "I said I was going to do what I want. I've already eaten a LOT. What else makes me happy?"

"I know," John said. "That little girl at the zoo."

Mr. Snuffles looked up from the newspaper. "What little girl?"

"You weren't there, but it was funny. So I was cleaning a mess up in the aquarium and this girl comes up to me and says she's lost and asks if I know where her class is. But I don't know and I don't want to get involved so I just walk away really fast. It was funnier in the moment."

"I'm sure it was."

"But as soon as I get out of the building, I see her class. And you know what, after I went to tell her where her class was, I felt pretty good."

Lick

"That's the last one. We've done a lot of good today Scruffy, old boy." Scruffy, the medium sized dog of indeterminate breed that John had just adopted did not reply, unless you count continuing to stare vacantly as a reply.

The Humane Society had been John's second stop after work. The first had been where he went to solve all of his problems- the coffee shop. John remembered the free-trade propaganda tri-folds had a phone number or a mailing address or something.

It did indeed have a mailing address and John assiduously composed 12 letters to his 12 favorite corporations warning them of the dangers of free trade. John didn't know all of their individual addresses, so he decided to just send them all to the free trade freaks. They could sort it out.

"What in the name of Gregor Samsa is that creature?!" Snuffles froze in the doorway, a look of abject terror replacing his usual look of utter contempt.

"Oh, that's Scruffy, my new dog. Isn't he cute?"

"You don't plan on leaving me alone with this- this monster, do you?!"

"Scruffy isn't a monster. He's a good dog, aren't you Scruffy? Who's a Mr. Scruffy-pants? You're a Mr. Scruffy-pants!"

Scruffy did not respond to the allegation that he was a monster or a Mr. Scruffy-pants, but John interpreted his slobbering a bit on the floor as a clear denial to the first charge and assent to the second.

"See? Besides, I couldn't just leave him at the animal shelter. After a specified period they have to do the humane thing and kill him, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me but they know best."

Snuffles edged around the room until he could safely get up onto the empty chair. "And what is it that you are writing your congressman about?"

"This is part of my letter writing campaign to make the world a better place. Did you know that 1 out of 3 Cambodian children under the age of 15 is unemployed? These are serious issues that require immediate action in the form of writing stern letters."

* Rap rap rap * "What is that racket? And the best part is that by helping others I enrich myself and feel all...toasty." John hugged himself.

Rap rap rap

Snuffles looked over his shoulder, "I think that's the door."

"What am I the butler? Don't these people know I'm busy? What is it?!"

The young boy John though he had seen before stood shivering in an oversized parka on John's doorstep.

"Hi sir (John cringed, people only called him sir when they wanted something.). Sorry to bother you, sir, but could I borrow two eggs please. My mother is baking a cake and we are short."

"Eggs? There are starving children in Canada and you come over here asking for EGGS?! I think you need to stop thinking about yourself all the time and try to help your fellow man! It might do you some good."

"But what about my birthday cake?," the boy sniveled.

"Let them eat cupcakes!" And with that John slammed the door shut in his face.

Some people.

Chapter 18

John's do-gooderism did not go unnoticed. After seven years of employment at the Zoo, albeit interrupted, he finally managed Honorable Mention on the Zoo Employee Walk of Fame, for which he received a coupon from his favorite fantastic ice cream shop.

John enjoyed his just desserts (peanut butter and gummi bears), fancying that the lactose confectionary tasted all the sweeter for his intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. These coarse peasants couldn't enjoy their rocky roads as fully as he.

The guy at the table next to John didn't have an elevated mental state. The man coughed hard. He must have swallowed one of those wooden popsicle sticks that always ruin the last lick, John thought. The man continued coughing. The Zoo discouraged John from intervening in the case of life threatening emergency. Insurance reasons. Nevertheless, state law required him to attend two first aid courses a year.

John knew exactly what to do. First, survey the area for potential dangers- you shouldn't intervene if you could be injured as well. No killer bees, banana peels or rabid dogs. Check. Next, he had to check the victim for a pulse. Difficult with the thrashing.. Ok, now breathing. Can't tell, but the victim is making the Universal Sign for Choking, which must have been changed to throttling the arm of the nearest person- in this case the woman with him struggling with her purse.

