City of the Future

By Tom Jenney

Illustrations by Leonardo

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This story will be part of the second edition of the *American Futures* story collection. The three volumes of the first edition of *American Futures* are available in Kindle and paperback at Amazon.
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To integrate “City of the Future” into the rest of the collection in the first edition, you can add it mentally to the Authoritarian Mercantilist section in Volume 2 and use the following probabilities for the story outcomes: “Order and Prosperity” (01-30), “City of the Future” (31-70), “Herding Cats” (71-98), and “Significance” (99-00).

EVERYBODY'S A PERP. Even you. If they ever come after you, they'll find plenty. Enough to lock you away for life in a labor camp. But they're not going to come after you. At least, not anytime soon. You're a National Detective, Level Three, in good standing, with a near-perfect Social Cred score. Anybody who watched you carefully for a week would know you didn't deserve a

near-perfect score, but a high score is one of the perks of being one of the *federales*.

Your beat is nothing fun or glamorous, like homicide or sex crimes. You do financial crimes in the Southern Border Zone. Mainly money laundering. Sometimes your work helps solve a murder or a drug ring, and the Dodge (the DOJ) credits you with an assist. The best part is getting to see vids from the crimes.

You get to see some crazy shit. And it's a limited audience. Some of the vids get leaked out on the Dodge slack channels, but that's not supposed to happen. Usually, the only people who get to see the vids are the detectives, the prosecutors, and the admin judge. Outside the SBZ, some trials still go to "juries" of citizens, but around here, it's limited screening all the time.

You came to Bisbee on a whim. Most of the time, you'd rather be in DC, where you grew up. Where they have real trees and real seasons and loads of pretty girls who've been to college. But you're here, in a tight little valley on a high island of scrub oak and manzanita above the Sonoran Desert.

In theory, with the Digital Dollar, there shouldn't be any money laundering. In theory, you and the other national agencies should be able

to track every single dollar that moves in the economy. But you had Econ 101, you had eight semesters of accounting, and you've had 12 years in the School of Real Life. People always find a way to buy illegal goods and services. Old-fashioned paper cash is preferred on the street. It trades at a good premium over the DD. People like the old Benjamins, the ones without the tracker threads – if they're still somewhat crisp. But

not too crisp. A bill that looks too new probably has a thread.

There are some gold and silver coins circulating in the SBZ, but they're clunky. Perps use gold ounces and halfies for big purchases. Cars and big house repairs. For smaller trades, you've seen an uptick in pre-1964 quarters and dimes – called "blackies" because of their tarnish.

Even in prison, the cons have currencies. Your buddy Robert works in Sierra Vista as a Level Three C.O. for National Prison Unit 34. NPU 34 is officially named the Biden-Trump Unit. (It was one of the American Party's early gestures of national unity.) Robert shows you vids from the panop. You take cash away from prisoners, and they trade in cigarettes or nicotine pouches. You take the cigarettes and pouches away and they trade tiny stuff like fentanyl or acid

tabs. They also barter in the service economy. They trade blow jobs and butt rams from their captive bitches. Whenever Biden-Trump runs out of anti-priapics to put in their food, the boys are back at it. You'd think being on the panop would slow them down, but it doesn't.

Robert says he doesn't let drugs into the joint. But he does trade in wigs and lingerie. They're big commodities. The guys ramming

butts and getting BJs like their bitches to wear wigs and lingerie so they can pretend the bitches are women. And they like them skinny. Some of the guys like men, but it's a macho culture in there. Traditional gender roles aren't going away. Maybe the bitches think the wigs disguise them. But even if their faces are hidden, and even if they roll down their unis so the numbers aren't visible, the cell numbers are clearly visible in the panop vids. The numbers even show

up on the nightvision. The Bureau of Prisons has tried to ban wigs and lingerie, but Robert smuggles them to the cons, in exchange for favors from gangsters on the outside.

Robert's really funny. But he's a loser. He can't get a lot of dates, so he uses his chits with gangsters on the inside to date their *mamacitas*. From Robert's selfies, most of them are pretty. Former strippers, out of steady work now that the Morality

Department has shut down all the legit clubs. The *mamacitas* are hotter than Robert could normally get. Hotter than you can usually get, but you don't like dumb girls. And you don't like to deal directly with gangsters. You try to keep at least two degrees of separation.

Your main vice is being a snob. You like high-end booze and cigars, especially the foreign stuff. You grew up in Leesburg, VA. Your dad's high

up in the FBI and your mom has a desk job in Arlington at Total Information Awareness. Your parents taught you to be a wine snob and your dad always had boxes of contraband Cuban cigars. You went to Georgetown on a scholarship for kids of federal employees and spent your evenings at great restaurants and bars and clubs. When your allowance ran out, the sons and daughters of Arab oil sheikhs and Russian oligarchs

were there to buy rounds. Everything was top shelf.

Now, you're in a broken-down vintage mining town in the middle of nowhere. It's picturesque. Tourists love it. For a weekend. You liked it for a few weeks when you first moved here. But it got old quick. You've been here for eight years. You keep applying for transfers, and you keep getting rejected.

Since you got here, you've heard occasional rumors saying Bisbee is set to boom from the trade war that has shut off copper from Chile and Peru and Indonesia and other countries in the Chinese industrial network. They're supposedly going to reopen the Lavender Pit and start a new pit on the southwest end of the old Copper Queen. Supposedly, they're going to gut the whole backside of the mountain but leave the ridges on the south side of Bisbee standing like the

building facades in Old West movie sets. Real estate's going to go crazy. Any day now. Unfortunately, you bought into the rumors and had your dad co-sign on a mortgage. But the shitty old house you bought six years ago for $220K is listing for only $240K now – which means a big loss, given that inflation has now ramped up to almost ten percent per year. You're hoping to get promoted soon, sell your house at a small loss, and then get back inside the Beltway.

NINETY-FOUR STEPS. That's how many steps it takes to get from where you park on Mayer to your front yard. After eight years of climbing the steep and narrow stairs, where they wind between the foundations of your neighbors' houses, you're in good shape. You don't even use the handrail anymore – unless you're really drunk.


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Some of the stairs in Bisbee are elegant. But yours are mostly run-down. The stairs are an easement or a right-of-way, depending on which lawyer you ask. The handrail is a steel gas pipe that goes up the hill and feeds the heaters and stoves for a dozen houses on your hill. Zip-tied to the underside of the pipe are several presumably weatherproof cables going to houses that still have landlines and ethernet. Running along the side of the stairs is a six-

inch city water line. It's a tripping hazard for tourists and drunks, but having the pipes and cables above-ground is a good thing. The crumbling concrete steps are bad enough, without having wildcat contractors tear them up every year to repair lines or put in new ones. One of your neighbors runs a dragon-themed BnB. About five years ago, he poured 12 new steps near his back gate and pressed iron dragon

medallions into the cement. Those steps are good, but the rest are dicey.

Brian had trouble with the steps. Brian is the guy who is about to ruin your Saturday morning cigar session. He has just showed up at your door carrying a brown faux-leather briefcase. He has a mud stain on the left knee of his suit pants where he tripped at Step 33. He fell into a puddle made by a slow leak in the city pipe. There are two tiny mosquitos

smudged in the mud stain. The briefcase looks like it has fresh scuffs in its otherwise pristine upholstery. You're not one of those hyper-observant savant detectives from TV. But you had some basic detective training before you went into financial crimes. You're probably more observant than the average Joe.

Brian is sweating. It's only 7:14 am, but it's August, and he's a guy with a spare-tire paunch who just climbed 94

steps. There are no clouds yet, but the air is still humid from the monsoon that came through two days ago. You look again at his pant leg. It's wet from the knee down. He probably went through a half inch of water before hitting the mud. Most of the mosquitos on the surface of the water got away, but two got smashed. Crime solved.

Brian hands you a card and announces that he's a Level Seven from the

Bureau of Mines. He's very tall. Maybe six-seven. You're not short. You're just under six. But Brian's height and weight are imposing. He's in his mid-50s. He has visible veins in his nose. Longtime drinker. And he's probably hungover now. Probably flew into Tucson last night and partied. He could use a drink and some air conditioning. You let him in and gesture to the dirty couch you inherited from the previous owner. You offer him some coffee. When

you bring him a cup from the kitchen, you also bring a half-full plastic pint bottle of America's Best Whiskey. (The part about America is true.) He pours a big shot into his coffee.

"The Beast. You're a man after my own heart, Tommy."

You told him your name is Thomas, but Brian is the kind of guy who gives everyone a nickname. You hate it when people call you Tommy. You

hate it when big guys treat you like a kid. Also, you're not a drunk. Even if you were, you're not desperate enough to drink the Beast. You keep that for assholes like Brian who show up uninvited and call you Tommy.

You ask Brian what brings him to town.

"We're going to break the Chink Link, Tommy. Right here in Bisbee. This is where it's going to happen."

The “Chink Link” is what people call the Chinese industrial network and the international supply chain and trade system that feeds it. People say “Chink Link” when they want to sound tough or funny or patriotic. It’s officially approved slang, per a memo from two years ago from the American Language Council. You can’t refer to Chinese-Americans in good standing as “Chinks.” That undermines national unity and carries

a civil penalty. Jail time, if it can be construed as assault. In fact, it's best to not use the term "Chinese" at all. If they're in good standing, they're Americans. Full stop. But China is America's primary enemy, and it's fine to refer to Chinese nationals as "Chinks."

There are thousands of things you'd rather do right now than listen to Brian, but he's here, sweating on your couch. He has removed his suit coat

and has topped off his coffee with another splash of the Beast. Trying to sound like you're genuinely curious, you ask him if he really thinks Bisbee is the key to breaking the Chink Link.

He launches into a long monologue. It's typical Party-line booster crap, the kind of stuff you would see every day in the business news, if you could stand to read it. Copper is the most important resource in the 21st-century economy. (If he were in Northern

Arizona, he would be saying it's uranium. If he were in the Rust Belt, he would be saying it's steel.) In the global trade war, the Chinks have control – or are gaining control – of the copper from Chile, Peru, Indonesia and several other countries. (Brian names them, but you're only half listening at this point.) America could be totally self-sufficient in copper. We just need to get American mines back into operation. Using

American capital. Using American labor. Bring back good mining jobs.

You're not an expert, but you've been in Arizona now for eight years, so you have a layman's familiarity with the local copper industry. You ask the obvious question.

"The ore grades around here are really thin. They gave up 60 years ago. Why don't you just double down on the mines near Superior? Or the

bigger pits around Tucson and Ajo. Or in Mexico. Cananea has good ore, right? We can mine that stuff now. Mexico's a vassal state. Pardon me. It's an *integral strategic partner*."

"We're definitely doing that, Tommy. Full speed ahead for those operations. But Bisbee is the next rung on the ladder. The low ore grades are precisely the point. We must show the world that we shall pay any price.

Bear any burden. Meet any hardship."

You look it up later. Brian's quoting Cold War rhetoric from John F. Kennedy. The longer he talks, the clearer the picture comes into focus. Brian is a true believer. He's a hot warrior in the New Cold War. He's also a lifer at Mines. He's in his mid-50s. This is his last hoorah. He's going to resurrect Bisbee as a booming mining town after a century

of decline. It will take a decade, at least, to get things going. The mines will be in full production about the time he retires, and he can spend his sunset years basking in the success of the operation. He's going to move to Bisbee and get a house. He thinks he knows which one. Right on Tombstone Canyon, on the upper end of the road. He’s going to buy it in a year or so, when he gets the financing lined up.

In his pipe dream, Brian will sell the land and have some developer turn it into a high-rise. He wants cash, sure, but mostly he wants a guaranteed option on a good condo unit. Something high, with a good view down the canyon. He'll make sure the other buildings are zoned to be slightly lower. It will be a nice view, because the mines and the tailing ponds will all be out of sight on the south side of the ridge. He'll be able to go down to the monorail station on

the second floor of the building and ride the train out to Warren to the theater district he envisions. He can also ride the monorail to meetings at the Cochise Admin Unit building – formerly, the country courthouse – where he'll serve as an expert adviser.

Brian is going to make sure the feds build a good hospital, too. He's getting older. ("Gotta think about things like that at my age, Tommy.") A bunch of his neighbors in the high-

rise will be doctors. He'll have the inside line on the best specialists in the county. He's going to get his family to move there, too. His oldest daughter just got married. Maybe his grandkids will go to a school named in his honor. He doesn't want a lot of recognition. But having his name on a school would be nice.

"Just a little reminder to posterity of my success. Which is really

America's success. Not mine, you understand."

While you're nodding in affirmation, your phone rings on the encrypted line. It's Robert. He's laughing.

"Hey, T. Update from CECOT on the San Pedro. You gotta see this vid I got. I can't send it, but I'll keep it on a flip chip."

"I can't talk right now."

“New inmate in the Bravo unit. No gag reflex. You should see what kinda meat this guy can swallow. It’s unbelievable.”

You hang up. You’re always hanging up on Robert. He doesn’t take it personally. He doesn’t have enough emotional intelligence to take things personally.

“Okay, Brian. Why are you talking to me? I’m a lowly Level Three from Justice. I know nothing about mining.”

“You’re one of the only feds in town. And I want to start to get to know my future neighbors. This is a cute little town, and it’s going to be a great city in just a few years. And I think you’re going to be key to the future here. You’re a talented young man. Maybe someday, your name will be

on the Justice building. I think they should rehab that old county building. Keep the old facade but with modern guts...”

As he’s talking, Brian leans over and fingers in a code to open his briefcase. There’s some kind of machine in the briefcase, along with some papers. You fear that he’s going to launch a powerpoint – something like “Bisbee: Model City of the Glorious American Future” – and project it on the blank

wall across from the couch. Ideally, you would sand down the chipping paint on the wall and put on a fresh coat and hang a tasteful picture – if you had any intention of staying here.

Brian's machine is not a projector. It's some kind of signal jammer. When he switches it on, the signal on your phone goes out. All kinds of error messages start popping up on the screen: your apps are telling you they can't talk to their mother ships.

“We’re in the Cone of Silence now. But I wasn’t bullshitting you, Tommy. I believe in Bisbee. It’s going to be great. But I wanted to talk on the downlow. We’re got some *institutional* problems that could kill the whole project.”

“Lemme guess. Labor?”

“Bingo. Now don’t get me wrong. I believe in the Three-Legged Stool.

Labor, Capital and the State. I really do. But we can't have one of the legs wagging the whole dog."

You ignore the mixed metaphor.

"You need me to help you bust the union? You want me to get some cops and vigilantes together? Round up all the striking mine workers in Bisbee. Put em in boxcars, and ship em out to the middle of nowhere in the New Mexico desert?"

You're joking, of course. There are no mine workers in Bisbee. You don't control any cops or vigilantes. There aren't even any boxcars: it has been 60 years since any trains ran in or out of Bisbee. Your joke is a reference to the 1917 Bisbee Deportation, in which a thousand striking miners were shipped out of town at gunpoint. It was one of the most spectacular union-busting episodes in American history.

People aren't supposed to talk about labor-capital disputes. Officially, there are no disputes of any kind in America anymore. There haven't been any strikes since the American Party consolidated power a decade ago. But it's hard to spend much time in Bisbee without seeing references to the Old Days. Most iconic is the copper-covered concrete statue of a miner in front of the old county building. The miner stands in

an odd pose, shirtless, with a hammer in one hand and a spike in the other. It looks like the old Soviet-style socialist realism. A plaque says the statue is “dedicated to those virile men: the copper miners.”

If Bisbee actually mattered to anyone, the government probably would’ve commissioned a new statue for the spot. Last you read, the government had installed over 50,000 new pieces of art in parks and squares and

changed the wording on a quarter million plaques. The general message: Everyone in America comes together for the Common Good. But they haven't bothered to fix the Virile Miner. Bisbee doesn't matter to anyone except Brian and the tens of thousands of imaginary people who are going to move into his beautiful high-rise condos. Last you checked, Bisbee's official population was around 5,000 – but it must be half that during the summer.

Brian explains the situation. CentComm – the executive committee that tells Congress what to pass – is always doing a balancing act between interests. Right now, labor interests have the upper hand. They've put the kabosh on a lot of projects that would depend on cheap, non-union labor.

"Lemme guess. You want to bring a bunch of wetback miners up here to get the Bisbee mines going."

"*Integrals*." The official term has emphasis on the second syllable. "I'm not a racist, Tommy. Even in the Cone of Silence. I really believe we've gotten past all that."

"Okay. Integrals. You want to bring a bunch of integrals up here to get the Bisbee mines going."

"They work hard, and they can run all the latest machines and processes.

Even advanced metallurgy. My guy Contreras in Cananea has a great operation we could easily duplicate. We're still better at running some of the AI analysis modules. And we want the whole operation directed by Americans, of course. Most of that will be union. Anything above Level Three. And of course, all the city plans for Bisbee will have to be done by Americans. With me in the driver's seat, ideally. Or somewhere

close to the driver's seat. I'm not a *prima donna*, Tommy."

"And you think they've got a surplus of skilled wet – integral – labor down there?"

Brian explains that two of the mines in Zacatecas are getting shut down. His guy Contreras has more than enough workers in Cananea. In a matter of months, Brian and Contreras could bring 15,000 guys up to Naco

and house them in “nice new prefabs” on the other side. It’s only seven miles to the border, and Border Control would have special lanes set up for their buses to cycle through 24-7-365. Brian has already gotten pre-approval from the national DOT to get an exclusive bus lane paved from the border all the way to Warren.

“The skids are all greased, Tommy. We just can’t do it with American Ones, Twos, or Threes. It doesn’t

come anywhere close to penciling out."

"I'm a Level Three."

"You and me are Aff-Gee, Tommy. I'm not saying we don't do hard work. But we don't produce anything that people can buy or sell. Aff-Gee's a union, technically. But unions are a whole different matter in the private sector. And I hope you can see that I really have a vision. I want to get

things done. I want to break the Chink Link. I want to resurrect Bisbee. I'm not just punching the clock and warming some seat cushion in DC."

"Why do you think you're safe bringing me in on your plan? Whatever it is. You've haven't gotten to the dirty part yet."

Brian laughs and pours another splash of the Beast into his empty coffee cup.

"I'm Level Seven, Tommy. I've seen your profile. Your *real* profile. You've been in Arizona for eight years, and you've applied six times to get a transfer back to DC. You grew up around big horse properties in Virginia. Black fences, prep schools. You went to Georgetown. You like good wine. Good whiskey. Not this

crap. You like fancy girls. Smart girls who've been to a university. When you opened the door, you were finishing a nice cigar. Padrón 1926 torpedo, it looked like. Right?"

