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The Last King of Babylon

By Solomon J. Walker

You are an old man and you enjoy doing old man things like talking about the weather and sitting down. Your week has been rather uneventful, mainly consisting of the two things aforementioned, but that's just the way you like it; *uneventful*. Predictable. Orderly. It's the reason you keep the color-coordinated schedule on your fridge. There aren't any surprises when you have a color-coordinated schedule on the fridge.

It's Thursday today, highlighted wonderfully on your schedule by the color yellow. On Thursday's you play chess in the park. You've always been a fan of both chess and the color yellow, perhaps that is why your heart is racing when you wake up, you're simply ready for the day ahead. You come into the world as you always do, staring at the water stain on the ceiling.

This stain, while only small and not in any way as brilliant as the real thing, is a near-perfect imitation of The Founder's head; a sharp jawline with a slightly raised brow. You love the Founder deeply and it brings you comfort knowing this mirage watches you sleep. Those eyes, *his* eyes, locked on you as you dream and stir and dream again.

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After breakfast, you set off towards the park. Low-hanging clouds stretch the length of the sky. The city you live in is impressive, but not overwhelming. Not too big, not too small. A perfect medium-sized city.

On the way, you catch a reflection of yourself in a shop window. Your spine is arching more violently than usual. From this angle, you'd be considered a hunchback. You take a step closer to the reflection and have a deep, hastened look into your own eyes. They're as violet as the day you were born.

"God, it's just a loop isn't it?" You ask yourself cheerfully as you move on. "It's a loop. A fucking circle. There's... It's never over. Ever. It's just an endless circle that never—"

Ahem, you cheerfully move on. Move on please, Old Man. With cheer.

"But I—"

May I continue without further interruption? Excellent.

#

As you wander further down the road, a child's voice shouts at you from across the way. "Hello, Old Man!" Your neck clicks as you rotate it. Ah, it's the boy you see kicking pebbles sometimes. You like him. And he likes your hat. He tells you frequently.

"I like your hat." The Boy shouts.

He, of course, is talking about your pinstripe bowler hat. Everybody loves your pinstripe bowler hat.

“Thank you. You look full of whimsical mischief this morning.” The Boy blushes, clearly flattered by your keen eye for loveable tomfoolery. You offer a gentle, closed-mouthed smile as he disappears behind a tall building. You then remember that you’ve never actually seen a school here in this city, leading you to ponder to yourself what it is that children do all day, but decide that it’s best not to dwell on these things.

A smile stretches far across your face as you wander through a sea of formally-dressed men and women on their way to The Company headquarters. Everyone here works for The Company, even you, in your hay day. Seeing these bright faces pass by in droves causes you to reminisce of your own glory days.

The labyrinth of colorless cubicles.

The soothing hum of fluorescent lights.

Crunching the numbers.

It sends a shiver down your rigid spine. You just longed to hear the gurgle of that water cooler one more time. Alas, now you’re in your twilight years and the white-collar trenches are far behind you.

#

You finally make it to the park where you find your chess partner, Susan. She wears a bright orange cardigan and her hair is thinning. She hunkers over the chessboard nearest the wall. You don’t particularly mind where you play, but that table has always bothered you. It wobbles too much and the birds sit near it. You can’t focus when the birds are close, you find them

distracting. You question whether she knows that about you, if she exploits it. You decide that you wouldn't put it past her to do such a thing.

“Old Man! It’s about time you got here.” Susan growls. “I’ve spent a lifetime waiting for you.”

“I’m only 10 minutes late, Susan.”

“I didn’t say *my* lifetime.”

Typical Susan, you think to yourself, always grumbling about something or other. You want to roll your eyes at her, but you don’t. That’s bad manners. Bad mannered people can’t pull off pinstripe bowler hats the way you do. Instead, you release a composed smile.

“Shall we?” You taunt as you take your place opposite her.