Right. Time to perpetrate the Heimlich maneuver. What's a little full body contact between strangers? John pulled up the stranger by the elbows and wrapped his arms around his body. John hugged him as hard as he could. He got two good thrusts this way before the man turned and stiffed armed John backwards. The stranger then grabbed an inhaler the woman held out to him and sucked hard on to it. Crisis averted.

"It is a good thing I dislodged that popsicle stick so he could use his inhaler," John thought.

"No need to thank me, sir. I'm sure you'd have done the same for me."

The man looked at John like he'd rather end John's life than save it, but said nothing. His wife, massaging her arm, thanked him with a thin smile and they shuffled to the door. Huh. They weren't very appreciative. The man's coolness bothered John. That was not any way to treat someone who just saved you from certain death. Where was the human feeling? John did not feel toasty at all.

He would have to think about this.

The walk home held only bleakness where previously John had only seen sunshine and bunnies. He hadn't cursed at the pigeons in weeks, but now they were everywhere, stupid oblivious as ever.

Terrible time of year. The thin veil of snow mixed with the dirt and the trash to form a grey soup. The whole city was a sink of dirty dishwater.

What was the point of doing good things if they weren't appreciated? The Zoo management appreciated him. This time anyway. Even the Free-trade freaks had replied with a nice letter. Were they really thanking him or were they just humoring him though? John's mind turned to suspicion. They didn't really care at all, any of them.

Their responses were not warm expressions of gratitude but a convention. Like saying 'Bless you' when someone sneezes or pretending to be deaf when someone asks if you have a moment to talk about the environment. Even the Zoo just wanted him to shovel their elephant crap. Bollocks.

"I think you're going about this the wrong way," Snuffles said, back at the apartment.

John replied with a honking blow into a Kleenex. "It's no use, I'm a failure."

"No argument there, but how is that different than before?"

John ignored him. "Nobody even cares. Everything I did didn't amount to squat."

"So let me get this straight- the only reason you did any of those things was so you'd get thanked?"

"Well when you put it that way."

"I did put it that way." Snuffles put.

John scrunched up his face. "Maybe not thanked, exactly, but- it felt good. You know? That guy though...killed it. Just killed it"

"Ah, I see now. You did these allegedly good deeds for you. Not that the things themselves were good, but that they made you feel good. Basically, you were engaging in the equivalent of spiritual masturbation."

"Fuck you."

Mr. Snuffles smiled. He had won. He always won.

John had a bad case of the mopeys.

A prone position on the couch with an arm dangling off allowed maximum T. V. viewing with a minimum of energy expenditure. Now he could direct all of his attention to the woodland creatures selling air freshener or cat litter or whatever.

Carl Weathers came on deliver his nightly prophecies: "Now it's gonna be cold out there tomorrow, so take your jackets. Or face the consequences."

"Ha, I can't believe I used to listen to you and your fear-mongering Carl Weathers.", John laughed. "I'm free of you now, though. For all the good it's done me." He grimaced. "I've tried everything", he said, half to Carl Weathers and half to himself. "And it's all nuts."

"It's good that you stopped that do-gooder nonsense anyway."

John popped his head up. He forgot the beaver lived with him sometimes. At times he wondered if he just hadn't imagined him. "Why's that?" Might as well argue with the beaver, imaginary or not. "Of all the things I did, that did the most good. It might have sucked as a philosophy, but at least other people benefited from it."

"Precisely."

John had perfected a stupefied expression in the last few months that communicated mystification, a common occurrence. It saved him the trouble of formulating a particular question.

Snuffles sighed. "Why, pray tell me, did you perform these actions of charity?"

"Um...because they were good- I mean they made me feel good- wait, no..."

"We discussed your altruistic hedonism last time. Let's try to move past that. Apart from the material affects your actions had, how did they affect you? What did they have on your character?"

John brightened. "They improve it. They make me a better person!"

"Not so fast Mother Theresa. Ignoring the incredible vagueness of that statement, if it were so simple, you wouldn't be lying on your couch covered in cheesy poofs."

"But I like cheesy poofs..."

"Answer me this question, Malcom X.", Snuffles said. "Should you do good because it's

good for others or good for yourself.”

John scrunched up his eyebrows. “What- no metaphor or field trip? You’re just going to drop the question on me? What happened to Socratic dialogue?”