"Close, Sherlock. 1964. Want one?"

"No, thank you. I'll pass. In my position, I try to avoid buying foreign contraband. Smoking one of your cigars would be thirdhand, in my case. No big penalty. But I'll pass.

From my research, I'm guessing you probably get them in Sierra Vista. Probably the back of that hobby shop. Supposedly, the *federales* don't know how the guy gets them from the cartels. They tell me they don't have enough information to prosecute. I'm sure they do know, but the feds around here like good cigars as much as the next guy."

He takes out a can of tobaccoless snuff and inserts a pouch in his upper

gum. It's American Patriot. Wintergreen, 3 mg. He offers you the can and you take a pouch. The flavor's dull. It doesn't bite like it should. But you can use the nicotine right now. You're feeling a little nervous. Brian has just hinted at the fact that you commit multiple felonies on a regular basis. But you don't buy from the hobby shop very often. You get most of your smokes from the evidence locker at the Customs building in Sierra Vista. Your fellow

buyers are mostly Army officers from Fort Hawley (formerly Fort Huachuca).

“I’m not trying to blackmail you, Tommy. And I’m not judging. Nobody’s clean. Get a search warrant and spend a day digging through the Federal Register, and you can send anybody up the river. It’s been that way for decades. Did you know it’s still illegal to sell Swiss cheese that doesn’t have holes? That’s probably

been on the books since the New Deal. And from what I've seen, your *peccadillos* are pretty small stuff, in the big scheme."

Brian picks up the pint of Beast. It's almost empty now, so he offers you the courtesy of having some before he finishes it.

"I know you have better stuff around here somewhere."

You don't need a drink, but you've been outed as a snob, so you add a splash to your coffee, which has been sitting cold on the table. You pass the bottle back to Brian. He tips it back and finishes the last swig. For appearances, you take a sip of coffee, but the Beast has made it wretched.

"I wouldn't carry blackies, Tommy. They just upped the penalties. You know that – you're in Financial Crimes. You're probably gearing up

for the next big crackdown. Besides, I go through a bunch of metal detectors every day and fly somewhere every week. I don't need security guards and TSA goons taking a quarter from me every time I go through a screen."

You have three blackie quarters in a fold in your wallet. $150 worth. Under the new guidelines, that's a felony amount.

“If I had a house like this, I wonder where I would hide them. Plenty of rotten floorboards. But that seems too obvious.”

It *would* be too obvious. You’ve always liked to hide things in plain sight. You keep yours in a mason jar full of pennies on your kitchen counter. The blackies are in a condom in the middle, surrounded by pennies. You have some tenth-ounce gold coins in the jimmy, too.

“Okay, Brian. What do you want from me?”

“I want you to be successful, Tommy. And yes, I want you to help me. But I want to help you. You have a lot of potential. Imagine this. I pull some strings. We move you to Level Four, and you do the bare minimum of three months. Then we move you up to Level Five, as Deputy Assistant Director of the Arizona FinCEN

Office. It's a good post. In that slot, you can do as little or as much as you want. You'll be making $150K and you'll have travel vouchers for at least one flight a month to Dulles. You can stretch out your visits and get about one week a month back home."

"So, what's the catch?"

"I just need you to everything necessary to make the Bisbee project work. Nothing fancy. Nothing shady.

Just exercise some investigative and prosecutorial discretion."

"Who do you need me to take down?"

Brian looks at the jammer and checks his phone to verify that the signals are still scrambled.

"Wilson. Federated Extractive. They absorbed the United Mine Workers. But you know that."

The name Wilson brings up an image. You're thinking of a thick old union guy in a three-piece, with a big face like a Christmas ham. Rumors of deep contacts in the mob.

"I gather that he has CentComm locked up against your Bisbee project."

"She. Mallory Wilson. She inherited the position from her old man, who

was head boss at UMW for decades. Anthony Wilson."

Anthony Wilson was the Christmas ham. His daughter must be old enough to be married but kept the name. Now you're imagining a bull dyke in overalls with buzz cut and a face like a small Christmas ham.

"Hard target?"

“You know how it works. Anybody can be taken down. But we need a good case. It can’t be the usual chicken shit stuff.”

“Mob connections? Cartels?”

“Definitely. But from what I hear, she covers her tracks. She’s got her old man’s connections. She couldn’t’ve taken over without them. But she doesn’t have the baggage. I think he had seven indictments and a

dozen grand juries, back in the day. In the old days, the feds were always running investigations on him. They might've gotten him, eventually. But he went cardiac. And things are different now. *Institutional*."

"The Three-Legged Stool. Why not get someone in DC to do it? Someone higher up, with a whole squad of detectives and goons."

“First, the hit’s gotta come from outside of the Beltway. Second, it’s gotta be a legit case. Not chicken shit. Also, Mallory spends a lot of time in Tucson. Lives in a fancy compound in the hills. If she meets with any mob or cartel types, she probably does it in Tucson. I need you to watch her until you find something big.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad.”

“It’s really not, Tommy. I’m not asking you to do anything illegal. Just some old-fashioned detective work. And keep the case to yourself. If you work with anyone to follow any leads, don’t ever say who the real target is.”

“Nothing illegal. But it’s political. That’s worse.”

“Leave the politics to me. You just do your job. We can trade numbers.

Just text me a happy message if things are going well. 'The weather's great right now. I'm never moving back to DC.' Something like that. And text something negative if you run into any problems. 'It's hot as hell right now. You'll need misters at your monorail stations.' I could get us a secure end-to-end for emergencies. But I don't think so. I really don't want anything ever recorded. If you text me about being injured – you stubbed your toe jogging or

something – I'll get on a plane. Or I'll come find you, if I'm here."

You nod in agreement. Minimal conversation with Brian will be a bonus.

"But... we should arrange to do some occasional public encounters. Totally casual. Just you and me having normal conversations. I've got a big budget for winning friends and

influencing people. We'll start tonight at 7 o'clock at Roka."

You think of five possible excuses for not having dinner. But it's not an offer. It's mandatory. Which sucks. Roka is the only decent foodie place in town. It's on its third owner, but the chefs are trying hard to preserve the quality of the original.

At Roka, you're friends with the head waiter, Colin. He's probably your

best friend in town. Usually, you dine alone. Just you and great food and good foreign wine they keep out of sight. You and Colin have intelligent conversations. He got an MA in philosophy from Arizona. When you walk into the place with someone new – which you prefer not to do – you give him a finger signal. One finger means your dining companion is a cool guy, or a girl you're actually interested in. Two fingers mean your companion is someone from work or

a girl you just want to fuck because you're bored. Three fingers mean the guest is a douchebag from DC. Brian will get three fingers. A fist bump means the guest is likely to get drunk and rowdy. Brian doesn't seem like the rowdy type. He's more like a day drunk. One of these characters whose bloodstream runs on ethanol.

WE'RE GOING TO rewind now – ten years – to explain how you experienced the "alien" abduction.

It was on a cold Tuesday in early March, a few days after your 25th birthday. You had recently completed night classes at GW, where you got your CPA and a Master's in Criminal Justice. You had done most of the basic Dodge training modules and you were keeping your options open with some FBI training.

When you suddenly found yourself in what seemed to be a hotel room, you were not alarmed. At Quantico the year before, you had done a week of SERE (Search, Evasion, Resistance and Escape) training. You figured this was more of the same. Or maybe the spooks at Langley were interested in acquiring you as an agent. They must've knock you out or dosed you with an amnesiac of some kind, because your last memory was

leaving your apartment in Old Town Alexandria. You were going to stop at Misha's for a triple macchiato before getting on the Metro and riding into town to your cubicle at the Dodge. Then suddenly, you were wide awake, lying in a bed in what appeared to be an ordinary mid-budget hotel room. Your phone was gone. In the large adjoining room of the suite was a bunch of exercise equipment, including a treadmill. There also was a desk with a laptop

and stereo speakers so that you could blast music while you worked out.

You quickly figured out that you were going to be a long-term captive. There were no doors in the suite and none of the usual ceiling panels or ductwork. There was a diffused light in the room that felt like sunlight and that stayed on for 12 hours at a time before dimming gradually into darkness. The “window” in the bedroom was some kind of video

screen which always projected stars and a distant sun. When you used the laptop to go on the internet, you found that you could not access any of your email accounts or post or comment on any social sites.

Meals would appear on your bedstand at appropriate times of the day. They always seemed to appear when you were in the bathroom or working out or surfing the internet. The food was surprisingly good and it varied over

the course of two weeks. Every three nights, you would get a quarter carafe of wine and a glass. The wine was decent and paired well with whatever meal had appeared.

You decided early on that this was some kind of sanity test, so you set a disciplined routine for yourself. You woke up with a run on the treadmill, gradually increasing to five miles a day. The internet service bypassed paywalls, so after breakfast you took

your cup of coffee to the desk and read national and international news and high-brow commentary for much of the morning. After lunch, you started reading literature, working backwards from Greek and Roman classics though a Great Books list. You made digital annotations to the books as you read and looked up obscure references. (You were genuinely curious to read the Great Books, but you also wanted to show your captors that you were setting up

a long-term project – they could keep you for months or years, if they wanted to.) When you got bored with whatever lit book you were reading, you switched to modern non-fiction, mostly bestsellers on science and politics.

In the late afternoon, you hit the barbells and weight machines and did yoga poses. After dinner, you brushed and flossed your teeth and studied Italian on a language app for

an hour. Then you listened to mellow music – soft classical, usually – until the suite was completely dark. Oddly, you had no urge to jack off – which was just as well, because you were certain that your captors were watching you. They must have drugged you on Sunday nights, because on Monday mornings, you woke up in clean sheets, and with fresh towels in a clean bathroom.

After about a week, you noticed that "you" were posting things to social media about some of the books you were reading. "You" got a few likes. When someone commented, "you" commented back. "You" sounded like you: some wry and cynical comments, but nothing provocative. The really strange part was that "you" appeared about once a month in photos posted by family members and a few close friends. Whatever was going on, your family and friends

must have been in on the deep fakes. That seemed like good news: whoever had abducted you was in communication with your family and friends. Presumably, you were not going to be disappeared.

It occurred to you that maybe someone in the government was creating an undercover profile for you. Maybe they would embed your new persona inside a corporation. Have you mole in as a junior

accountant or something until you discovered fraud or corruption or dealings with a cartel or some Russian oligarch. For a CPA, that would be as close as you got to being James Bond. You were not an ass-kicker. Ever since you had gotten interested in girls in high school, you had kept yourself in shape. "Curls for girls." After a low-calorie week and a day of dehydration, you could sport six-pack abs for the beach. But you were not a tough guy. Some guys were, and

some were not. You had figured out early on that you were not. You did some kick-boxing at the gym every week, but it was just for the full-body workout.

After exactly one year of captivity, you awoke in your apartment in Alexandria at your normal wakeup time. Your phone was on your bedside table. It had a normal quantity of work-related emails and a couple of unread texts. You had the

texts set to delete after a month, so you didn't have a long record of what "you" had told people. Scrolling through, you saw nothing interesting. Just texts between you and family members and a couple of close friends. Stuff like, "Meet us at 7 at Tony and Joe at Wash Harbor," and you responding with thumbs-up emojis. And a few texts and work emails from your supervisors at the Dodge. Presumably, these folks all

had some knowledge that you were going undercover.

It was a workday, so you showered and got dressed. You wanted to blend in, so you wore a dark gray suit with a tie in muted tones. It was clear and cold outside, so you put on a plain gray woolen herringbone overcoat. You brought a black scarf, partly on the hunch that you might need to obscure your face from the surveillance cameras on the Metro.

But you had received no instructions to that effect, so you just covered your neck and ears and stepped out into the brisk air.

The barista at Misha's was new, so you didn't have to deal with anyone saying, "Haven't seen you around for a while." You ordered your customary macchiato and walked to the Metro station. You took the orange line and scrolled through news feeds on your phone. As you had

seen while in captivity, DC seemed to be going through a lull in real news. It was the same old stuff. Important bills were bogged down in committee and various Members of Congress were making partisan accusations of ethics violations by Members on the other side.

You got off at the Archives stop and surfaced into the cold. At the east entrance to the DOJ building, there was a new pair of security guards

working the metal detector. One of them grunted a greeting and scanned your badge. When you got to the third floor, you headed to your cubicle. Nobody gave you a strange look. Everyone must've gotten the memo that you were on special assignment away from training. In any case, you had never done much chit-chat with your colleagues. You were an introvert, and you had always followed your dad's advice and

avoided mixing work with your outside life.

You opened your laptop on your desk and started digging through your recent emails. Your direct supervisor, Doug, had sent you some encrypted files related to a new FinCEN investigation. You opened them and found five years' worth of financial records from a South Dakota holding company that had about $43 million in annual revenues and $20 million in

net assets. Around ten, Doug came by and asked if you had a chance to look at the files he sent. You told him you had just started looking.

“FinCEN is hoping we’ll find something in the LLCs,” Doug said. “The holding company is named as the beneficial owner for a dozen of them, registered in a bunch of states.”

You wondered if you were going to be assigned to work undercover at the

holding company. But a $43 million company was not much of a target. From what you could tell, the company had just a few dozen employees spread out across all the LLCs it had started or acquired. Of course, you would not bring up the topic of undercover work. You would wait for Doug to bring it up.

“What do they think the company is up to?”

“They haven’t said. They just said they want us to dig into the LLCs and see if everything is straight. Right now, it sounds like they’re working on a paperwork bust. I know, kinda lame. But maybe they’re actually digging for something real. Anyway, ours is not to reason why.”

“Yes, sir.”

You tried to look eager and professional about accepting the

assignment. But it was a lame assignment. Or it sure looked like one. Looking back through your old work emails and your assignment tracker, it appeared that “you” had spent the last year digging into LLCs for FinCEN. “You” had apparently found nothing actionable.

You weren’t surprised. FinCEN paperwork busts were chicken shit. The Corporate Transparency Act had been tucked into the National Defense

Authorization Act in 2020 and had been passed over Trump's veto. When the program was supposed to go into effect in 2025, the Treasury put a hold on the program for a couple years before quietly reinstating it. It required most of the 35 million LLCs in the country to file information on the "beneficial owners" – the *real* owners – of the LLCs. The idea was to catch more money laundering by giving the federal government more information about small companies

that had previously been under-regulated by state governments.

Of course, it wasn't chicken shit for the millions of people who had to file. People who failed to file or who filed incorrect information were subject to two years in jail, a $10,000 fine, and $500 per day in penalties. But the program wasn't very effective at catching money laundering. If the owner of a Mexican food restaurant was laundering money for a cartel

heavy, the owner wasn't going to declare in his FinCEN reports that the heavy was the beneficial owner of the restaurant's LLC. First, the restauranteur probably regarded himself as the actual owner, regardless of how much cash the cartel was running through the place. Second, a cartel threatened much heavier penalties than two years in jail for any restauranteur who dared to roll over on the cartel. At best, the FinCEN mandate was just another

way to stack charges: when a cartel heavy got caught doing something big and bad, the paperwork violations would be added to the stack and become a bargaining chip in a plea bargain or a snitch deal.

As you learned from your emails, FinCEN and the Dodge were working on using AI systems to search through the millions of reports that had been submitted. But that approach had been a total failure, thus far. You and

the other accountants working in financial crimes operated on hunches you got when you spent many hours looking at a firm's reports. "You" had apparently participated in several remote working groups to help design algorithms to guide AI searches – to turn the hunches of individual human investigators into something that could be scaled up by the AIs. "You" had suggested the same ideas the other investigators had submitted: look for high ratios of cash

transactions, large individual cash transactions (at that moment, $250 was the suggested threshold), and relatively high debt burdens owed to small lenders, especially non-bank lenders. But the people at FinCEN had different ideas. The latest was targeting holding companies with multiple LLCs in more than two states. Hence your most recent assignment.

You spent most of the rest of the week and the first half of the next week at your desk. From what you could tell, the South Dakota company looked squeaky clean. It was owned by trusts set up by the Robinson family, and most of the LLCs were farming operations. Old Man and Old Lady Robinson were living in an elder care facility outside of Denver. They had both come from relatively well-off farming families. His had been based in Missouri and hers in North

Dakota. 50 years ago, when they had started having their four kids, they had set up the trusts to protect the family wealth from the spouses their kids might marry. They had availed themselves of the usual tax-dodge trusts and named various children as directors of eight farms held in trust as LLCs. The FinCEN documents had been filed by a reputable law firm based in Pierre.

Looking back through benchmark data on farm prices and crop yields for the previous 20 years, you found nothing interesting. The family had done well in 2022 and 2023, but so had everyone else in the farm sector. Over the decades, they had plowed extra farm income in the stock market. From the confidential reports you got from the IRS, their income in recent years had been entirely normal given what they had in assets. The houses and lifestyles of the Robinson

kids – and the private schools attended by the grandkids – did not seem out of line with the family's visible income. Two years ago, the two sons had taken $18,000 out of the country to go pheasant shooting in Britain – but that wasn't unreasonable for a week at a posh estate in Dorset.

THE FOLLOWING WEDNESDAY, on what seemed to be a normal day, you woke up at your apartment. You

decided to take a work-from-home day. After going to the gym, you grabbed a macchiato from Misha's and headed back to your apartment. You sat down on your couch and started firing up the work VPN on your laptop. Your plan for the morning was to file a short report on the Robinson investigation, with polite suggestions to your sub-department and FinCEN on how to tweak the AI algorithms. You were also trying to think of a polite way to

say that digging into a company with $43 million in assets was a waste of everyone's time. Your plan after that was to meet up for a late lunch with your buddy Tyler, who worked for a defense contractor. You hadn't seen him for a year, but he was apparently in on the undercover scheme because his text that morning suggested you meet him at the Austin Grill, which he referred to as "the Tex-Mex place we went to last month."

The morning didn't go the way you had planned.

As you were entering the six-digit code the Dodge VPN system had sent to your pager, you heard a woman's voice. It seemed to be coming from inside your head, rather than from your phone or your laptop.

"Thank you for participating in our experiment," the voice said, in a low alto. The woman sounded like a

hottie. “We trust that you were comfortable on board our spacecraft. We are conducting a social experiment on humanity, starting with America. You must choose a political ideology to dominate America for at least a decade. You can choose from a menu of 14 ideologies we will download to your brain. Once you choose an ideology, we will ensure that the ideology will be very popular among Americans for a decade.”

“After the first decade, we will stop controlling people’s minds and will allow human nature to reassert itself. The majority of people in America may stop agreeing with your ideology. If you choose an ideology that is inherently unstable, the government will likely become less stable over time. If the government imposes policies that contradict human nature, your wishful thinking will not magically make the policies work the way you want them to. And,

at no point will we suspend the laws of economics. We will give you a final assessment after 75 years. In what you call the year 2100."