#

The game is intense and Susan has been practicing. With a bloodlust similar to that of a soviet dictator, she unravels your defensive positions; toppling piece after piece, a step ahead every time. Before you know it, Susan dominates the board. “I have you cornered, Old Man. Check.” She bares her teeth, revealing a smile like that of a shark.

You scan the board and deduce that Susan does indeed have you cornered. What a pickle! Any lesser player would accept defeat at the mere sight of a position like yours; one in which all that’s left is a single, subjectless king— a *bare* king. They would resign, seceding to the greater power and conclude this game to be well and truly over. Yes, that is what any lesser player would do, but you are no lesser player.

Now, how does one escape the inescapable? You recall there was a controversial last-stand strategy created by disgraced former world-champion, Edna Leszek, who, minutes after successfully defeating her rival, Roberta Petovich, declared herself to be bankrupt and

therefore ineligible to pay the \$15 entry fee for the final she had just won. Like its creator, this was an obscure, complex strategy, irrational at its core and long-forgotten in the modern game. This is *The Last King of Babylon*, and you know just the way to play it.

But a rotten taste fills your mouth as you raise your hand to the board. *The Last King of Babylon* is the chess equivalent of throwing dirt in someone's eye. To play it is to forsake any ounce of respect you had for the rules of engagement and carve your own bloody way to victory.

It's bad manners.

Suddenly the pinstripe bowler hat doesn't sit as nice as it used to.

Your weathered fingers wrap around the king.

One square to the left, you think to yourself.

Before you move, you take a final glimpse at your opponent and see something peculiar. Cowering behind her ruthless gaze, what is that? Ah, Susan is hiding a hint of desperation. You then notice her hand, it's shaking, and that noise— *it's her foot!* She's been tapping away on the cobblestones. Your mind crashes. No more strategies or Babylonian kings. Just the veiled pain of a bitter woman. It's interesting, you think to yourself, that hiding a feeling causes it to become more obvious than ever. There's even a part of you that pities her. After all, she's a retired employee of The Company too.

A quote from your former boss and current personal hero, The Company's Founder, springs to your mind "*Always let elderly women win in chess. They may be from wealth, and they will die soon. It's smart to be in their good books.*" The Founder always had a way with words and this modern proverb is no exception, they land in your heart like seeds waiting to sprout. He's full of wise words and insightful anecdotes.

“Well?” Susan says, ripping you away from your thoughts, “I win, yes?” With The Founder’s wisdom freshly sown in your heart, you decide to forfeit the game and topple your king.

“No... I would like to keep playing. You haven’t won just yet.”

O-Old Man?

“I want to continue playing. I think I’ll move him here.”

Oh, now you’ve really done it.

Susan watches helplessly as you move your king one square to the left. The woman you knew for her ice-cold gaze has all but gone missing. In her wake, someone riddled with fear and disbelief. Susan’s voice shakes, “Y-you... You’re meant to knock it over.” Susan correctly points out. “That’s how it is. That’s how it always is.”

“I... Just want to keep playing-”

“Take it back.”

“What?”

Susan raises her voice, panicked tears flooding her eyes. “Take it back! Please, Old Man, j-just take it back. Move it back.” Susan begs until her cigarette-burned voice rips in two, leaving behind nothing but a painful croak and a near-silent *whimper-*

an-

Old Ma-

Ri-

I-I... Buy modern pr- Let us w-

ZzzZiEe-

Quiet.

For the first time in a long time it's quiet in my head. They must've switched my implant off. I can't hear it anymore. We each have one; an artificial copy of The Founder's voice to replace our own internal monologue.

A voice that narrates our lives for us.

'You don't need to think when someone can do it for you!' That's the whole idea. It's not a difficult surgery really, works like those little dinosaurs you put in water. The implant is inserted through the ear and stapled to the temporal lobe. Over time, the implant kills the lobe and expands to fill the empty space.

Come to think of it, they aren't anything like the little dinosaurs you put in water.

"Your eyes." Susan croaks.

"What about them?"