Snuffles busied himself grooming his fur, indicating no forthcoming reply.

“To help others,” he said at last. “If I was trying to only help myself, it would be selfish and wouldn’t be a charitable which would defeat the point.”

“That’s an interesting sort of conundrum.”

“What is?” John asked.

“Your ostensible purpose in all of this is to do best by you- improve your moral character, live the good life, etc, etc.-, but if that is your direct purpose in this instance, it disqualifies your actions as noble. I’ve always wondered, is a good person just a person who does good things? If he just stays at home all day is he still good? Was he only good for picking litter off the highway? Are you less good for staying here with me and Scruffy?” Mr. Snuffles refused to address Scruffy by his full name: Lord Archibald Chauncey Scruffington.

“Aaargh. It’s too confusing for my small brain. Let’s face it, I’m a failure.”

Snuffles cleared his throat.

“What was that?,” John raised his head up. “Were you going to say something reassuring?”

Snuffles looked around. “Who? Me? What? No.”

“Figures. Stupid beaver.”

Chapter 19

John reminded himself for the thirtieth time in his life not to be such an ass to Mikey. The poor guy had begged John to go with him to the party so he knew he would not have to stand by himself in the corner.

“Mikey, why don’t you just not go if it makes you uncomfortable,” John had said.

“Because it’s a party. You go, talk to some people, have a good time,” Mikey had said.

“I can hear the enthusiasm in your voice.”

John should have been grateful, he did not fancy riding a bus down to the yuppie suburbs south of Austin, but he kept remembering he did not want to go in the first place.

Mikey and John spent ten minutes leaning out of the car’s windows looking for address numbers on the curb or mailboxes. All of the houses looked the same and they all had wooden privacy fences so they could not see into the backyards. “It’s a colony of Dallas!,” John joked internally. Finally they found a house with an unusual amount of cars parked in front of it so they decided that must be it. Twelve or so people milled in their host’s backyard. Mikey headed straight towards the cooler. John doubted he was going for a coke.

John spied Harold talking to the host, Mike (the reason Mikey got stuck with that name), next to a picnic table. John figured he could say hello and grab some chips simultaneously.

The chips were barbecue flavored but Mike and Harold did not notice John. They had breached the rule about discussing politics at social gatherings. They kept it pleasant, though, by not listening to closely to what the other said.

“The current government is full of self-interested career politicians.”

"Totally incompetent."

"They only pay attention to the lobbyists for big corporations."

"Special interest groups are ruining the nation."

"Meanwhile areas that vitally need more funding are ignored."

"The government has become far too intrusive."

"We should get rid of the whole lot and start over."

"I agree completely."

John chuckled and sat at the picnic table. A few more people ambled in through the gate. Coffee girl! John ducked. How the hell did she get here? Seemed to have come with one of those other women. The group walked over to the drink section. Mikey, coming out of his reverie, noticed he blocked their way and jerked forward out of the way, provoking grins from the women.

John heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. "Psst, John!" He turned around. Mr. Snuffles crouched behind a shrub.

"What the heck! How did you get here?," John hissed. He glanced around; nobody looked in their direction.

"I parachuted in. Never mind that. I just came to tell you that it's time for me to move on."

John's eyes widened. "But we have so much more to discuss! I just started thinking about some of this stuff."

"Others need me more now, John."

"What are you Mary Poppins now?"

"Can the jokes. I came by to see if you had anything else to say- you're final report so to speak," the beaver said.

Something slid past John's legs underneath the table. He leaned back and squinted down his belly, but that never works.

"Psst, John. Down here."

Confirming no witnesses with a quick glance, John swung out of his seat and dropped to his knee. Behind a styrofoam bowl of chili con queso, Snuffles lounged, licking nacho cheese product from between his fingers. "Mmm, almost worth the inevitable heart disease. But you know how much my people enjoy blocking things. It is almost a mania with us."

"Snuffles," John hissed. "What are you doing here? Someone will see you!"

"Oh keep your dungarees on. The ancient laws of hospitality would surely prevent them from calling Animal Control. Besides, I won't be here long. I've come to tell you goodbye, John. I'm leaving. This is our veritable Mary Poppins moment."