Your first thought, which you also uttered out loud, was "What the FUCK?!"

Your second thought was surprise that you knew exactly which 14 political ideologies she was talking about. You had been only minimally

interested in politics your whole life. Growing up in DC tended to inoculate a lot of Beltway kids against the kind of political fervor that drew outsiders to the place. At any point in college and in grad school, you could much more easily name 13 bands that were going to be playing at the Black Cat that year than name Virginia's 13 delegates to Congress.

But at that moment, sitting on your couch, you had in your mind brief

synopses of: 1) contemporary American centrism, 2) left-liberalism, 3) progressive social democracy, 4) democratic socialism, 5) neo-conservatism, 6) nationalist conservatism, 7) paleo-conservatism, 8) centralist libertarianism, 9) paleo-libertarianism, 10) market anarchism, 11) anarcho-syndicalism, 12) collectivist communism, 13) nationalist fascism, and 14) authoritarian mercantilism. Prior to that moment, you had heard of most

of those ideologies. Maybe in your sophomore poli sci class at Georgetown. But mostly through osmosis, in the political news stories you had mostly skimmed or ignored in recent years.

[To read the explanations of the ideological options, go to the Menu on page 19 in the Kindle version of *American Futures*, or near the beginning of any of the three printed volumes.]

Your guess was that your captors had "downloaded" that information through some kind of sleep-based or drug-induced hypnosis during the year you were held in the "spacecraft." Now, they had somehow triggered your memory of the information. Maybe the trigger was the tone of the hottie voice, or some high-frequency signal embedded in the recording of her voice. Did it come through the VPN?

Was the transmitter hidden in your apartment? Had they implanted something in your ear? Or your brain? You were trying to remember what the instructors at Quantico had said about modern hypnosis techniques.

But... ideologies? Choosing an ideology? For America? For an experiment? What did this have to do with undercover work? You spoke again, but you didn't shout – whoever

you were dealing with, you needed to demonstrate self-control.

“You want me to choose an ideology?”

“We are conducting a social experiment on America,” said the hottie voice. “You must choose a political ideology to dominate America for at least a decade. Please make your choice before you go to sleep tonight.”

You were confused. Mostly, you were angry. They couldn't have held you for a year just for some political quiz. This was some kind of test. Maybe testing your patriotism. You restrained your anger.

"Can I talk about this with Tyler?"

"Feel free to consult anyone you wish. Please make your choice before you go to sleep tonight."

This was one hell of a mind-fuck. Probably CIA. You had to reconcile yourself to the fact that you were still in some kind of surveilled captivity. You tried to remember your SERE training. The most important thing was to stay on a routine.

You grabbed your laptop and logged into the VPN. You filed your report, fighting to keep your tone professional and not drop F-bombs

into the text. You did make your suggestions sharper than normal, with a preamble about giving your sub-department and FinCEN "direct feedback" and avoiding giving them a "feedback sandwich." They needed better algorithms, and one of the algos was a $100 million threshold. Anything smaller than that would risk being a "waste of scarce resources" and "especially, resources used to train and deploy undercover assets." You added, "We often spend millions

of dollars on lawyer salaries and overhead for a single investigation, if it drags out and goes to trial. And we don't always win these cases or force good plea settlements. My recommendation is to focus on the big fish."

After you filed the report and logged off, you showered and put on casual clothes and a warm overcoat with a fleece liner. You arrived at Austin Grill early, grabbed a two-top in a

corner under a music speaker, and ordered a Diet Coke. You were trying to avoid carbs, but you were on your second bowl of chips when Tyler joined you.

Like you, and like most of your close friends, Tyler was the son of what the conspiranoids called Deep Staters. You and Tyler called them Guardians of the Realm. Your dad was FBI and Tyler's dad was, as he put it, "some kind of spook, officially retired."

Your dads occasionally played golf together. You and Tyler had met playing lacrosse and partying at McLean Prep. Before you ordered food, Tyler talked about the sexual proclivities and questionable sanity of his latest girlfriend. She had a "somewhat sane" friend Tyler thought you might like.

After you ordered, you made a move to steer the conversation toward the topic of your recent absence and your

current situation – without providing details.

“How are the Guardians of the Realm?”

“Same old stuff,” Tyler said. “But older. Pops never fails to complain about ‘the kids these days’ and about the ‘sorry state of the Republic.’”

Your dad was prone to uttering similar sentiments. From everything

you had gleaned in the past, your dads and the typical Guardian were not cynics. The view of the conspiranoids was that Deep Staters were all cynical grifters. Your experience was that the older Guardians were mostly disappointed idealists. They had gone into government and stayed in government because they really believed that what they were doing was crucial to national security, domestic tranquility, economic prosperity, etc.

By contrast, the people in your generation – especially Beltway kids – were much more cynical. You and Tyler were Exhibit A. You had gone into the Dodge because it looked like the only path forward for a guy who needed steady income, wasn't cut out to be an action figure, and didn't have the skill or ambition to make a shit-ton of money. You also chose the Dodge because it attracted smart girls – lawyers and paralegals – who were

more feminine than the she-males who went into the FBI. You liked girls who could converse on a range of topics. Girls who went to law school were also likely to have some family money: they could pitch in a little to pay for the costs of beach house rentals on the Eastern Shore or week vacations in Quebec or Europe. Tyler was more ambitious when it came to money. He worked for a defense contractor because “that’s where the money is” and because he

could leverage his dad's connections in Langley and at the Pentagon.

You were still wondering how your period of captivity was going to set you up for undercover work. You decided to feel Tyler out on that.

"I'm looking at maybe doing some kind of remote work. It would be cool if the Dodge sent me somewhere. Get out of town for a while."

“They don’t have a lot of foreign placements, right?”

You nodded.

“They should. They should send you to the Bahamas. Or Cyprus. Some money laundering place that has beaches. If you get that kinda gig, I’ll bring girls. Or maybe you can supply the girls.”

Tyler then mentioned a double dinner date “you” went on with him over the summer in Rehoboth. Girls “you” had met at the beach.

“You ever hook up with that hottie?”

Tyler was definitely in on the “spacecraft” game. But what game were they playing? Who exactly was playing? And what was the fucking point? You had no idea which hottie

Tyler was referring to, but you played along.

“Nah. I got a sketch vibe from her.”

“Dang. Sketch or not, you shoulda tapped that.”

You decided to test the “ideology” angle. Like you, Tyler was totally apolitical. You were interested to hear what he might say. After the food came, you launched.

“You ever think about politics?”

“Nah. I mean, other than military procurement. I gotta track that stuff. But that’s business, not politics. You mean ‘politics’ like all the people yelling at each other on Capitol Hill?”

“Yeah. Politics. Ideology. That kinda stuff.”

“Not really. I’m registered independent. Part of that’s for work, so I look totally neutral. But part of it’s that I don’t know enough or care enough to pick a side.”

“If you had to choose a side, which one would you choose?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t even vote last time. I’m a bad American. If I got serious about it, I’d probably ask my dad. I think he’s registered

independent, too. But he definitely has opinions. I probably get my opinions from him."

You fumbled for questions to ask. You were not in the habit of talking about politics.

"But like, what do you think? You think this country is okay? Or is everything fucked up?"

Tyler chewed for a while.

“I really don’t know. If I had to put money on it – which I kinda have, given my job – I’d guess that we’re okay in the short run. But there’s the debt thing. That can’t be good. And outside of high-end defense technology – my line of work – we don’t make a lot of stuff in America anymore. No matter who’s in power, the trade deficit keeps going up. If there is a fix for any of this stuff, I don’t think we’re going to fix it with

the current parties. Everybody in DC is dug into their trenches. Red trench. Blue trench. Fighting for a few yards. Same old shit. Every year or so, you hear about some big compromise. Moderates on both sides are for it, but it never gets done. The extremists in the parties always kill it. My dad's always saying, 'We don't need two parties. We need one party. The *American* party.' Since when do you care about this shit?"

Tyler sounded like the same Tyler. But you calculated before you responded. If Tyler was in on the "spacecraft" game, you were probably being recorded. Or he would report back to someone.

"I don't really care," you say. "I mean, I do care. I want what's best for this country. Strong national defense. Strong economy. We make the important stuff here. Good jobs. Workers feel like they're getting paid

to make important stuff. The government does the stuff it needs to do. We take care of poor people. But not too much. We take care of sick people. We make the environment clean. But we can't tax people so much that they stop working and inventing stuff. I'm not a commie or a socialist. And I'm not much of conservative. Maybe the crime stuff. We have a lot of criminals. They need to get locked up. But you know me. I'm not a church guy. I'm still

out bangin' hotties. Not much recently... Maybe I'll settle down one of these days and become a good family guy. But I'm not ready for that yet. I think I'm a contemporary American centrist."

"What the hell is that?"

Was Tyler was playing dumb? Maybe he was in on the cover-up for your abduction but wasn't in on the ideology "experiment."

“It’s a term I learned recently. It’s basically just middle-of-the-road. The Republicans are good on some stuff. The Democrats are good on other stuff. They ought to meet in the middle somewhere.”

“Yeah,” Tyler said. “That’s probably what I am. But I don’t think they’ll ever meet in the middle. I keep thinking my dad’s right. We don’t need two parties. We need one party.

When China needs to do something, they can just do it. We shouldn't go full China. But it would be good for a few years for the parties to stop fighting over stupid stuff. Pro-Trump. Anti-Trump. Just focus on getting stuff done. Fix the debt. Get American manufacturing on top again. Stop churning out so many high school grads who can't even fuckin read. Focus our defense budget on stuff we actually need. Not

shit like the LCS. Fuckin Christmas trees...”

You had heard Tyler rant before about LCS. He was talking about the Navy’s fleet of littoral combat ships, which had become famous for cost overruns over the past two decades. Congress couldn’t decide on which ship design they wanted, so they funded two different designs to satisfy two groups of lobbyists. From what Tyler had told you, neither design was

very effective in operation. The "Christmas tree" referred to way lobbyists from different companies and pork-barreling Members of Congress added more and more expensive "ornaments" to projects. The implication was that the weight of the ornaments ended up pulling down the whole tree.

"... at least for a while. Not forever. Maybe ten years. We don't want to go full China. There are some good

things about democracy. Great things. We don't want to lose that. We just need a time-out so the politicians can learn how to work together again. And fix stuff so this country doesn't go bankrupt. But what do I know? I hate politics."

Good question. What did Tyler know about your situation? He said, "ten years." A decade. You remembered the hottie voice in your apartment, saying you had to choose an ideology

for a decade. That told you all you needed to know.

“Okay, Ty. Enough of that shit. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Good. I forgot to tell you I’m doing an informal survey. It’s very important.”

He grabbed his phone and opened a notes app. He typed in “Thomas” and looked at you.

“Okay. Hawt or not? Scale of one to ten. Be honest... Caitlyn Clark.”

“Ten. Greatest three-point shooter of all time. So far.”

“Don’t be a douchebag. Hawt or not? One to ten. Initial reaction. Then you can hedge.”

“Nine. But I want to hedge.”

“Okay, hedge.”

“Nine. But I’m worried she might turn out to be a man or something. A really hawt dude. Not hatin on the trannies. Also, I have no idea if she’s smart. She seems smart. But she’s all game. All the time. Which she should be. I’d love to walk around with her and see the jaw-drops. She’s an inch taller than me. In heels she’d be way taller and I’d have that short-guy thing, where people think, ‘That

guy must be all that.’ And we’d have giant kids someday.”

“So, what’s the hedge?”

“Seven. In case she’s not very smart. Or doesn’t want to talk about anything but basketball. Or has a bad personality.”

“You’re par for the course. That’s about where most of the guys are ending up. Eight on average,

rounded. I went solid nine. No hedge. I don't care if she's smart or not. Okay, next one. Sydney Sweeney..."

ON THE WALK back to your apartment, you reviewed what you knew about the 14 ideological options. It seemed that the Guardians of the Realm were pushing you to choose authoritarian mercantilism. Apparently, they thought the current

system needed a hard reset. They wanted to restructure America's system of government for a decade along the lines of the Chinese system prevailing for the three decades after 1990.

From what the "aliens" had "downloaded" to your brain, you had some rough definitions of what authoritarian mercantilism would involve.

Mercantilists sought to generate trade surpluses, so that the value of what Americans sold abroad would be higher than the value of what Americans bought from foreigners. A mercantilist government would then use those surpluses to build a stronger military and spend money on domestic infrastructure projects such as highways, ports, and housing developments. Trade surpluses tended to raise the cost of exports for foreign and domestic buyers, so part

of the mercantilist strategy was to "sterilize" foreign currency inflows by encouraging American companies and banks to acquire foreign assets. One way to do that was to buy secure access to supplies of raw materials in foreign countries. Another way was to buy the debt of foreign governments and buy shares in foreign companies.

To make sure that American companies were making products for

export markets, a mercantilist national government would need to make strategic investments in many companies and direct their managers. If American exports were not competitive in international markets, a mercantilist government would need to impose high tariffs (taxes) on American consumers buying foreign goods. As mercantilists saw things, such policies would protect American jobs and make them pay more by

shielding the country from foreign competition.

The “aliens” would set things up so that mercantilism was initially popular, with a majority supporting its policies with slogans such as “America First,” “Made in America” and “Buy American.” But in a democratic system, mercantilism would come under pressure from consumers who wanted to buy more foreign goods or save less money, and

from entrepreneurs who wanted to produce goods and services that were not part of the government's industrial plan.

To make sure the system was not undermined by the whims of consumers and voters, and to allow the government's industrial planners to make quick investment and policy decisions, the "aliens" would initially have a large majority of people support a very strong and highly

centralized national government, with local subdivisions that served to follow the orders of the central planners. The government would be directed by a single political party, with secret party elections. Real power would be in the hands of a small number of party elites who would rely on the advice of technocrats, including economic experts, scientists, and military strategists.

To keep the system intact, the government would also need to suppress some civil liberties. It would need to put tight controls on protests and dissent in the media, control exposure to foreign media sources, and conduct widespread surveillance of communications between citizens. The government would need to award long prison sentences to suspected dissidents. Convicted criminals (including dissidents) would be made to do hard labor in factories and on

government infrastructure projects. Vices that made citizens less productive (such as drug use) would be punished by long prison sentences or execution.

You didn't really know about the mercantilist economic part. As far as you knew, it might work. But the civil liberties part sounded a little harsh. If you were really choosing a system of government – one you actually had to live under – you

probably wouldn't go for a one-party system that suppressed dissent. And you weren't a puritan on drugs and other vices. But maybe the country needed to go hardcore on the war on drugs. Either that or give up on it entirely.

In any case, you weren't really choosing a system of government. You were taking some kind of weird survey. Clearly, the Guardians were grooming you to become one of them.

During a year of captivity, you had apparently passed their psychological fitness test. Now they wanted to find out if you were their kind of patriot.

When you got back to your apartment, you booted up your laptop and your VPN and said out loud, “I want what’s best for this country. I choose authoritarian mercantilism.” Then you went back to work. You opened a secure folder and began working on the next case. It was a Texas holding

company with five LLCs and $5 million in net revenue. Probably another dud. But one of the LLCs was a payday loan center, so maybe. Mostly, you wanted to make a good show of diligently returning to your duties.

Before you went to bed that night, you looked at upcoming concerts. Phoenix and Beck were on tour together and were going to play at Wolftrap. You got four tickets,

figuring you and Tyler could take some girls.

THE NEXT DAY was really weird. It reminded you of the tail end of the one mushroom trip you had done. The part where the visual hallucinations had stopped, but you had found yourself thinking and believing strange thoughts. It was in college, at somebody's family cabin in the Shenandoahs. For a couple of

hours, you had believed that you and the people in the cabin were the only people who existed.

Your news feeds blew up early in the morning with talk about the new American Party. Everyone was joining. Not everyone, but everyone who mattered. Most Members of Congress, the President, the Cabinet, most of the pundits, and the big movers and funders in the Republican and Democrat parties. A similar

revolution was happening in state governments. Early polls from reputable pollsters showed the American Party having an approval rate of 85 percent.

When you went to Misha's before work to get your macchiato, the baristas and customers were jumping on the bandwagon. Some ghetto huckster was in the shop, selling red-white-and-blue American Party buttons and stuffing cash into the

pockets of his overcoat. A small crowd had gathered just to buy buttons. You lingered, bewildered, listening to the banter of the crowd. Everyone had reasons to justify their support for the American Party and its emerging program of authoritarian mercantilism. You tried to distill the banter into the main reasons.

First, the people at Misha's were fed up with the political gridlock between the Republican and Democratic

parties. Rather than bickering about partisan issues, they wanted America's politicians to work together to solve the country's problems. People who had formerly been bitter partisan opponents were hugging each other and confessing their former hatreds and paranoia and begging forgiveness with tears in their eyes. Witnessing that outpouring of emotion, you were convinced that the Guardians of the Realm must have dosed everyone with some kind of

drug. Something that broke down inhibitions and ego boundaries. Maybe they put it in the water supply. (Apparently, the Guardians had done something to inoculate you against its effects.)

Second, people in the crowd expressed their frustrations with America's constitutional system. Of course, the framers had deliberately divided power between the federal government and the states, and

divided power between Congress, the President, and the courts. The crowd seemed to be in unanimous agreement that the Constitution's divisions of power were a mistake that kept government from taking quick and decisive actions for the benefit of the country.

Third, the people in the crowd were unhappy with America's "culture of hedonistic individualism." They complained that entrepreneurs and

managers and consumers made decisions based purely on the pursuit of pleasure, without regard to the needs of families or the common good. With tears in their eyes, they declared that the "culture of individualism" had made them unhappy: it had led them into destructive habits and addictions and had kept them from feeling the joy of knowing they were part of something bigger than themselves.

Finally, like the people online, the crowd at Misha's had the perception that China's economic and political system had been very successful and was responsible for weakening America's dominance in the world economy and in geopolitics. A week ago, you could not have defined *mercantilism*. And you were sure that most of the people around you couldn't have, either. But there they were, throwing the word around. People had a simple understanding of

the theory. To save money and get ahead, a family needed to maintain a trade surplus – the value of what it sold had to be higher than the value of what it bought. Why would a country's economy be any different from a family's economy? You had a vague memory of a college economics professor arguing against that simple logic, but you couldn't remember the details of the argument, and you certainly weren't going to start arguing with a bunch of randos in a

coffee shop – especially when they were all having a drug-induced emotional orgy of unity.