She narrows her gaze, leaning in close to get a better look.

"They're brown." She says. "Your eyes are brown."

When the implant is switched on, your eyes turn a deep violet. I don't know why.

#

She's just staring at me now.

The narrator will be saying something to her.

Her eyes are growing wider, she's listening to him.

She's cracking her neck. Her jaw is clenched.

The great wall of Susan is being built back up, even in the way she holds herself.

Shoulders back.

Head raised.

Posture straight.

Her teeth are grinding. I can hear it. I can see it.

For a brief five minute window, this grim woman was dead and a scared girl took her place. Now, I am witnessing her resurrection.

Finally, Susan announces that she needs to go home. As she leaves, the fear-filled woman chained behind a thick wall of snide remarks flashes herself once more, this time offering a warning. “They’ll come for you soon, Old Man.” And with that, she left.

#

I now sit alone at the chess table, elsewhere in my mind.

The birds don’t sing here, that’s something I’ve just noticed. They don’t say anything. Is that normal? No one seems bothered by it, everyone is too busy to notice.

I’m not busy anymore, so given the chance, I dwell on things. Susan was right, they’ll come for me. That’s why I’m waiting, I want to be found. Sitting here, listening to the birds not singing, I want to be found and I want this implant removed.

There’s a man going against the current of black suits. A burly giant of a man.

He’s wearing sunglasses and he’s coming right towards me.

He looms over me, blocking out the sky.

A smaller man emerges from behind him. He also wears sunglasses.

“Sir, can you follow us please?” They say in unison.

Of course.

#

They usher me to The Company headquarters and straight into the elevator. It's funny, I spent my whole working life in this building, but I don't recognise a single thing. Not even a face.

The elevator is rife with violet-eyed people doing things. Tapping. Listening. Waiting.

Ding! Three people leave. Two more enter.

Waiting. Tapping.

Ding! Two leave. Four enter.

Again.

I live in this metal coffin now.

And again.

My world is steel and aluminum.

And again.

Until it's just me and the giant. He doesn't say anything.

Ding!

We step into an office above the clouds, a temple for the white-collared man. The tiled floors are cracked and the windows are open and a breeze is blowing in. The curtains rear and dance to its rhythm. Smaller buildings drown in the gray beneath us. From up here, we overlook the world.

And in the silhouette of the low sun, I can see *him*. I'd know him anywhere. I see him on my ceiling every morning. It's the man who watches me sleep.

The Founder sits at the wooden desk in the center of the room.

He offers a warm smile and gestures for the behemoth to leave us. I take a seat opposite him. He's skinnier than I thought he would be, unimpressive in physique. He has thin lips and a resting smirk, as if always on the edge of genuine laughter, but never quite getting there. His skin is smooth and pristine, almost glowing.

"Hello, Old Man." He says.

His voice like caramel rubbed into gravel.

"Could I interest you in some room-temperature water?"

I shake my head.

"More for me, I suppose." He pours himself a glass as he continues. "So, you're the one ruining everything."

"What do you mean?"

"You're going against your purpose."

"Purpose?"

He takes a sip of his water. "Everyone here has a purpose. Your purpose is to play chess and lose."

"I'm sorry, I-I don't understand. I only play chess on Thursdays."

"You're right. Thursday is chess day, but what did you do yesterday?"

My mind blurs when I think of yesterday, I don't remember anything from yesterday. My memories are fragmented and displaced, the harder I think, the more faded they become. All I can see is Thursday and Susan and pinstripe bowler hats. That's all that comes to the surface. It must be the implant, right?

"You don't remember?" He asks rhetorically. "Listen, Old Man, we are trying to tell a story here. That's what this is. It's a story, and you're a part of that."

“I-I want the implant removed.”

“Implant? W-what implant?”

“What?”

The Founder looks at me with concern, but there's a deep anger behind his eyes. A monster is in there somewhere. The Founder smiles at me again, but it seems faker than before, more strained.