"Is it because you need to spread your wisdom to others who need it more?," John asked.

"No, it's because I'm bored of you. Also, this weather is awful! And my allergies! Seriously, John, I don't understand why you stay here."

John bit the side of his cheek. "Fine, I get it. Leave. You know, you really didn't teach me anything, anyway."

Chunks of corn chip and ground beef sprayed out of the beaver's mouth. "Didn't teach you anything? Why the nerve! The unmitigated gall!" John put his hand out in front of Snuffles face before thinking better of it. He poked his head out above the picnic table, but nobody seemed to

be looking their way. Ducking back down, the beaver coughed and resumed his rant. "Maybe you're right. Maybe i have taught you nothing if that's what you think. Maybe you are an unteachable pile of humanoid-".

"Ok, ok, enough. You have done great. I admit it." John sat on the grass. "And I should be really grateful to you. It just seems like I'm still in the same place I started." John yanked some grass out of the ground and rolled it between his fingers.

"John, John, John," Snuffles wheezed. "I feel like we have had this conversation 4 times before."

"I know, I know. I'm an stupid imbecile," John said.

"Ok, ok. I'll leave you with a parting gift." Snuffles.

"What's the gift?," John perked up.

"A valuable lesson."

"Oh, ok, so no gift."

"Shut up, John. I'm telling a story." The beaver cleared his throat. "As you know, there are some groups of people that believe the world was only created a short time ago."

"Oh yes, I have heard about those people...Young Earthers...they build weird museums with Jesus riding a T-Rex."

"No, not THOSE guys. They are fairly rare and mostly harmless. The ones I am talking about hold many positions of power and permeate our culture: The New Worlders. They believe that the world only came into existence in 1654(?)."

"Wait," John interrupted. "I was not very good at history, but I'm almost certain there was something before 1654."

"Ok, John. Of course there was an earth, but before then everyone was essentially a drooling primitive buffoon. Before the shining force of Enlightenment came and dispelled the clouds of superstition and ignorance!"

"Ahem," the beaver cleared his throat. "But I digress."

"As you know, John, before a scant hundred years or so, artificial light was difficult to come by. Sure, even before electricity there were oil lamps and candles, but you could not just leave them on willy-nilly all night. No, in the good old days daylight was for working and twilight signaled the end of the day. "

"Their night was different from our in another respect. Most of us now will sleep for a full eight hours or thereabouts. Not so in earlier times. It was common that you would sleep for about four hours, rise for a while and then return for a second sleep sleep. In the interlude, they would come together for the shared light of a fire or a candle or even go outside, to sit underneath the stars."

"Hmm, that's kind of funny," John said. "You would think that it would be the other way around."

"What's the wrong way around?," Snuffles asked.

"Well, now that we have lights all the time, you would think that we would sleep and work or play when we want, but we don't. We all sleep for the same long stretch almost every night."

"That's a good point, John. What do you think that means?"

John furrowed his brow. "Maybe it means that we think of technology as a way to free ourselves..." He looked at Snuffles for approval. "But really it locks us into certain patterns of behavior?"

"Interesting thought," Snuffles said, nibbling a celery stick. "I'll have to write an essay about that."

"Anyway, outside, under the stars, the old timers would partake of a small meal, do some light work and just enjoy the night sky, undimmed by lights."

"That sounds...very pleasant," John admitted.

Mr. Snuffles snapped his fingers. "Now what's the lesson from that?"

"Save energy by turning your lights off?"

"No! Listen. You have been searching this whole time for freedom. But all you have done is restrict your life. You have been looking for knowledge, but you have run away from all the experiences of life that could give you this knowledge! The beauty in life is not in finding some magical answer."

John frowned. "So, I should just go back to being normal?"

"John, I think we are way past being normal."

John smiled.

"Have a life. Enjoy the stars, instead of drowning it out with your own terrible thoughts."

They sat in silence for a moment. Snuffles licked the cheese off of his paws.

"Well, John..." Mr. Snuffles said.

"I'm sorry Mr. Snuffles, I cannot sit and hear what you are going to say." John stood up from under the table, straightening his clothes. "I have someone I have to go embarrass myself in front of. Good day to you, sir." John walked away.

"That's right, John." Snuffles said. "Be a champion."