You took your macchiato and started walking back to your apartment. With the American Party craze going on, no one would care if you worked from home that day – or worked at all, for that matter. (Doug had been texting everyone in your bureau, gushing about how great things were going to be for the Dodge under the

American Party. In a selfie he sent, he was wearing an AP button that looked different from the ones the huckster was hustling at Misha's.)

As you walked, you tried to process what was going on. The Guardians had done a massive psyop on the country. A combination of some hypnotic drug and a massive meme campaign. It had to be the biggest psyop in world history. You wondered how the Guardians had

delivered the drug to everyone, and how they had orchestrated the meme campaign to get the country's opinion leaders on the same sheet of music. Had they printed up a bunch of American Party buttons in advance? Your guess was that they had contracted with a bunch of button makers in advance. Then other button makers who were up late at night had seen the tsunami that was starting to build on social media and started printing out their own buttons.

It was nice to see everybody hugging and forgiving each other at Misha's and see all the happy stuff in your social feeds, but you were outside of all that. You were watching other peoples' trips. That was a clear sign that the Guardians had chosen you to be one of them. Of course, they definitely did a big mind-fuck on you, with the year in captivity and the silly stuff about the "aliens" and the choice of ideologies. But maybe that was

part of the inoculation. Guardians had to think clearly in order to guide the country.

Waiting at a streetcorner, you pulled up your feed from *The Economist*. It was already mid-afternoon in Europe. The title of the lead story was, “An Uncanny Springtime in America?” The editorialists were happy that Americans seemed to have suddenly reached a tipping point against the nasty climate of partisan polarization,

but they were not very “sanguine” about the “regrettable new consensus” on mercantilist economics.

The word “springtime” prompted you to look around. The dogwoods and the cherry blossoms in all the planters were in bloom after a long winter. The low clouds were small and puffy and pushed along by a strong wind from the west. Strong and shifting winds had always been a signal that spring was coming to the Beltway

after the cold torpor of winter. The air was still brisk but promised an afternoon that would be warm enough to leave your coat at home. You wondered if the Guardians had timed their strange revolution to coincide with the advent of happy weather.



IN THE WEEKS and months that followed, the depth and breadth of the Guardians' revolution became

increasingly apparent. The speed with which things happened was bewildering – *to you*. Everybody else seemed to take the changes in stride. (After months of witnessing so many radical changes, you too would begin to take the changes in stride.)

The members of the American Party – which meant nearly everybody – agreed that the important thing for national unity, order, and prosperity was to have strict unity and discipline

within the Party. Internal debate would be allowed to some extent, but once the new Central Committee (CentComm) of eleven members – the President, five Senators and five Representatives, elected by a secret ballot of Congress – made its decisions, every politician would have to agree or be banished from the Party. To allow members to debate in private and to encourage confidential testimony from experts, Congress

stopped televising or recording congressional debates.

To cement that structure in place, Congress quickly passed several constitutional amendments, which were soon ratified by a unanimous vote of state conventions. The amendments consolidated power in Washington, effectively making state and local governments into administrative units of the central government. Popular elections for

Members of Congress would still continue, but the majority in Congress (i.e., American Party members) were empowered to remove Members who were seen as disruptive to national unity. The central government also had extensive emergency powers to suspend elections, suppress protests, and silence “fake news” and “anti-American” content in print, broadcast, and social media. Finally, the American Party was empowered to

make rules governing how other parties participated in the system.

All of that made sense to you, given your understanding of the authoritarian mercantilist scheme. But you were somewhat disturbed by the fact that the amendments included no expiration date on the consolidated national system of government. The "aliens" and Tyler had given you the impression that the consolidation would last a decade. In theory, the

Constitution was still in effect, so it could be amended in the future. But you wondered if the new holders of centralized power would ever allow the system to be re-federalized.

With authoritarian mercantilists firmly in charge of the political system, gridlock was gone. Congress quickly passed several major "Made in America" reforms aimed at making America less dependent upon foreign trade. The biggest was to put a 25-

percent tariff on most foreign manufactured goods, and to increase those tariffs by another 25 percent per year until they reached 100 percent – which would double the cost of foreign goods in four years. CentComm had the power to place additional protectionist tariffs at will on countries deemed to be competing unfairly with America (and that list grew ever longer).

Congress also attacked immigration. Quotas for legal immigrants at all income and skill levels, including refugees, were cut by three quarters. Congress multiplied the amount of money spent on border security by a factor of ten. Half the money went to completing a huge wall on the southern border and increasing the personnel of the border patrol. The other half went to internal enforcement: rounding up persons who had overstayed their visas and

deporting them via bus and plane to their home countries.

Congress passed big cuts to payroll taxes for workers in manufacturing jobs and big cuts to corporate income taxes for businesses that hired American workers and opened or expanded manufacturing plants in America. Congress increased infrastructure spending by a quarter trillion dollars per year and granted tens of billions of dollars of new

subsidies to businesses – especially in manufacturing – that were believed to make America less reliant on foreign supply chains. The authoritarian mercantilists also increased military spending by half. Many of the new personnel were immediately deployed to the Navy and Coast Guard to ensure that foreign goods would not be smuggled tariff-free into the country, and to keep international sea lanes open and protect American cargo ships. In the interest of national

unity, Congress also voted to maintain current entitlements, including the big ones: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act (ObamaCare). Eventually, the government would consolidate the health programs into a single system known as Americare.

To raise America's savings rate – and to gain more power over investment decisions – Congress enacted a major overhaul of Social Security. For

workers under the age of 50, the government now diverted five percent of their wages and salaries away from Social Security and into individual retirement accounts managed for them by a government-run sovereign wealth fund, known as the American Savings and Investment Fund (ASIF). (Workers could no longer put money into the old IRAs.) For workers under 50, the government also put five percent of their salaries into health savings accounts (HSAs) that were

managed by the ASIF and subject to Americare spending rules. The ASIF put half of the new pension and health funds into government debt and half into stocks and corporate debt – eventually transforming the government into the largest shareholder in the nation's public corporations. New reforms passed by Congress also allowed the ASIF to take minority positions in large private companies.

Although the new tax cuts and mandatory savings policies initially caused the national government to lose over one trillion dollars per year in revenue, Members of Congress were not worried. Most of them had the belief – supported by many "supply-side" economists – that faster economic growth would eventually make up the revenue. They also argued that deficits wouldn't matter, because CentComm could force the Federal Reserve to maintain low

interest rates. For mercantilists, the deficit to worry about was the trade deficit, not the national government's budget deficit. When asked (politely) by the press about exploding spending, many in Congress talked about reducing "waste, fraud, and abuse," cutting foreign aid, and reducing spending on poor immigrants – though economists generally agreed that those were relatively tiny spending programs in the big picture.

The tariff increases did not bring in a lot of extra revenue, and with large tax cuts and spending increases, the national government's deficits tripled. The American Party defended the large deficits mainly on mercantilist grounds: because trade surpluses bid up the prices of dollars (when foreigners bought American exports) the monetary inflation caused by "printing" money to pay for the new debt helped to make the dollar

weaker, and made American exports look cheaper to foreign buyers. Congress and the Federal Reserve also tinkered with capital controls designed to blunt the inflationary pressures of trade surpluses by "sterilizing" inflows of foreign currency. Among other measures, the Fed rewarded banks that used foreign currency inflows to purchase foreign assets.

The Made in America trade policies effectively abolished America's existing trade treaties and caused many countries to retaliate by imposing higher tariffs on American goods, manipulating their currencies, and subsidizing their manufacturing sectors. With more countries focused on manufacturing and scrambling for raw materials (many of them mined in the developing world), the prices of raw materials went up for American manufacturers. By the end of the

decade, the volume of world trade would be cut by a third. One thing was very clear: mercantilist policies increased employment in American manufacturing. (The productivity of American manufacturing had been increasing for decades, but for the first time in about a century, America added millions of new jobs in manufacturing.)

The Made in America income tax policy soon morphed into a two-tiered

flat national tax on personal and corporate income. The rate was 15 percent for individuals and businesses engaged in manufacturing and exports, and 25 percent for everyone else. (Soon, the IRS had a whole division dedicated to auditing tax returns randomly to determine whether the activities claimed by taxpayers to be manufacturing and export-oriented actually qualified for the designations.)

Congress empowered the technocrats answering to CentComm with broad authority to make regulatory reforms. Many of the reforms were designed to reduce regulatory burdens on manufacturers. Among them was a moratorium on all regulations estimated to have an economic impact of $50 million or more. Another was a requirement that for every new regulation imposed, bureaucrats must remove two others. The technocrats

were also granted wide powers to grant waivers for national regulations.

With regulatory policy nationalized, Congress abolished state regulatory and licensing schemes and created its own national licensing system for professionals and services. On the one hand, that made things easier for professionals and service providers: once they were licensed, they could do business anywhere in the country. On the other hand, they now had to

negotiate the national bureaucracy to get approval. (Although press stories were suppressed, scuttlebutt at the Dodge indicated a big increase in corruption and bribery involving national bureaucrats.) Congress also monopolized the mercantilist game. State governments were in the process of being phased out, but in the meantime, Congress forbade state legislatures from awarding incentives – such as special tax credits and cash subsidies – to businesses to attempt to

have them relocate plants and headquarters to their states.

In the beginning, the rate of economic growth under the American Party increased measurably as a result of the tax cuts, higher savings rates, and regulatory reforms – real per-capita GDP exploded from about one percent annually to over three percent. (The general euphoria probably helped, too.) But the new economic growth and the new revenue from

tariffs did not replace the lost revenue from the tax cuts, so combined with the effects of increased spending, annual deficits tripled. Interest rates remained relatively low for a while, so the national government initially had no trouble paying interest to service the increasing debt.

Although Congress suppressed debate within America, the net effects of the mercantilist trade and immigration policies on economic growth and

wages were debated by foreign economists. (CentComm began blocking Americans' access to foreign news, but as a Dodge worker, you could continue to read *The Economist* and other foreign sources on your work account.) According to the foreign sources, the results of Party policies were mixed. The nominal wages of American workers did go up measurably, pushed in part by restrictions on trade and immigration and heavy government spending on

infrastructure projects. But the higher prices for manufactured goods meant that real wages (wages adjusted for the effects of prices) did not go up nearly as much: workers had more dollars, but the dollars didn't buy as much as they did before. Some foreign economists predicted that decreased competition with foreign producers would make American firms less innovative. They warned about the eventual rise of "zombie"

firms that would exist solely due to subsidies and trade protection.

The foreign economists did agree that one policy seemed to be unambiguously good: Congress diverted unemployment insurance payments into personal accounts managed by the ASIF. Because Americans were spending their own savings when they were out of work, they tended to avoid long periods of unemployment. On net, thanks to

personal UI accounts and somewhat stronger economic growth, America's unemployment rate dropped by two percentage points.

Another factor debated by foreign economists was the impact on wages of the general suppression of independent labor unions. Officially, labor unions were celebrated by the American Party as the crucial first leg in the Three-Legged Stool of Labor, Capital and the State. But they were

tightly controlled by CentComm. Labor leaders were given large salaries by the national government. To be a legally sanctioned union, all union members had to be members of the American Party, agree to support the policies adopted by CentComm and labor technocrats, and agree not to go on strike. Inside the Party, labor leaders had strong influence, and served as cheerleaders for mercantilist polices against trade and immigration. By helping to restrict foreign

competition, they appeared to have put upward pressure on nominal wages. At the same time, however, the technocrats sometimes put caps on wages within key manufacturing sectors to make them more competitive in international trade.

A similar dynamic occurred in corporate governance and management. To be eligible for lower tax rates and subsidies, the board members and managers of firms had

to be loyal members of the American Party and agree to support the policies imposed by the technocrats – something that was made easier by the fact that the ASIF owned an increasingly large number of voting shares in public corporations and equity in private companies.

Congress centralized funding for K-12 education with a national property tax and abolished local school districts, effectively creating a

national voucher program. All schools – including nominally private schools – had to participate in the system. All schools made students take standardized tests, held back students who did not perform at grade level, and adopted civics and economics curricula that promoted American Party messaging. Teacher unions were bent to the will of the national education technocrats, as part of the general suppression of independent labor unions.

In response to increased school choice and high-stakes testing, average test scores in math, reading, and science began to rise quickly – eventually plateauing at the level of most developed countries, but lower than the average for East Asian countries. In higher education, Congress kept the national student loan program for students loyal to the Party and added generous retraining subsidies for

workers who lost jobs due to foreign competition.

With continued subsidies to health and education, prices continued to go up like they did before in the health and education sectors. Unconcerned with deficits, the mercantilist Congress initially chose to spend money to chase the prices, rather than attempting to impose price controls. CentComm directed the Treasury and the Fed to accommodate the massive

deficit spending with money creation and relatively low interest rates. General price inflation rose to about five percent. In response to price spikes in some sectors of the economy, CentComm began imposing wage and price controls, which tended to result in shortages. CentComm sometimes addressed the shortages by relaxing price controls, but sometimes it responded by directing American firms to increase production of selected goods and services – a policy

that had a long lag and didn't appear to you to work very well.

Public debate about policy was increasingly muted, but from the scuttlebutt you gleaned at work and from friends, it appeared that American Party insiders were divided about global warming. Some saw cheap and reliable energy as a key input to economic growth, but many technocrats were concerned about the impact of climate change. They

reached a compromise, a collection of national energy policies known as the Made in America Energy Initiative. One the one hand, the technocrats reduced renewable energy mandates on electrical power utilities, froze fuel-efficiency standards for automobiles, and reduced regulatory burdens on fossil fuel producers and users. As a result, gas prices and electrical bills initially decreased in real terms. On the other hand, Congress began spending over $100

billion a year to support the domestic renewable energy industry and to begin building nuclear power plants. Renewables advanced slowly, but America quickly broke ground on new nuke plants for the first time since the 1970s. On net, American energy policies (and a faster-growing economy) appeared to cause carbon output to increase, and foreign climate scientists expressed alarm.

Although the American Party leaders generally saw the policies of China as positive examples, they went in a different direction regarding population policy. (China's one-child policy in the previous century had created a surplus of male children and sped up the rapid aging of its population.) Congress adopted strongly pro-natalist policies, with large direct subsidies to parents who got married and stayed married (at least on paper) and had up to four

children. CentComm also provided very generous awards to single women who chose not to have abortions and gave up their babies for adoption.

When it came to criminal law, the American Party was mainly concerned with reducing America's embarrassingly high rates of crime. Although the rates had been low compared to those of the 1970s and 80s, they were high compared to those

in other developed countries. With the country unified politically for the first time, Congress decided that it was time to get really tough on crime. With China as an example, prosecutors were empowered to extract more confessions from the accused. (Torture was not officially condoned, but emergency rules from CentComm reduced the access of the accused to lawyers and draconian sentencing made plea bargaining even more common than it was before:

rather than risk long sentences by going to trial, the accused pled guilty and got shorter sentences.)

Convicted criminals were sentenced to hard labor in prison factories and on government infrastructure projects. Drug users and prostitutes were sentenced to hard labor, and drug traffickers and pimps were executed. There was a surge in incarceration and executions, and drug use and prostitution declined dramatically,

along with violent crimes and property crimes.

In one of its earliest acts, Congress created a new National Department of Technology ("DTech") to consolidate hundreds of existing government and private-sector data-scooping programs into a single Social Credit algorithm. Beginning at the age of 13, every American had to have a Social Credit account and install the Social Credit app on his or her devices. The

algorithm rated people on a scale of one to 1,000. People with high Social Credit scores got special bonuses and benefits from the government, including year-end tax credits and lower interest rates at banks.

On smartphones, the Social Credit app was one of the default apps on the opening screen. The app was updated several times a week with new scores, and the algorithm set year-end goals for improvement. Prominent on the

app was a button that said, “Boost your score NOW!” When users pressed that button, they were offered a menu of actions they could take to improve their scores. They could buy goods and services from approved vendors, post or comment at approved social-media platforms, learn new skills, adopt fitness workouts, and plan healthy diets selected by government-approved nutritionists. (You didn’t need to boost your score. As a National Detective – and

probably due to your close contact with the Guardians – you started with a default score that fluctuated around 950, depending on the whims of the algorithm.)

In addition to having Social Credit scores, government workers and personnel in strategic industries were assigned to Levels corresponding to their ranks and authorities and privileges. CentComm planned to eventually assign Levels to all

Americans – on the grounds that all citizens had strategic roles – but that system would take a few years to roll out.

With America unified, the American Party saw no need for political protests. The small protests that did occur in the first months of the new regime were labelled as “riots” and quickly suppressed by the police and National Guard units. Politicians from small minority parties were

often found to be in violation of campaign finance regulations and given long prison sentences. Gun ownership was officially allowed, but only for citizens “in good standing,” which in practice meant that gun owners had to demonstrate that they were loyal members of the American Party by maintaining high Social Credit scores.

Under the rule of the American Party, the judicial system was rapidly

centralized, with committees from the Dodge removing judges who dared to challenge the dictates of the technocrats, or who were deemed to be insufficiently tough on crime. In an ironic turn of phrase, this process of making the judiciary less independent was called “judicial review.” To stay in office and earn high salaries, judges at all levels had to demonstrate that they were “in good standing,” which in practice meant that they had to be members of

the American Party and achieve high Social Credit scores. As such, judges became an effective enforcement arm of CentComm's technocratic policies.

Judges stood aside as intelligence agencies and DTech conducted routine surveillance of Americans under an expanded version of the Patriot Act. There was still an official emphasis on foreign enemies and terrorists, but the spies increasingly focused surveillance on persons

suspected of giving industrial technologies and secrets to foreigners, candidates suspected of being in violation of campaign finance regulations, and persons suspected of organizing riots. DTech hired a small army of inspectors armed with AI search engines to investigate press and social media platforms for communications that were anti-American or “obscene,” and the Party’s judges routinely allowed emergency suppression of the old

First Amendment rights to free speech. (Your old cynicism persisted, and you often found yourself thinking that authoritarian mercantilism was, among many other things, a jobs program for Guardians in the intelligence agencies.)

Congress continued to support public art and the humanities, but with a nationalist bent – not subsidizing anything deemed to be embarrassing to America or damaging to national

unity. At the beginning, some edgy and daring artists tried to make a name for themselves, by advertising their work as “free speech” or “censored by the National Endowment.” But they were soon suppressed by threats of fines and prison time under CentComm’s national emergency declarations.

On other civil liberties, things were mixed. Abortion in the first trimester was still technically legal in America,

but judges began fining women who had multiple abortions and did not accept pro-natalist awards to give their babies up for adoption. Sexual minorities were not persecuted, but they were not allowed to adopt children, and obscenity laws encouraged them to keep their lifestyles quiet. The American Party's judges respected property rights and economic freedom – but only when they did not conflict with national mercantilist policies.