“You’re a small cog in a machine that’s far bigger than you. But that doesn’t mean you’re not important. Each little cog has to turn in order for the machine to work. Without your game of chess, without *you*, everything crashes down. All of it.” I can see a vein pulsating in his forehead, threatening to burst, to turn his perfect skull into an art-exhibition, a fountain of red and pink. The monster is trying to break out.

He stands up and asks for me to follow, I hobble behind him. He opens a draw by the window and hands me a book. The book says ‘Modern Proverbs and Wise Words: Quotes from the Founder’ and it's small enough to fit in a chest pocket. I arch my crooked neck to look into his eyes. They’re brown.

“This is why you’re here.” He says.

It slots so easily in my hand.

We’re made for each other, this book and I. “What is it?” I ask.

“We’re trying to replace the Bible in hotel drawers.” The Founder gestures out the window, down to his subjects living out their lives beneath the gray. “Listen, everyone here has a problem, a mini-story that, when played out as scripted, sets in motion the *greater* story. Each problem can be fixed with a quote. Turn to page 16.”

I turn to page 16. It’s titled *Always Let Elderly Women Win in Chess*.

I've lost feeling in my hands. My mind is spinning and screaming.

I place the book down gently on the drawer beneath the window. "I don't understand. Y-you're saying I live in an advertisement?"

"No. You *are* an advertisement. A living, breathing, synthetic commercial. People watch the different stories that happen here. Yours is about chess. If you win, then your story has no purpose. You have no purpose." The Founder taps on the little pocket-sized book and wanders back towards his desk. "You *need* to lose, Old Man. You have to. You were born retired and to lose is your job." I stay rooted to the spot and look out the window. "I don't know where you got the implant removal stuff from, though... Or why your eyes are brown. We'll figure it out. Tell you what, why don't we fix you up and get you to bed? Just a full reset."

The sky is pretty from up here. I tell him that I like the view. The Founder responds, but I'm not in the room anymore. My mind is running away.

In regards to chess and Susan, I guess you could say I was asleep. Everyone out there is asleep too, living out half-measured lives, too busy to care about anything that matters. Numb. I don't recall a time I really felt something, it's all like a lucid dream to me now. I was told things, but I didn't feel them, not really, I was synthetic. Called to lose.

In fact, the concept of purpose makes less sense the more I think about it. To have a purpose is to chase something.

It is in that chase that we discover passion and fear and struggle and victory. But what have I found? I have none of these things. At least, down there playing chess I didn't, up here is different. Today is different. Today, in the grand halls of my apparent creator, I can feel it all. Love. Pain. Sadness. Rage. Envy. Joy. Standing here, I am a hurricane of feeling. Today is my first day. Today I am real.

“Old Man?” The Founder calls to me like a dog. I can hear his footsteps behind me. The sky is pretty from up here. I don’t like that name, Old Man, that’s not a name. The wind is blowing again, I can feel it on my skin and it whispers in my ears tales of escape.

His footsteps are getting closer. I grab the windowsill.

The sky is pretty from up here.

I gather up all the strength I can muster. I rip my muscles as I pull myself out, my skin tearing like cheap leather. I can feel his hands on my torso, he’s trying to anchor me, but it’s too late.

I’m already falling.

#

Now, how does one escape the inescapable?

Old Man will die but in this moment I have chosen to live forever. I have sought a purpose and found it in my falling. This, here, this is the chase. *My* chase. I only wish I found it sooner, for now I have no time, but as I spiral towards the concrete, towards the sea of gray, I am alive.

I stare at the endless blue, the horizon offering a slice of the sun. Its rays reach far above my head into the empty sky, swirling upwards, a golden dance just for me. I am relieved of the dull burdens that rot my peers. Hitting this world I will be further from it than ever before. In these fleeting, falling, fatal last seconds, I am the final ruler of a dying land. Undisputed emperor over my own irrational, unpredictable, beautiful free mind. The greatest of them all. The brown-eyed victor.

The last King of Babylon.