America's judges also stood by as Congress gave expanded presidential war powers to CentComm, allowing it to commit troops to foreign theaters for multiple years without congressional approval. And judges did nothing as America began building dozens of high-security on-shore military prisons for the detention and interrogation of suspected terrorists – foreign *and* domestic.

Having doubled military spending, Congress and CentComm spent half the new money doubling military personnel and increasing their pay, while the other half was dedicated to research, development, and deployment of new military hardware. The new regime began doubling the number of personnel who were deployed overseas. In a change from previous eras, America focused less on Islamic terrorism and less on

trying to contain the territorial ambitions of Russia and China. Instead, CentComm sent tens of thousands of “peacekeeping” troops to a dozen African and Latin American countries that were producers of raw materials deemed to be strategic to American industry. Among other actions, American soldiers helped the governments of Bolivia, Colombia, Congo and Uganda to suppress insurgent movements by leftist or separatist

guerrillas. America also began regular military operations against Latin American drug cartels.

Closest to home, America became heavily involved in managing Mexico's drug war and its economy. The phrase "integral partner" soon became ubiquitous. Mexicans in general were initially very resistant to the idea of having the *gringos* running their country, but CentComm played its hand carefully. Everything

America did was accompanied by billions of dollars of handouts for Mexican officials and NGOs. ASIF invested tens of billions of dollars – freshly "printed" Digital Dollars from leveraged Treasury notes – into hundreds of new factories, mining operations, railroads, and freeways in Mexico. ASIF made a big show of granting large ownership shares to the Mexican government and awarding good wages to Mexican workers. At the same time, the American Party

and DTech worked to stamp out all racist and anti-Mexico statements and insinuations on all legal communications platforms. Officially, Mexico was “America’s best friend.”

Ostensibly, Mexican military units were under Mexican commanders for the combat operations against the cartels. In practice, America directed all operations and provided 90 percent of the personnel and materiel.

Mexico launched a raft of anti-corruption initiatives through its new Directorio Anti-Corrupción. Officially, the DAC was entirely Mexican. But as someone who sometimes crunched numbers for what Dodge staffers called "Operation Tequilaville," you could see that the Dodge and the DEA were calling all the shots. An internal memo might declare, for example, "Our *amigos* in the DAC need us to focus on nightclubs and entertainment in

Sonora and Chihuahua." But you knew that the directives came from Washington. The DAC obeyed the *gringos*, with limited room for pushback.

Initially, the war against the Mexican cartels appeared to be very successful. As a purely military matter, the cartels were routed within a year. They were no longer able to mobilize enough armed men to challenge local police forces, let alone Mexican military

units. The cartels' financial networks were fragmented and driven deep underground. (Literally, in the case of a few former kingpins who were caught storing piles of cash and gold and silver in abandoned mineshafts in the *sierras*.) In an economic sense, the cartels were no longer cartels. They had no ability to coerce rivals or restrict supply or manage operations outside of very local areas. In many ways, the Mexican drug business returned to what it had been in the

early 1970s, before the Guadalajara, Sinaloa and Gulf cartels had emerged and challenged the dominance of the Colombians.

Naturally, traffickers in other countries stepped in to fill the vacuum. With successful interdiction in Mexico, and with general import restrictions on goods entering America, the street prices of drugs in America skyrocketed – even though fewer Americans were using drugs. It

was much more difficult to get drugs into America, but the rewards for doing so were huge. Recently, the DEA found that foreign precursor chemicals were being smuggled into America in small packages that fit into the wheel wells of airliners. The packages were distributed to small drug labs across America through a network of airline mechanics. And in an ironic twist on protectionism, drugs were increasingly "made in America." In the past year, several

raids on meth and fentanyl analog labs in the Midwest found precursor chemicals that were mostly or entirely made in pharmaceutical plants and chemical factories in America.

In the first two years of the new regime, the initial mass euphoria seemed to wear off gradually. (Like all drugs, the Guardians' drug must've had a half-life.) But the American Party's policies continued to enjoy overwhelming popular

support – even if opinion polls in America could no longer be trusted. In the recent congressional mid-term elections, only five percent of voters were brave enough – or crazy enough – to vote for other parties. (Ten percent of registered voters did not cast ballots, prompting Congress to pass an edict making voting mandatory and deducting 100 points from the Social Credit scores of non-voters.)

Of course, would-be dissenters were increasingly afraid to say anything against the American Party. Even among your family and close friends, you heard no dissent. Not even cynical jokes. Tyler wasn't going to say anything political, and he was rolling in cash from new defense contracts. Your other friends all had government jobs. When you queried your dad on how he thought things were working out, he was cheery and perhaps cagey. The most he would

say was, “So far, so good. Let’s see how this goes.” And your mom never expressed any political opinions, anyway. You had a cousin in North Carolina who owned a timber farm. If she was a dissenter, she wasn’t going to say anything: if she did, CentComm might take away her subsidies. Like you, everybody was keeping their heads down and working.

[The major policy changes that occurred during the first decade of the alien experiment are also outlined in the first-decade section for Authoritarian Mercantilism in Volume 2 of *American Futures*. That section begins on page 1648 of the Kindle version, or on page 665 of the print version of Volume 2.]

BISBEE WAS SUPPOSED to be a quick detour in your career.

Over the first two years of the American Party regime, as you became accustomed to the depth and pace of changes, you were increasingly struck by a strange fact: your job at the Dodge seemed to be going nowhere. It was the same old thing. FinCEN would send you files on holding companies with multiple LLCs, and your job was to study the

companies and try to figure out if they were laundering money.

You now had access to some of the data that was pouring into the new Social Credit system to feed its algorithm. In theory, the data could have been useful. You and your colleagues at the Dodge helped to build an AI analyst that would flag individual beneficial owners of LLCs who were either too leveraged on personal credit or weren't leveraged at

all. But those were still shots in the dark. In your reading of money laundering cases that had been prosecuted, the appetite for risk of the accused had very little to do with whether they were laundering money. Some money launderers were compulsive gamblers who kept putting more chips on the table in their finances. Others were ultra-careful penny-pinchers who were scared to raise any red flags by getting

anywhere near bankruptcy. Others were in the middle.

No one approached you with offers – or even hints – of getting deployed to do undercover work. Month after month, you tried to bring up the topic with your superiors. You were vague, like you were with Tyler the day before the big psyop went down: “I’m looking at maybe doing some kind of remote work. It would be cool if the Dodge sent me somewhere. Get out

of town for a while." But no one ever expressed any real interest in your career.

In December, almost two years after the big psyop, in a typically long internal memo about bonuses and reorganizations, the Dodge mentioned that it needed "boots on the ground" in the Southern Border Zone, as part of Operation Tequilaville. The new investigative analyst positions were not undercover ones, but they covered

moving expenses, rental and mortgage stipends, a car, and a net of $500 per month in increased take-home pay.

You made an instant decision to apply for one of the new positions. You were fed up with your desk job and you wanted to send a stronger signal that you needed a more adventurous role. Also, the memo coincided with a big snowfall – one of the "Snowmaggedons" that hit DC every few years. The whole area had been

buried in two feet of snow, and a hard freeze had quickly turned fun snow powder into slippery ice. When it thawed, it would turn into mud. For the moment, you were done with DC.

The memo offered a possible choice of locations to early applicants. Among the places listed was Bisbee, which you had never heard of. A quick web search of images showed a cute town with houses clinging to steep hillsides and funky bars and

coffee shops. One of the coffee shops was called Kafka. In a photo, you saw a giant metal beetle on the wall above two guitarists playing gypsy jazz. In another photo, you saw a 20-something hottie with a fashionable tourist backpack. She had a carefully cultivated faux-hippie look, like a trust-fund girl on safari – one who took showers at least daily and got waxes regularly. She had piercing blue eyes and looked lawyer-smart.

She was probably just a model, not a resident. But you were sold.

Ten minutes after reading the memo, you applied for the position in Bisbee. Three days later, you got the transfer approved. A month later, you were in Bisbee, with a rental house and a 15-year-old Toyota 4Runner you bought in Tucson.

You did the same old work on a VPN from your house, but with weekly site

visits to various LLC storefronts. You expensed at least $200 a week in Mexican restaurants. You enjoyed sampling Mexican food. You liked the basic Sonoran style, and you loved the spicy stuff in New Mexico. You explored tourist sites in Arizona and New Mexico on weekend driving trips that were not directly expensed.

Increasingly, you spent whole weeks away from Bisbee. As a law-enforcement Three, you got to have

blank plates on your 4Runner. The national Flock system had deployed millions of plate readers on stop signs and traffic light poles around the country. Your bosses couldn't track your movements on Flock – and you were pretty sure they hadn't installed tracker chips in your phone or laptop. In any case, they probably didn't care. You put in at least a little work every day, connecting to the VPN for a couple hours whenever you were in range of a good cell signal.

After two years, you were entirely done with Bisbee and the Border Zone and began applying for transfers back to the Beltway. But the Colombian and Ecuadoran cartels had begun to rebuild Mexican smuggling operations, so there was plenty of work to be done for Operation Tequilaville. They wanted boots on the ground. Your transfers were never approved. And for eight years,

you never met any lawyer-smart trust-fund girls in safari clothes.

AFTER BRIAN GOES back to DC with your Level Four paperwork, you start digging to find some dirt on Mallory Wilson. The first thing you learn is that she is not a bull dyke in overalls. She's an aging hottie, with sandy-blonde hair, green eyes, and a trim physique. (By "aging," you mean that she's about your age. At

35, the women you date – mostly, when you're at home in Virginia – tend to be in their late 20s.)

From her record, Wilson seems smart. She was a philosophy major at Princeton and has a master's degree in labor economics from Chicago. The old man's trust fund might've had the skids greased for her a little in those programs, but from multiple video clips of press conferences, it appears that she knows her stuff and is smart

on her feet. Pressers are not as hard these days, without a real opposition media, but she's able to go off-script when she needs to.

Digging deeper, you learn that she's a savvy political manipulator. When her old man died, she apparently used some of the cash from his estate to pay off the leaders of Federated Extractive. But she was also persuasive, convincing the rank-and-file that a college girl who grew up on

a horse farm in Maryland had the skills and the DC connections to get better deals for the union. When the American Party began consolidating the Three-Legged Stool, she hustled to convince the UMW to willingly join Federated Extractive and purge the non-Party holdouts. She gets a Level Eight salary from the government ($250K per year) – but donates nearly all of it to the pet charities of the FE and the UMW and to Party fundraisers. Her spread in

Tucson is a ten-acre horse property along the Tanque Verde riverbed in the eastern foothills. It's officially valued at just under $3 million. Without the property price controls – the Party's attempt to prevent the strong dollar and foreign currency inflows from creating a real estate bubble and pricing out homebuyers – it's probably worth more like $6M. She also has a small 9th-story beachfront condo in Acapulco. Her

net in liquid assets is estimated at about $15M.

On paper, Wilson looks like your kind of girl. With those kinds of assets, you would gladly discount her age. Adjusting for assets and Party connections, she's a 20-year-old supermodel with a PhD in astrophysics. But Wilson is the enemy. She's the target of a secret investigation into mob and cartel connections.

You work the investigation from the inside out, starting with a small universe of Wilson's known direct connections and building out along likely avenues that may lead to mobsters and the cartels. Following Brian's instructions, which correspond to your own intuitions, you search using a cloaker VPN, and you keep all the data you collect on sheets of paper. You don't keep the data on your laptop. Most

importantly, you don't log them in the Dodge's Perp Tracker system. First, those entries are like blood in the water for sharks. Whenever something new appears in Perp Tracker, dozens of low-level investigators across the country start trying to link the new data to their own investigations, leading to turf wars between bureaus and investigators. Second, the data have a way of leaking out to the suspected perps, who then lobby as far up the

food chain as they can to quash investigations and get their names cleared. Because of these issues, new files and edits to Perp Tracker must be approved by a Level Six or higher. In theory, Perp Tracker could be a great tool for sharing useful information. In practice, almost no one has used it in the past three years, except to pull files on convicted criminals who don't have enough connections to get their records cleared.

It's difficult to find likely high-level mob and cartel connections in Tucson. The city is a backwater in many ways, starting with economic development. Other than government employment, as a common joke goes, its main industries are retirement and panhandling. It's also a backwater for high-level criminality. Going back to the 1950s and 60s, it functioned as a neutral zone in the mob wars – a place where mobsters like Joey Bananas could retire in peace in compounds

protected by armed guards. So far, it doesn't look like the new Colombian and Ecuadoran cartels have any kind of presence in Tucson. Drug operations in the city are small, run by neighborhood gangsters who occasionally murder each other in turf wars and drunken honor disputes.

The most likely cartel leads are probably in Acapulco, which is rumored to have an emerging network of Mexicans working with the

Ecuadorans. In your official work, none of your Tequilaville projects has any direct leads to Acapulco, so you may have to get Brian to pull some strings and get the Dodge to fly you there. Wilson charters private jets when she goes there. You'll have to fly commercial. And economy. But it would be a good gig. Now that Mexico is mostly pacified and working as an integral partner – "America's best friend" – it's easier for *gringos* to travel in Mexico. You

would do your best to build a good cover as a tourist. Anyone who followed you down there would observe you spending entire days at the beach and most of the nights in dance clubs.

After a week of web work, you decide that you need to start observing Wilson in her local habitat. You can do your official work anywhere, on your laptop, so you start doing two-night stays at resorts on the northeast

side of Tucson. When weekday bargains are not available at resorts, you sleep in the back of the 4Runner at campsites and pullouts at balmy altitudes on the highway up to Mount Lemmon. As a convenient cover, and for a good full-body workout, you start bouldering. You get some shoes, some chalk, a copy of *Squeezing the Lemmon*, and a crash pad that serves double duty as a stiff mattress in the back of your truck.

“HEY THERE, STUD. Mind if I squeeze in here?”

Those are Wilson’s first words to you. It’s a Tuesday in late September. You’re at a French-style coffee shop and bakery next to the highway that goes up to Mount Lemmon. It’s across the highway from a bouldering gym you joined two weeks ago. You’ve seen Wilson here twice. She hangs out here regularly for a half an

hour after a yoga class at a studio in the same strip mall. Right now, the place is crowded. You're sitting with your back against a long booth cushion that runs along the wall behind a row of small tables. The only available seat is right next to you.

"Hey there, stud" is quite a line. It catches you off-guard. You wonder if she uses the line on burly union guys, to put them in their place. To let them

know she's the boss. To complicate things, she looks really trim in her yoga duds. Very hawt for 35. You mutter something to indicate that she's welcome to sit.

"I've seen you here a couple of times," she says. "What are you working on?"

You go with your prepared response. "Technically," you're in the DOJ's financial crimes sub-department, but

your job is mostly doing internal audits on government finances. You're working to support your hiking and off-roading habits – which might actually be true at this point. And your new bouldering habit. You can work anywhere, so you live in Bisbee and boulder in the Catalinas.

She tells you she wants to try bouldering. She says a lot of climbers do yoga to get limber for climbing, and that she can borrow some shoes

from a yoga buddy. By the time she finishes her latte, she has made a date to meet you after yoga on Thursday to go up to Windy Point. You did suggest that it might be better to go to the gym first, but she is adamant about doing the “real thing” the first time out.

ON THURSDAY, YOU and Wilson grab coffees and you drive up the highway through the cactus elevations

to the Windy Point overlook. It's the beginning of October and the air is brisk on a light breeze. You grab the crash pad and hike east through the rocks along a thin footpath through manzanitas and junipers to the bottom of a 200-foot-tall granite pinnacle that you've been to a couple of times. It has some easy 5.8 and 5.9 starts for lead climbers and relatively flat places at the bottom to throw the pad.

You barely understand bouldering at this point, but you do your best to instruct her in the basics. As you have learned in a couple of lessons at the gym, having flexibility and skeletal muscles from yoga is more important than having a lot of bulk muscle. After a half hour, Mallory – you've already stopped thinking of her as "Wilson" – is just as competent as you are. Your only advantage is that you've had a month to build up some callouses on the rough crystals.

After an hour her hands are cramping and the skin on her fingers is wearing thin, so she can’t climb anymore.



While you're standing there chewing on an energy bar, Mallory steps forward and takes your hands. She feels your callouses with her fingertips. She lets go, but you instantly understand that it's not innocent curiosity. She looks down the footpath in the direction of the parking lot.

"Do a lot of people climb at this spot?"

All you can see is the distant white-blue blur of the Tucson valley stretched out between the lower peaks of the Catalinas.

“I don’t think so. Not on a weekday.”

Mallory’s green eyes fix intensely on yours. You kiss. This is already the best date you’ve had in a decade. Maybe longer.

She lies down with her back on the crash pad. Things are moving quickly.

“I don’t have a condom,” you say.

“You’re an accountant. And I’m an economist. The fact that you think about condoms, but don’t have any, suggests to me that you’re a good risk.”

You try to give her a good ride, but it's been a long time since you got laid. Mallory is really hot. And smart. The fact that you're outside makes things even wilder. You're done in what feels like a minute. You mutter an apology, but she says you can take her back to her house for lunch and try again. On the way into town, you run into the gym to put your phone and laptop in your locker. Mallory doesn't ask why, but the reason is that you're not sure the

Dodge's didn't install tracker apps on them. You don't want them to know that you've gone to her house.

Two hours later, after a shower and a more leisurely romp, you're sitting in bed with Mallory, looking at the Catalinas in a large picture window set in thick Santa Fe-style haybale walls. You're eating marcona almonds and manchego cheese, and sipping on a very decent macchiato she has just pulled for you from the

machine in her kitchen. You're talking about Tucson architecture. She says she likes the appearance of the older Joesler-style houses with dark red abobe better than the cookie-cutter Santa Fe stucco stuff but says that the old houses have cramped floor plans. She's thinking about having her contractor retrofit some of the bigger rooms and some of the outside walls with sections of exposed adobe. The new horse stable she envisions would be almost entirely

adobe, with haybale-and-stucco columns on the corners. You tell her she should redo the whole property and go full Mies van der Rohe, with black steel girders and floor-to-ceiling glass panels. She is horrified until she understands that you're just joking, and then has a long laughing fit. You debate about whether the ubiquitous Diana Madaras paintings in Tucson are good, or *kitsch* – and settle on the proposition that they're *good kitsch*. You speculate about whether it's a

good idea for her to take the plunge and get into Western art.

You're concluding that this is a lifestyle you could get used to when Mallory's phone alarm goes off and she explains that she has an important call at 2:00. She needs to "kick you out" but wants to see you again soon. You ask how soon. She asks if you want to meet her at the climbing gym next Saturday. Your answer is, "Most definitely."

Driving away from her house, you decide two things. First, you like Arizona. You're going to stay here – at least, you'll stay as long as this Mallory thing works out. Second, you're going to abandon Brian and his investigation. Even if Mallory dumps you right now, your connection with her is a million times better than your connection with Brian. You're going to drop the investigation, starting now. It's only a question of how.

AFTER CLIMBING TOGETHER at the gym the following Saturday, you go to Mallory's house and get things going in her master shower, which has a luxurious step-down basin that's set with Alhambra mosaic tiles. While you're drying off, she returns from the kitchen in her bath robe. She has a seltzer for herself and a Negra Modelo for you. She tosses some waterproof cushions onto the floor of

the shower basin and turns the heat lamp up.

“Sit down. We need to talk.”

You keep the towel around your waist and take a sip of the beer. She cradles her knees as she sits facing you.

“I’m pregnant. And I want to be pregnant. I’m 36.”

You nod and take a longer sip. You don't even know when her birthday is. You have a whole universe of things going through your mind. You're thinking about how you're going to process this. You haven't been hit with anything this big since the Guardians were mind-fucking you with the "alien abduction" business, which feels like a lifetime ago. You haven't talked to Brian yet, but the investigation is definitely over. Mallory is going to be the mother of

your child. She will not go to some rape cage like Biden-Trump. If Brian persists, you will kill him. You imagine yourself strangling Brian with your bare hands and burying your thumbs in his eye sockets.

Mallory interrupts your thinking.

“What are you thinking? Initial reaction?”

“I’m thinking... this... could be a good thing?”

“Yes?”

“Yes. But...”

“But?”

“Well... we don’t really know each other. You could hate me in a few weeks. A few months. Maybe a few days. I’m not saying I’m a difficult

person. I don't think I am. I haven't had any relationships long enough to find out. But you know how people are. They have sex. They fall in love. They think they've found their soul mate. And then things go sideways. And it's not because they're bad people. They're just people. People are difficult. I've never lived with anyone. Other than college roommates. I might be a real pain in the ass. I might be a terrible dad for this kid. I might be a terrible..."

“Husband?”

“Yeah. If... that’s what you’re thinking.”

“It’s cold in here. Mind if I turn on the water?”

You’re thinking that it’s *her* shower. Why would you have any say in the matter? You tell her you’re getting cold, too. She tosses her bathrobe

outside the shower, reaches up and turns on the hot water. She sits under the nozzle for a few seconds with her face between her knees, then reaches out for your hand. You sit with your legs and arms wrapped around her while the jets beat down on your shoulders and the water runs in warm rivers over your nose and mouth. You close your eyes and imagine that the two of you are in a rainforest with multicolored birds chirping in the canopy above you. Mallory sobs and

shakes for a long time as you hold her. At some point, the passion rises and you make love on the floor of shower until the hot water tank is empty and you both run to her bed to get warm.

AN HOUR LATER, Mallory has switched to business mode. You're sitting at the tidy white porcelain island in her kitchen, sipping on a macchiato and sucking on a bootleg

nicotine pouch and trying to understand the Partner Agreements her lawyers have sent. Mallory is on her laptop. From the brief call she took a few minutes ago, you gather that she's working a deal to get FE workers to process Bolivian lithium onshore. The switch to business mode is simultaneously reassuring and disturbing. You are reassured that you're dealing with a woman – you think of her as "Hard Mallory" – who makes careful plans and gets

things done. You're disturbed that the Mallory you held in the shower – "Soft Mallory" – can disappear so quickly.

The Partner Agreements are like prenuptials, but you and Mallory are not getting married. At least, not in this paperwork. You and Mallory are going to be what the Party calls Procreation Prosperity Partners (P3s). In its efforts to stimulate a higher national birth rate, the government

has become the third party in all child-rearing operations, regardless of legal marital status. CentComm awards generous subsidies to P3s for prenatal and postnatal care. Mallory doesn't need the financial support, but there's no means-testing or opt-out. The Party has proclaimed the program to be a huge success: over the past five years, the birth rate has increased by "ten percent." That sounds impressive, unless you understand basic math. Assuming that the

numbers are accurate, the American birth rate has increased from 11 to 12 per thousand. (For comparison, in 1960, during the Baby Boom, the rate was 22. In the mini-boom of the early 1990s, it was 15.)

Your big short-term concern is anonymity. Mallory wants to keep her pregnancy entirely private, but in a few months she will be visibly pregnant. America no longer has any legal outlets for tabloid gossip: all

news is preapproved for its impact on national unity. The chats on VPNs tend to be fragmented: memes don't spread virally. Illicit photos and videos – like the kind Robert keeps on his flip chips – tend to be shared in-person and travel slowly if they travel at all. Most gossip nowadays is literally word-of-mouth. As a Level Eight, Mallory's privacy is pretty secure. Among other things, she's allowed to use VPNs and install signal jammers in her house and car.

But Brian told you he has some Level Nines he can sometimes squeeze for information about Eights.

You figure you're going to need a few weeks to sever the arrangement with Brian. He's not coming back to Bisbee until early December. (He texted you recently about visiting the copper mine in Cananea.) Before that, you need time to build up a plausible workload you can use as an

excuse to drop the investigation on Mallory.

The Partner Agreements are comprehensive. Mallory and her lawyers have thought of everything. Some of the sheer volume of the agreements comes from having to cover a wide range of institutional scenarios. For the past five years under the AP government, Congress has begun nationalizing marriage and property law and preempting existing

state laws. But the Party has not fully abolished the 50 state legislatures, which function mainly as cheerleaders to celebrate the spending of pass-through funds from Congress and CentComm. And, many state laws remain in effect, especially where they concern state-specific issues that Congress and CentComm don't have the bandwidth to address.

In any case, not much of what Mallory owns is going to be

community property, even if you get married. Most of her assets are in trust, including the house. As a Level Eight, she must have quite a bit built up in her ASIF account, but CentComm has recently restricted the ability of beneficiaries – even spouses – to access the funds. There's an increasingly wide gap between the official "paper" value of people's ASIF accounts and what they are allowed to take out for emergencies or retirement income. *The Economist*

recently featured the ASIF in its cover story, with an illustration of the Cheops pyramid and the teaser "America's Latest Pyramid Scheme."

Before signing the P3 papers, you ask the obvious question.

"Are we getting married?"

"I'm thinking we should wait on that. And you shouldn't move in yet. Let's

find out if we're good together. What do you think?"

Part of you is disappointed. You feel some rejection. But part of you is relieved. You really need to deal with Brian before things go public.

"That sounds like a good plan."

"Maybe we can do that after we have our first child."

First child. You think of her first words to you. “Hey there, *stud*.” She’s a horse girl. She was looking for a healthy breeder with good genes.

“And what do we do between now and then?”

“We try to love each other.”

You sign the papers.

ON A MONDAY morning in late November, you meet Mallory at her first ultrasound. You flew back to Tucson last night on a redeye, after spending Thanksgiving at your parents' place in Leesburg. You didn't tell your parents or any of your friends about Mallory or the fact that you're going to be a dad. You've parked across the street from the medical complex, in the lot of a breakfast restaurant, and you've left your phone and laptop in your car.

As a matter of national pronatalist law, the ultrasound is mandatory. And according to Americare rules, it's "free." (As an economist, Mallory says it's "unpriced.") You've avoided talking politics with her so far, but you've been thinking that authoritarian mercantilism feels like a kind of fascism. The editorials in *The Economist* occasionally speculate on whether America's "corporatist" system will mutate into the fascist

variant. So far, the Party has not gone to old-school racist eugenics. But the goal of the P3 system is to “raise loyal and productive Americans.” As a matter of national law, the government can mandate the termination of pregnancies in cases where the fetus has clear signs of birth defects.

The ultrasound tech is a pleasant middle-aged woman. She moves the wand around and shows you images

of a funny creature with a big bulbous head and little arms and legs and paws that look like they belong to an otter.

“Your baby looks very healthy... the size of a very large grape... you can see here that there’s still a tiny bit of the embryonic tail... it’s really too early to say for sure, but I’ve done a lot of these, and I’d bet you she’s a girl.”



It might be the sleep deprivation from the redeye, but the word *girl* triggers something. When the tech leaves the room, you start crying. You can't remember the last time you cried.

Maybe high school. Your crying makes Mallory laugh.

“I’m a wuss. I didn’t know I was a wuss. But I guess I’m a wuss.”

She takes your hand.

“Keep it up. You’re earning big points right now.”

An hour later, you’re in Mallory’s kitchen, sitting at the island and

drinking a macchiato. Out in the yard, a guy in a union shirt is driving a skid loader, delivering some pallets of bricks. Mallory is showing you a spreadsheet. The first column is populated with a couple hundred girls' names in alphabetical order. In the second column, you're supposed to rate how much you like the name, on a scale of one to ten. The third column is hidden, but it contains Mallory's ratings. The fourth column subtracts your rating from Mallory's

and gives an absolute value of the difference. According to Mallory, any name with a difference greater than two is automatically disqualified. You scroll down to “Mallory” and enter a ten in your column. A seven appears in the fourth column, meaning that she rated it a three.

“I don’t hate my name. But we’re definitely not going to name our daughter ‘Mallory.’”

You scroll up and enter a nine in your column for “Jennifer.” That’s your mom’s name. A one appears in the fourth column. You’re thinking Mallory must’ve put an eight, but she says she put a ten. Jennifer was also her mother’s name. She died early, from breast cancer. You change your score to a ten. Mallory says you shouldn’t change your score, but you say you need to update the score to reflect new information. In your generation, Jennifer is very unpopular

as a girl's name. It's now an old lady name. But that's part of the appeal for Mallory. She wants to give her daughter – your daughter – a "Supreme Court Justice name," and avoid giving her a "stripper name." You're tempted to say that Supreme Court Justices aren't as important as they used to be, now that CentComm is running the country, but you and Mallory have never talked about politics, and this is not the time to start.

Mallory opens another tab in the spreadsheet. This one is for middle names. Before you start scoring names, Mallory tells you that your daughter's last name will be Wilson. She says the girl can add your surname, maybe hyphenate, when she gets older – "if you're still around."

"If I'm still around."

Mallory comes over and hugs you from behind. She keeps her arms around you while you scroll through the middle names. The good thing about having a three-syllable first name is that the cadence works for any number of syllables in a middle name. As you start going through the As, you seem to be striking out. The names you like are at least two points off. At “Alice,” you put in a ten. A nine appears in the fourth column. Mallory laughs.

“A ten for Alice? Yuck. Is that your grandma?”

“Wait for it...”

You highlight your ten for Alice, then highlight the whole column and copy tens all the way down. Now you have the differences populated in the righthand column. Now you can see the zeroes and ones for the names she really likes.

“That’s no fun,” Mallory says. “But it does demonstrate some intelligence. And efficiency.”

Scrolling down, you see that Mallory has put a ten for “Alicia.”

“Uh-LIH-sha?”

“*Alicia*. Spanish.”

Mallory also has a nine for “Allison.” She really likes the name, but she doesn’t like the double “son” in “Jennifer Allison Wilson.”

Mallory has put a ten for “Amaranta.” That sounds like a horrible name, but you don’t say anything.

“Amaranta is a little girl I see on the beach in Acapulco. She and her mother sell jewelry to tourists. She’s four years old and completely

adorable. I always buy the most expensive thing they're selling. I teach her English and she teaches me Spanish."

You keep scrolling. Mallory has put tens for a lot of Spanish names. Like "Remedios." Mallory senses your doubt.

"You don't like 'Remedios'?"

“It sounds too much like *remedial*. Not a good name for a Supreme Court Justice.”

“Fair enough. Maybe I’ll make it a nine.”

“Amaranta is growing on me.”

Mallory shows you a picture on her phone. The little girl is dark, with Indian features. She’s wearing a colorful beaded necklace, and her

braids are tied with little bands that have seashells on them.

“Done. Let’s go with Amaranta. Jennifer Amaranta Wilson. What do I have to do to get my name hyphenated onto the end?”

“You have to stick around.”

“That doesn’t sound too hard.”

“And maybe get some more skills.”

“I’m an ace accountant, you know. And I can do most of the V4s at the gym.”

“I was thinking carpentry.” She glances out at the stack of pallets in the yard. “Or masonry.”

“I’m in the wrong union for that.”

“I can fix that. I know people. We’ll get you to Level Two journeyman in no time. Bricklayer.”

“I’ve never laid a brick in my life. Maybe some plastic bricks. In preschool.”

She moves her hand slowly down your abdomen.

“I’ve noticed that you do have some *laying* skills. I’m thinking we should put those skills to work...”

“YOU COULD HAVE him arrested and sent to Biden-Trump,” Robert says. “I’ll make sure the boys show him some *hospitality*.” He pronounces it like Eric Cartman. Hos-pi-TAH-li-TIE.

You're talking over beers at Roka. You told him about Brian – without naming him – but you haven't told him about Mallory.

"I don't want him dead. Or buggered. I just want him gone. Besides, he's too old and fat to be attractive to your butt pirates."

"Oh, you'd be wrong about that. They love any kind of fresh meat.

Even old meat. They like the enlarged prostates."

Robert sees the look on your face and bursts out laughing. He loves to sick you out.

"For real," he says. "That's a thing."

Normally, you would try to one-up him with something sicker. It's a compulsion you have. You're usually the funny guy. The clever guy. But

with a kid on the way, you're not feeling funny or clever.

"Plus, he's a Level Seven."

"Ah. That won't work. We don't get Sevens at B-T. Up to Threes. Ones are the best. They can disappear into the system for months without a trace. Habeas schmabeas. By the time a lawyer shows up, they're ready to confess to anything just to have a chance of getting out. And the drug

addicts don't have lawyers. They don't know up from down for a few weeks, until they dry out and get cold. And sometimes, we get ineligible Fours. You're an eligible Four, right?"

"Very eligible. When this guy comes to town in two weeks, he's bringing the Level Five paperwork."

"It sounds to me like he's your best friend. Level Five is when you start

getting the Get Out of Jail Free cards. You ought to give him a hand job, at least. I'd swallow to make Level Five. I'd even tickle that enlarged prostate."

He wiggles his index finger. You laugh out loud.

"You need to get a different job. That place is fucking you up."

“I keep applying for cop jobs. If you’re a Five, you could write me a bomber recommendation. Don’t kill that guy until you make Five.”

“I don’t want to kill him. I just want him gone.”

“What’s the rush? I’d love to have a Seven in my pocket. Look at it from my point of view. I get it. The guy’s a big fat dickhead. He calls you ‘Tommy’ and treats you like you’re

his kid brother. But he likes you. So he's got you working on some dumb project. That's government, baby. You said he wants to make Bisbee the City of the Future. That doesn't sound too bad. Totally pointless. But not bad."

"I'm dating a Level Eight."

"No shit? How old is she?"

"Older than my usual, for sure."

“Dude. I’d be all over that kinda gravy train. Is she in menopause?”

“No. Not quite.”

“Dude. That beats the hell out of my ineligible Level One ex-strippers. What was that DC lawyer chick you were banging a year ago?”

“Five.”

“Now you’re at Eight. You’re moving up. Is she hawt? Old-lady hawt?”

“Kinda.” You’re hedging. You don’t want to give Robert a lot of information.

He picks up his glass and clinks it against your glass where it’s sitting on the bar.

“I say you keep the Seven guy as a backup. While you’re working the Eight. She might dump you, but it sounds like this Seven is a sure thing, with his dumb project.”

“The Seven doesn’t like the Eight.”

“Ah. Workplace drama. That’s a problem.”

You nod and sip your beer. You keep thinking about the ultrasound image.

“Maybe you can marry the Eight and retire? Be a kept man? That’s my ultimate career goal.”

“I think that’s where I’m headed.”

“Does she have any high-ranking lady friends? I don’t care how fat and ugly they are.”

“I’ll work on that.”

You and Robert order another round. Robert holds up his glass.

“Here’s to our bright futures as kept men.”

BEFORE BRIAN COMES to town, you take your blackies and your gold up to Windy Point and bury them under some rocks in a clump of juniper a hundred yards from the pinnacle where you and Mallory first

climbed. Where you first made love. And maybe, where your child was conceived.

You think about telling Mallory about the stash, in case you die early. Maybe she can take your daughter there to find the treasure buried by her dead father. Ever since the ultrasound, you've been thinking a lot more about death. But you might need the coins, if Hard Mallory kicks you to the curb.

You've stopped buying contraband since the ultrasound. The good news is that Mallory has a lot of foreign wine at her place. You've also deleted your personal VPNs. As an Eight, Mallory has free access to foreign news. You and Mallory haven't shared contacts on your devices. Your standing date is to meet at the coffee place on Thursdays and go climbing and then go back to her place. Meanwhile, you've taken

on a bunch of new LLC investigation folders and pulled some long days with legit Dodge work.

BRIAN KNOCKS AT your door mid-morning the Wednesday he arrives on a redeye. It's cold outside, on the way to a high in the low 50s, but he's sweating in his gray suit after climbing the 94 steps.

“Wake up, Tommy. Put on a tie and grab your passport. We’re goin to ooooold MEH-hi-co. To see Contreras. Tequilas are on me. Leave your phone and laptop. And you can leave your keys. I’m driving.”

A half hour later, a border guard at Naco is scrutinizing Brian’s passport, his Level Seven card, and the papers for the car, which belongs to the Bureau of Mines. When you were

driving through Warren, Brian took a big swig to finish a pint of the Beast and tossed the bottle out the window. Now he's happy and trying to chat up the guard, dropping names and telling him how he's working on bringing lots of mining jobs to Bisbee. If the guard wants a good Level Three job in a year, the new mine will be hiring Americans for security. He gives the guard his card and tells him to call him any time. The guard is unimpressed.

“Make sure you’re sober when you come back. Or maybe have that guy drive.”

“Roger, Houston. Wilco.”

On the other side of the border, the Mexican border officer waves Brian through without stopping him, but Brian slows down long enough to yell “*¡Hola, Ernesto!*” at the officer in a bad *gringo* accent.

Brian explains that in the "old days," the border situation was the opposite. When an American left the country, there were no questions – and usually, no officers – on the American side. But the Mexicans always asked a few questions.

"We used to be focused on keeping the illegals out," he says. "Now we're focused on keeping the *gringos* in. Especially their money."

You wonder if his comments are an invitation to talk about politics. But you don't think about politics very much, and you're not going to talk about them with Brian in a Bureau car that may be bugged. You're certainly not going to discuss your recent speculations about authoritarian mercantilism morphing into a kind of fascism. You might tell your dad about that one of these days. You might bring it up with Tyler or Colin

– or maybe even Robert – but you would do it in a jocular way.

You ride through a brown and desolate landscape of scrub desert. As the car curves through low hills, Brian points out various landmarks. An hour later, you pull up to a cantina in the dingy town in the foothills below the Cananea mine. The huge flat-topped mountain of mine tailings rises in the background.



“They call it a *torta*, because it looks like a cake. Our mine is going to be at least that big.”

Inside the dark cantina, Brian waves at the fat old lady behind the bar and shouts to her in his *gringo* accent.

“*Dos tequilas, Magda.* Top shelf. *Y tacos de cabeza.*”

“*¿Cuántos, Señor Brian?*”

"*¡Doce!*"

"*Cabeza*. Is that brains?"

"Cheek meat. Really tender. You'll love it. They're small tacos, so I got a dozen."

Brian explains that the meeting at the mine with Contreras is not until one.

When Magda brings the shots, Brian downs his.

"*Dos más, por favor.*"

You sip on yours. It's very good. Despite the fact that Mexico is America's best friend, there's still a triple tariff on Mexican tequila. The Beast version is even more horrible than their whiskey. People joke that the Mexicans must've poisoned the agaves at the Beast plantations in Texas.

Brian pulls out his personal cell.

“Before you tell me about the leads you’re working on, I gotta show you something. Big break in the case.”

He shows you a photo of a guy standing on a hotel balcony. He’s a good-looking dark-skinned Hispanic dude, about 40, with slicked-back hair that’s not quite long enough to go into a ponytail. He wears a black shirt that

looks like silk, with some kind of gold pattern on it.

“That’s Julio Ramón Echeverri Salgado.”

“Who’s Salgado?”

“Echeverri. In Spanish, you use the father’s name, if you’re going to use one name. It’s a Basque name, originally.”

You've noticed that when Brian gets drunk, he gets pedantic.

"Who's Echeverri?"

"Officially, a construction magnate from Colombia. But he's a *narco* for sure. He's probably the biggest Colombian *narco* to set foot on Mexican soil since we sent the Army down there. Down here."

"Is he *here*?"

“No. The photo’s from Acapulco. About a year ago. We got it from one of our spies. Not a spy, really. A lookout. She’s a janitor in a high-rise condo building that Echeverri’s company built. She put a camera in the handle of her mop and sells the photos to the cops and the DEA. Anyway, guess who has a condo in the building?”

“Ma – Wilson.”

“Yup. The janitor says she’s seen Echeverri talking to Wilson several times.”

“Interesting.”

“No smoking gun yet. But what are the odds? Also, look at this one. It’s a long way off, but that’s gotta be him. Same shirt. There’s a woman in a bikini in the elevator behind him. You can’t see the face, but she’s light-

skinned. A *gringa*. You think that's Wilson?"

It's Mallory. You finish your shot.

"Could be. She's wearing clothes in all the photos I've seen. But if he owns the building, they must end up in the same elevator sometimes. Randomly."

“What are the odds? Besides, the fact that she owns a condo means she’s already given money to Echeverri.”

“Along with everybody else who has a condo there. Are they all backing the guy’s drug operations?”

“In the old days, we would need something a lot more solid. But you know how the game works. People have been taken down for less. The Party has to crack down on

corruption. Even the appearance of corruption. And besides, you're going to get me more data points. If you can find a Stateside venture they're both in on, that might seal the deal."

When the second shot comes, you try to look festive. You clink your glass against Brian's and down it quickly. You can feel the relief from a good swoon coming on. Brian calls out to Magda for another round.

“Glad you found something,” you tell him. “Even if it’s speculative, at this point. I’ve hit a bunch of dead ends. And the Dodge has given me a ton of new folders. Fuckin FinCEN.”

“Ah. That reminds me.”

He pulls some papers from his breast pocket and hands them to you.

“Level Five. Signed by the DOJ. All you gotta do is sign and scan and send it in. As I understand the way the department works, you can pick your own projects now. Leave that other shit on the back burner. Assign it to someone lower down on the food chain. And besides, this is legit Tequilaville stuff. You gotta start working Echeverri. He has probably set up a bunch of shell companies from Acapulco all the way up here.

You just gotta connect some of those dots to Wilson."

Magda brings two more shots. She's followed by a bus boy holding a big tray of tacos.

"Here's to Bisbee," Brian says.

"City of the Future!" You try to sound enthusiastic.

Brian shoots his and looks disappointed when you sip on yours.

“I gotta slow down. Get some tacos in me first.”

The tacos are good, but you’re not feeling very hungry. You force yourself to eat four of them. You want a good buzz to keep your nerves steady, but you can’t switch off your brain today.

YOU GET TO the mine office at precisely one o'clock. The mine director, Benjamín Contreras – Brian calls him "Mín" – is late coming back from lunch, so you drink Keurig coffees made by his secretary.

When Contreras arrives, Brian pulls a fresh pint of tequila from his briefcase. He must've bought it from Magda while you were in the bathroom at the cantina.

"*¡Bien hecho, Señor Brian!*"

Contreras is a squat little man in a rumpled brown suit. His skin is the color of the adobe bricks Mallory is putting on her house. His age might be anywhere from 40 to 60. He pulls three shot glasses from a desk drawer and slides them across the desk. Brian fills them. They have the logo of the copper company on them,

embossed in what you assume is copper. Contreras raises his glass.

"*¡Al éxito!*"

You pound your shots and Brian pours seconds. As you sip on your second, Brian and Contreras laugh and make jokes in Spanish. You don't speak much Spanish, but it sounds like Brian is somewhat fluent – despite the bad accent. Brian refers

to you as *el chico* and *Señor Tomás*. You recognize the word *marica*.

"I told him you're not a fag. You're just young and haven't had a lot of practice drinking. And for the record, I wouldn't care. If you are, you've hidden it well. I've seen your file. But if you are, I'm gonna need you to start a gay bar in Bisbee. Every up-and-coming city has at least one gay bar."

Brian translates that for Contreras, who starts babbling out a long story. Other than *marica* and *mujeres*, the only intelligible phrase to you is "Fred's Rainbow Bar." Brian explains that a couple of Mexican wrestlers with white-blond hair ran a gay bar in Cananea for a couple of decades, when the industry was in more of a boom. Contreras said he used to go to the bar, because it always had the best-looking women of any bar in town.

“And these women,” Contreras adds in heavily accented English, “they were women. This I promise to you. I know very well.”

For a long time, the two of them talk shop, sometimes in English and sometimes in Spanish. Brian assures Contreras that the Bisbee project is on track, and that he’s “sorting out” the labor question. He also assures him that Contreras and his leadership

cadre will be in charge of the operation – no matter what the *gringos* say in the official statements. Contreras is proud of his ability to run an efficient mining operation. He tells Brian that if the *gringo* unions load up the payroll with Fours and higher levels, the math won't work. Brian assures him there will be a 20-to-one ratio of Mexicans to *gringos* in the payroll, but Contreras reminds Brian that it's not the ratio that matters, but how much cash actually

goes out in payroll checks to the Four-Ups.

Just before two o'clock, Contreras says he has a video call. Brian offers him another shot, but he waives away the offer. Brian downs a quick one, then tightens the cap on the pint and puts it in his briefcase.

"Can I take the kid on a tour?"

"Of course, *Señor Brian*. Get the badges from Lucía. And the hats. And please, to shut the door."

When you shut the office door behind you, Brian laughs and says in a Mexican accent, "Badges? We don't need no stinkin badges!"

You know it's a movie reference, but you can't remember which movie. In any case, Brian is joking. He goes to the secretary's desk and sweet-talks

her in Spanish while she prints out the badges.

"Don't forget the hard hats, *Señor Brian*."

"*Por supuesto, Doña Lucía*."

For the next hour, you march around the lower levels of the facility in your hard hats and safety glasses. For a fat drunk, Brian has a lot of energy. He stops to give you pedantic

explanations of mining techniques, ore concentrations, and metallurgy. He seems to know everybody's name. Or at least, he has given a nickname to everyone. Outside the huge smelter building, he stops and banters in Spanish with a security guard he calls "Mickey" and "*Ratón Miguelito*."

"Mickey" lets you in a side door to the smelter.

"*Ten cuidado, Señor Brian*."

"*Por supuesto, Ratón Miguelito*."

The giant smelter room feels like a sauna. It's dark around you, but high above, the room is lit up faintly by a yellow-orange glow. You're standing on a metal grate walkway. On either side of you and above you is chain-link caging. Little LEDs hang low from the caging to illuminate the walkway. It feels like you're inside a

submarine that's gliding through the depths of Hell.

Brian leads you down the walkway and stops at a metal staircase that has a safety chain hanging across the bottom steps. He looks around for cameras and then opens his briefcase and takes a big swig to finish the pint of tequila.

"You gotta see this, *Señor Tomás*." Brian shouts in your ear over the

thrumming mechanical din of the room. “This is what it’s all about.”

He removes the safety chain. You ascend switch-backing flights of stairs inside the chain-link caging. You can see that the stairs are attached to the back wall of the room. On the other side, a few yards away, is a dark metallic heat that seems to pulse at you. As your eyes adjust, you can tell that it’s a huge round cauldron. On the third set of stairs, you climb above

the level of the lip of the cauldron. The orange-yellow glow of the molten copper has an odd effect. It's not bright but the heat hurts your eyes, even through the safety glasses.

You continue to follow Brian up several more flights until you reach a platform high above the level of the cauldron. Flat skinny walkways of metal grates with side rails extend out between huge aluminum boxes

attached to the ceiling. Brian points and shouts in your ear.

“Those are the ventilating units. They open the roof when the guys are working on the units, to help with the heat. But the guys wear cooling suits. They can be up here for an hour at a time. Those are some tough *hombres*.”

You’ve seen more than enough, but Brian powers forward across one of

the walkways. You're over the cauldron now, and frightened. The side rails look solid, and the top rail comes up to your rib cage. There's no way you could fall. But you would rather have the chain link cage all the way around you. You think of Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings*, doing back flips at the edge of the cliff over the volcanic magma. Brian stops at a corner in the walkway between ventilation units and points

down. Sweat is pouring from his forehead and his face is bright red.



“Woo! That’s eleven hundred fucking degrees down there. See down there? The far end? Look at the sluice on that side. It’s got robot arms that open and close it. The operators work in that room way over there. It’s air conditioned in there. We can go in there afterwards. But this is the real thing. When the sluice opens, the molten copper runs down that trough and into the unit with the electrorefining cells. We can’t go in there. Too toxic. But you gotta see

the finished anodes. That's the real shit. 80 kilograms of pure copper. That's about what you weigh. Maybe more. Imagine a plate of pure metal that weighs as much as you do."

You nod, trying to look enthusiastic. You want to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. You're starting to feel weak. Even Brian, despite his energy, seems to be leaning against the rail for support.

“Mín’s gonna build one of these for us in Bisbee. We just gotta get that bitch out of the picture. Put her away for life. Or executed. If she’s working with a high-level drug dealer like Echeverri, it would be a huge scandal. Union corruption at the highest levels. She might get the electric chair.”

You think of Mallory, strapped into an electric chair with a hood over her head. You think of the little body you

saw on the ultrasound, with her bulbous head and her otter paws.

You notice once again how tall Brian is. You crouch down quickly and wrap your arms around his calves. You lift with the strength of rage. As his center of gravity rises above the top rail, you push forward with your shoulders, your head buried in his huge gut. He flails but is too surprised and too delayed to get hold of you or the rail. If he says anything,

it’s lost in the surrounding noise. His body falls into the molten soup below. Unlike Gollum in the movie, his body doesn’t sink. It floats, glowing red and slowly turning black. You think you can see steam coming off the body, but the light is so bright you can’t be sure. You stagger back to the staircase and stumble downward. You have visions of being arrested and sent to prison. Maybe Robert can keep you safe. But you don’t care about anything except getting out of

this heat. Any prison will be cooler than this place.

YOU'RE SITTING IN Contreras' office. It has been about an hour, and now you're cold in your sweat-soaked suit. Lucía has wrapped you in a blanket and brought you some hot tea.

Contreras comes into the officer and sits in his chair.

“The police are up there. In the smelter. They found his briefcase. And his empty bottle.”

You start crying. You’re crying because you’re afraid of disappearing into a Mexican prison. In America people can disappear for a while, but not forever. Eventually you get to talk to a lawyer. In a Mexican prison, maybe not. Maybe Americans get some kind of due process. You don’t know. You think about never seeing

anyone you know ever again. Never seeing Mallory again. Never seeing your daughter. But Contreras doesn't know what you're thinking.

"This is very sad, *Señor Tomás*. *Señor Brian* was your good friend."

You nod.

"He was very tall. No one is that tall in Mexico. Maybe the tallest person to visit this mine in ever."

After a moment of confusion, you understand what Contreras is saying. He's worried about liability. Or maybe bad headlines – though the Mexican news media these days are almost as locked down as the American ones. Brian was too tall for the guard rails.

"And *Señor Brian* was drinking. Very heavy. They found his bottle."

“He drank a lot,” you affirm.

“He was leaning over the rail,” you add. “He was pointing at something. He was telling me about anodes.”

“You say he was *leaning over the rail*?”

You detect a note of hope in his voice. He pantomimes the action by leaning forward over his desk.

“Yeah. He was leaning way over the rail.”

“This sounds very – how do you say? – *reckless*.”

“It sure seemed reckless to me. I was scared up there.”

“I think maybe he was being very drunk and very *macho*. Maybe he was... *showing off*... to you? I’m sorry

to say this. Because he was your friend. But maybe?"

"Yeah. I think so."

"He did not look very drunk. When he left my office. Did you think so?"

You think about Brian in the hallway, joking about "stinkin badges." He was pretty drunk. But Contreras is going for a narrative: Brian was fine

when he left the office and only got drunk later.

“I think he was fine when we left your office. But while we were on the tour, he kept taking drinks from the bottle. I think he finished it before we went up in the smelter building.”

“This is very sad about *Señor Brian*. He was a good man. He had big dreams for mining in Bisbee.”

Contreras reaches forward and thumbs his cell phone, which is sitting on the desk.

“I don’t want you or the company to get into trouble. I’ll tell the police that he was drunk and reckless.”

Contreras points to the cell phone.

“You already did, *Señor Tomás*. You will not need to talk to the police. Maybe a little paperwork. I will

handle everything. This a very simple matter. But it is very sad."

He pulls a bottle of French brandy and two cordial glasses from his desk drawer.

"I will give you a small drink. *Por los nervios*. And then: *no más, Tomás*. You drive the car back home. But we will drink quietly now. We will drink to the life of *Señor Brian.*

Our good friend, who died today very sadly."

Now that you're apparently off the hook, you sip the brandy and try to think good things about Brian. If it were not for him, you never would have met Mallory. You wouldn't be having a kid.

You then find yourself thinking classic self-justifying perp thoughts. You think that maybe you were doing

Brian a favor, by killing him before reality destroyed his Bisbee project and he had to retire as a failure. He was so happy up there, watching the molten copper and talking about the 80-kilogram anodes. Maybe you saved him before he got in too deep politically and Mallory's faction got CentComm to put him in prison or fire him without a pension. Or maybe you saved him from the guilt of ruining Mallory's life and making her daughter – your daughter – grow up

without a mom. Someone had to feel guilt, so maybe it's better that you feel it, rather than him. You know these thoughts are bullshit, but they cascade through your mind.

An hour later, after sharing some cold sandwiches, Contreras and Lucía walk you out to your car.

“I am going to be honest with you, *Señor Tomás*. I do not think that the

dream of the Bisbee mine was going to work out."

You nod.

"Please drive carefully."

You drive north into the dusk as it stretches across the flat scrub desert. As you reach the outskirts of the Sonoran side of Naco, you remember your promotion. The papers are

where you left them, in the cubby hole on the passenger-side door.

THE NEXT DAY is a Thursday, but you're frazzled and sleep-deprived and in no shape to meet up with Mallory. You do a lot of paperwork for the next four days. Mexican paperwork, down at the Naco border station. American paperwork, at the Bureau of Mines office in Sierra Vista. It occurs to you that Brian's

death is not going to be a news story. It might go out as an internal memo at the Bureau, as a warning for personnel to exercise caution when visiting foreign mines. You give the Mines clerk a hand-written condolence card for Brian's family. You say you are "very sad about his accident." You tell them you barely knew Brian, but he always treated you like a good friend. You tell them you were inspired by his vision for what Bisbee could be.

On Tuesday, when it seems that you're done, you scan in your promotion paperwork and send it to your new supervisor at the Dodge. You won't get any official response for a couple of weeks, but Doug emails you the next day: "Welcome to Level Five, buddy! It's slow from here but keep climbing!" Doug has been a Level Five for the past four years. Since his initial enthusiasm a decade ago, Doug has not been much

of a Party guy, and promotions to Six and beyond tend to be very political. You doubt that he's envious. If you keep climbing, and if he keeps you happy, you can pull him up behind you.

On Thursday, you drive up to Tucson early and install yourself in the coffee shop. You put your laptop bag on the seat at the table next to you to hold it for Mallory. She comes in from yoga promptly at 8:30, gets a latte and

slides in beside you. She touches your hand briefly. Not long enough for any casual observers to notice, but long enough to assure you that everything's okay between you and her.

You feel like you need to explain why you weren't there last Thursday. You tell her you had a bad week at work – "it was awful, please don't ask" – but you got promoted. You wonder if she knows about Brian's accident, or if

Brian was even on her radar. Maybe Brian's Bisbee dream was so ridiculous that the unions had never registered it as a threat. Maybe the Level Eight in charge of the Bureau had never made any effort to push the project with Jim Patterson, the Level Nine who was director of the Department of the Interior. If so, CentComm probably didn't know about it, either. Brian was obsessed with Mallory, but it's possible that it

was an unrequited obsession. She might be unaware of his existence.

Mallory suggests that climbing might be the best remedy for a bad week at work. You tell her that's exactly what you're thinking. It's a cold day, and it would be even colder up at Windy Point, so you go to the gym.

For about the first half hour at the gym, you're still thinking about Brian. At some point, you notice that

Mallory's looking hot in her yoga outfit. You haven't gotten laid in two weeks. The combination of anxiety and lust results in explosive energy. For the next hour you do a lot of routes that have "dynos" – moves where your hands and feet come off the wall and you jump up, or up and sideways, to grab holds that are out of reach. Even where routes have entirely "static" moves and do not require dynos, you create dynos by skipping easier holds. By contrast,

Mallory is all static. When it comes to static climbs, she's on the same level as you. But she's not as strong as you for dynos, and she apparently hasn't killed anyone recently. After an hour of tearing around the gym doing dyno climbs, your forearms are pumped and your hands ache. The skin on your fingers is raw from reckless grabs at holds. You've torn off a callous on your right ring finger, and you've wrapped the blister in medical tape.

At one point, you're sitting with Mallory on the cushioned floor, too exhausted for the moment to climb any more. You're in a zone where you've forgotten about Brian or work or anything except blasting to the top of routes.

"You're a monster today. Maybe you should try to have more bad weeks at work."

You tell her that with more flexibility in your new work role, you could start taking time off to climb on both Tuesdays and Thursdays. She touches your hand. Again, not so that a casual observer would notice.

"I'm thinking I should take the monster home with me after this."

You go to her house and make love and eat lunch. After lunch, you go outside and watch the guys who are

laying adobe bricks into a new facade on the east side of the house. You ask them questions about their craft and they teach you how to use the various kinds of trowels to lay on mortar and set bricks and fill in the gaps. Three hours later, you're in a zone where you've forgotten about Brian, about work, and even about Mallory.

WHILE YOU'RE IN Leesburg for Christmas, your parents host a

Christmas Eve dinner, which is also a small retirement party for your dad. After your parents' friends leave, you go with your dad into his home office. He must have a thousand books on the shelves that line the room. Like most Level Sevens, he has a jammer – but it's sitting on his desk, out in the open. There's a small blizzard going on outside, but you're next to a gas fireplace with faux logs. You're sipping on Lagavulin and drawing on Simón Bolívar torpedoes. Your dad is

sitting in a matching leather lounge chair across the coffee table from you. He's stroking the white wisps of hair that barely cover his scalp.

"Your mother is getting into 'Swedish death cleaning.' She told me the other day that books are not trophies. I said, 'The hell they're not.' I've read almost all of these, and they're filled with marginalia. If you want to throw them out when I die, go right ahead. And no apologies for the

hassle, by the way. You're going to get about a million from me when I go, after taxes and after your mom's portion. She gets the house. And whatever's in the Level Seven death benefit, which seems to change every year. Of course, a million isn't what it used to be. Regardless, you can consider yourself well paid for your efforts at dealing with all my shit."

You nod.

“Did you fly into Dulles today?”

“Manassas.”

“Man-asses.” Your dad pronounces the word in a hick accent. “Your plane get diverted by the blizzard?”

“My girlfriend chartered a plane from Tucson.”

Your dad raises his glass and clinks it against yours.

“That’s a good girlfriend.”

“It was an old Lear. Pretty small. We had to land in Arkansas to refuel. The pilots said the newer planes are unbelievably expensive.”

“The bottom rung of the jet world. But at least you’re on the ladder. Who’s the girl?”

You tell him about Mallory. He's heard of her.

"The union princess. And apparently, a legit boss now. That's impressive. You're moving up, Thomas."

You clink glasses again. Then you tell him that you and Mallory are having a kid.

“That’s really big. You should’ve invited her to the family dinner. And why are you staying with us?”

“We’re trying to keep things on the DL, for now. Next time we’re in town, I’ll bring her over for dinner. Just you and mom.”

“She has mob connections, Thomas. Even if she’s totally legit. Those people are in her orbit. Don’t let anybody do any favors for you. And I

would strongly suggest that you don't pick up women on the side. Not to mention the fact that you're having a kid. As I see it, your party days are over, lad."

"Yup. That's how I see it."

After some more banter, you steer your dad toward politics with a comment about how the past decade ("under CentComm, what some people call authoritarian

mercantilism”) has struck you as being a bit odd – though you add that you’re too young to have much of a perspective on history.

Your dad studies the splash of Lagavulin he has recently added to his glass. His program for a night of sipping is to progressively add less water to each measure, so the flavor keeps up with the deadening of his taste buds.

“That’s the way democracies go, Thomas. They’re inherently unstable. They tend to degenerate into political gang wars. Like the lawfare stuff under Biden and Trump. Runaway executive power. When one side gets into power, they try to put their opponents in jail. They spend money to help their friends and punish their enemies. It looks bad to the average Joe, and eventually, people clamor for a strong hand to come in and make

everybody work together to sort things out."

"Does the strong hand work? Does it sort things out?"

"I don't know. Sometimes, probably. What an authoritarian regime does is to create a monopoly. You move the gang wars behind closed doors. In the back rooms at Party conventions. The public doesn't get to see it. They just hear in the news that some high-level

guy has been imprisoned for corruption. And if they're stupid – and most people are – they think the government is doing a good job of fighting corruption, because some big guy went down."

"Do the regimes tend to choose good economic policies?"

"No. Or, mostly no. Sometimes, maybe. I was going to say Singapore, but they're not mercantilists. Lee was

always very free trade. And Pinochet. But when we started this whole thing, everybody was high on the Chinese model. I was, too. But we're not as smart as the Chinese. And from the intel I've read over the years, they're not exactly brilliant, either. For example, neither of us has gotten much done with AI or high tech lately."

"AI is not one of the legs of the stool."

“Nope. Robots don’t vote. They don’t join officially sanctioned labor coalitions or industry groups. Maybe they should. Most of the big developments are happening in other places now. Europe and Japan and Australia and India. The problem with the monopoly is that the feedback loop is really slow. There’s not much debate, so the regime doesn’t change course in response to new information.”

“How does it go back to democracy?”

“It takes a while. With all the major interest groups inside the tent making deals, they can keep the people from getting agitated for a while. Like the PRI party that ran Mexico for a big chunk of the last century. On the outside, they had the appearance of democracy. Some writer – Vargas, I think – called it ‘the perfect dictatorship.’ Or the Peronists in

Argentina. But eventually, the regime runs the economy into the ground. The economy doesn't grow. Prices are high for everything. People feel poorer. There are too many losers. Eventually, the thing breaks down, and people want democracy again."

"Does democracy make things better?"

"Sometimes. Eastern Europe did great. And Spain and Chile.

Sometimes a country lucks out and elects somebody like that Milei guy in Argentina. He gave them a good run for a while."

You're wondering if the old Guardians of the Realm are still pulling any strings at CentComm. Maybe they're reluctant, given the results of their last big psyop. Or maybe they're not in a position to pull strings anymore.

“How long will it take America to get back to democracy?”

“No idea. But I probably won’t live to see it. We’re not producing good longevity drugs here. We’ll get the basic broad-spectrum stuff pretty soon, I think. But not the stuff with the AI, the fine-tuning for individuals. Last I saw, the Swiss and Australian drugs had 200 percent tariffs. And they’re super-expensive, to start. My

plan is to enjoy some good scotch and read a few good books before I die."

"What's the difference between our system and fascism?"

"Not much, really. At least, not on the economics. It's all the same. Where people usually draw the line is when you get a personalistic dictatorship. When one guy is calling all the shots and he builds a cult of personality around himself. And if he

starts a lot of wars to acquire territory. But you get that with a lot of communist regimes, too."

"Sounds like a king."

"Yeah. Like an absolute monarch. These things are all close cousins. It's hard to draw the line."

"We've acquired Mexico. Sort of."

"America's best friend."

“So far, we seem to have avoided the king part. The dictator part.”

“So far. CentComm really does seem to function like a committee. They all jockey around for their personal priorities. And I hear it can be pretty vicious, what goes on behind closed doors. But no single dominant personality has emerged from the *junta*. Yet.”

Your dad pours you a splash and tells you to turn up the gas on the fireplace.

THE MONTHS PASS. Mallory's belly expands. You go through the motions at your day job. You climb two or three times a week and help the masons finish the work on Mallory's house. When that work is done, you follow the brick team to another project on the east side of town and help the carpenters work on

the rebuild for Mallory's stable. You start getting your paperwork lined up for a dual journeyman license in bricklaying and carpentry.

Mallory goes into labor at eleven o' clock on a Thursday night. You drive her to Tucson Medical and stay by her side for five hours of "uncomplicated" delivery. (From your vantage point, the whole thing – which includes an epidural – seems *very* complicated.) You lie in the post-natal bed with

Mallory as she holds Jennifer. Even in the dimmed lights, Jennifer is very dark. She sleeps with a peace that seems otherworldly, especially given the world she has just entered.

Mallory is *not* at peace. She begins sobbing uncontrollably. At some point, she half whispers, half sputters, "I have to tell you something."

"I know," you say, whispering in her ear. "Echeverri."

Through her tears, Mallory studies your eyes.

“There was a case. I was on it. I killed it. It’s over.”

Jennifer sobs some more and manages to squeak out another whisper.

“The next one will be yours.”

"*This one* is mine," you tell her. "I will love her until the day I die. Longer. If there is a longer."

Mallory moves Jennifer so that her head rests on your chest. You feel the warmth from the bundle and fall asleep instantly.

THREE YEARS LATER, on a Saturday morning in the late summer, you're at the Old City Park in Bisbee

with Jennifer. Mallory is at home with Thomas Junior, who you have started calling “Tomasito.” You’re sitting on a big beach towel under the red pistache you planted, on a circle of golf-quality bermuda that you planted and that you tend almost every weekend. Federated Extractive paid to put in the tree and the grass, but the City can’t afford to maintain it, so that job has fallen to you. You’re a union Five, so you’re over-qualified, but you love gardening.

Every October you plant winter grass. You've also put in sections of decorative rock on both sides of the concrete stage alcove that's set into the retaining wall. For decades, the whole place was solid concrete. Now that the park looks nicer and has grass, families come here from Sierra Vista and Douglas to picnic.

You leave Jennifer under the tree, playing with her Ameribricks. (They're domestic Legos that are

almost as good, but with less variety.) Set into a section of mortar in the rock to the left of the stage is a small bronze plaque you installed.

Park improvements donated by
Federated Extractive
in honor of Brian Mahoney (1979 - 2036), who loved Bisbee

You touch the bronze and experience the usual mix of feelings. Sadness for Brian's family. Horror at the memory

of pushing him over the rail. Relief that he didn't take down Mallory. Fear that somebody might eventually figure out how he died and do something about it.

"That was the guy from the Bureau of Mines?"

You turn. The voice is familiar, but it comes from a thin hippie-looking guy with long hair, a deep tan, and a chest-length beard.

“Robert. What the fuck. You look... different.”

“Permanent disability. I thought I should look the part.”

You glance over to make sure Jennifer is okay. She’s pushing her pink Ameribricks car through the grass.

“What happened?”

“Officially? I tore a bunch of tendons in a scuffle with some cons. That did actually happen. But I’m okay now. I can walk pretty good. In fact, I walk pretty much everywhere.”

“And unofficially?”

“I cracked.”

“You cracked?”

“Yeah. I don’t know what it was, exactly. I think it was just cumulative. I couldn’t function. I was drinking at work and taking anxiety meds. It was the constant violence. The constant depravity. It just went on and on. After the scuffle, when I woke up in the hospital, I knew I could never go back.”

“Damn. We should go get a beer one of these days and catch up.”

“Nope. No beer for me. And I’m avoiding bars. My sponsor tells me to stick to coffee shops. I’ve only got two years.”

“Okay. Coffee, then.”

“Are you still pushing paper at the Dodge?”

“Yeah, officially. But I don’t do much. I’m doing some masonry on

the side, with an outfit in Tucson. I did this stonework."

Robert studies the wall for a long moment.

"That's really good, Thomas."

"It's kinda sloppy in places. Like this spot. I need to fix that."

“I’m not an expert. It looks good to me. It must be great to actually make something.”

You nod. It *is* great.

“Can I meet your daughter?”

You almost laugh. Robert does laugh.

“I got a lot of problems, Thomas. I might be the sickest puppy you ever met. But I’m not a pedo.”

You walk over to the circle. Robert sits down on the grass. You tell Jennifer that this is your friend Robert, but she doesn't look up. She's on all fours, making her toy car follow a black ant through the grass and making little squeaking noises and asking "Mister Ant" where he's going. You sit down on the towel and watch her. She drives the car close to Robert, which makes you a little nervous. She looks up at his face.

“You’re stinky.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve been walking around town all morning without deodorant.”

Jennifer stands up, turns her back to Robert, and sits on his ankles where they cross. Her natural skin coloring is almost as dark as Robert’s. She resumes her discussion with Mister Ant. She wants Mister Ant to ride in

the car. Your eyes meet Robert's. They're full of tears, which have begun to run down his face. At some point, Jennifer notices that he's crying. She keeps playing with the car.

"Are you sad?"

"No. I'm happy. Maybe the happiest I've ever been. In a long time."

“I’m happy because I’m with my daddy.”

“Me, too.”

“Where’s *your* daddy?”

Robert thinks for a long moment.

“My daddy’s in the grass. And in the tree. And in the dirt under the grass. And in the sunlight. In the blue sky. You can’t see Him. But He’s here.

He’s everywhere. And He’s been really good to me.”

Jennifer looks back at Robert’s face for a moment, then keeps playing. She seems to accept the whole thing. She has none of the follow-up questions that are popping into your mind, like how long Robert has been a religious nut. Mister Ant crawls onto the toy car, and she has some brief moments of delight before the ant goes back into the grass.

“I’m stinky,” she says. She stands up and toddles over to you.

“Uh oh,” you say. “Pantload. Gotta change that.”

“I’ll take that as my cue to get going,” Robert says.

“I’ll give you a call. We’ll get coffee.” You say that, but you’re not sure you want to hang out with the

new Robert. He's probably not nearly as funny as he used to be.

"I got rid of my cell. But I'll be around. I come to Bisbee a lot, especially in the hot months. Sometimes, on Sundays, I go to the little church that's right there next to the Copper Queen."

You remember that you have some snacks in the diaper bag.

“You hungry?”

He starts to say no, then reconsiders.

“I’m on a pretty limited budget these days. I guess I shouldn’t reject food when good people offer it. Remember when everything was cheap? Whatever happened to that?”

“I don’t know.”

You have some theories, but now isn't the time to discuss them. You hand him a packet of trail mix. He holds it up and bows, as if to thank you and his god. It's both sincere and slightly comical.

As Robert walks away, you change Jennifer's diaper. It's a big load. It takes several wipes to get it all. You think about the phrase he used: "good people." You haven't seen him since the incident with Brian. First you

were too busy. Then Jennifer came into your life and took over everything. But you also avoided Robert because of all the people you knew he was the most cynical. He would've made constant jokes about how "convenient" it was that Brian "just fell" into a vat of molten copper. How it "couldn't have happened to a nicer guy." They would've been friendly accusations, maybe without real suspicion, but they would've been accusations.

Now, Robert has included you in his category of "good people." Is it a kind of absolution? Is a wandering Jesus freak on the same level as a priest? Maybe they rank higher than priests, because they're scarcer and only appear at random. Maybe they're above priests, but below actual hermits living in desert caves. You have no knowledge of such things.

You are also agnostic about the category of "good people." Being good seems to have something to do with trying to love other people and do things to help them. But most people you know are like you. They're just *people*. Trying to get ahead in life. Or at least, trying not to lose what they have. They change diapers. They watch their kids play. They plant trees and water and trim grass. They do pointless paperwork jobs. They lay bricks. Sometimes

they do desperate things. They kill somebody, if they have to. Then they deal with the guilt. You wonder how many people have killed somebody and then put his name on a wall.

SIX YEARS LATER, you and Mallory and the kids are on spring break at her condo in Acapulco. You're also there to celebrate your recent promotion to Level Six and to Financial Division Chief of the

Southwest for the Dodge. Jennifer is nine and Junior is seven. You're waiting until they're older to take them to Europe. They won't remember much, if you go now. And because Mallory is a Level Eight, travelling outside the American Zone is a pain in the ass for paperwork and surveillance. Given that Eights are high-level players with sensitive information, their travels outside the Zone are tracked carefully.

Because of Mallory's status, your kids will be Level Threes when they turn 18. You've talked about sending them to Europe to go backpacking on their own. By themselves, they would have a lot more freedom to wander around untracked, touring castles and cathedrals, and dancing in nightclubs with Euro kids. After several soft devaluations, their dollars won't take them as far, but they'll do fine on Mallory's money.

Officially, Mexico and Canada are both integral partners in the Zone. Canada finally caved a couple years ago, in return for zero tariffs. Their integration is in name only: they've kept the Canadian dollar, and they're almost entirely independent, except that their immigration policies are dictated by Washington. Cuba and the Central American countries from Guatemala to Panama are officially American protectorates. But the American military is spread thin and

isn’t in a great position to protect anyone. (America has generally backed out of military engagements outside of the American Zone.) America doesn’t even have functional control over Mexico – as the recent uptick in drug confiscations suggests.

Things are expensive in Mexico. Things like the $20 piña colada you’re sipping on the beach below the condo. Mexicans are mostly doing better now, with integration and with

zero tariffs on most of what they sell to Americans. And now that they've fully dollarized, their government can't flood the country with cheap pesos. All of that's good for the Mexicans, and you can't complain about that. But it's not like in the old days, when *gringos* could live like kings for a week on a wallet full of cash.

In any case, the rum is good and the morning is warm. The palm fronds

are swaying and the waves are low and soothing. Mallory and the kids are a couple hundred yards down the beach, playing with Amaranta. You apply some sunscreen, lie back on your towel, and doze.

When you wake, you see a man sitting on a towel about five yards to your left. He's about your age, not as muscular, with very dark skin. He's sipping a Coke in a glass bottle. You still think of it as "Mexican Coke."

But now that Cuba and Nicaragua are in the Zone, sugar prices are coming down and Americans are starting to make Coke with real sugar. CentComm has finally put a leash on the Florida sugar growers. You're not very impressed with CentComm's economic policies. America seems to be in a permanent, medium-bad recession. But they got one thing right, at least.



At some point, you notice that the man has a silk shirt folded by his side. He has his long black hair tied back in

a short ponytail. It's Echeverri. You're both wearing sunglasses, and you try not to make any sign of recognition. But before you can pretend to go back to sleep, he tips his bottle toward the spot on the beach where Mallory and the kids are.

"You are a very good father. Your family is very happy."

He speaks very good English, but with a heavy accent. You sit up.

“Thanks. They like it here.”

“You have been very good to Jennifer. We do not talk very much, but Mallory has told me.”

You nod, wondering how much Mallory has told him and how closely he has been watching your life. He answers the other question that is in your mind.

“Everything is in the past, Thomas. We had a nice time, but that was long ago. This is all for the best. You understand?”

You nod.

“I think that Jennifer looks like my mom. Her name was Remedios. Someday, I will meet Jennifer. Maybe when she is all grown up. If I live long enough. You understand that my life is very... complicated?”

You reach for your piña colada and take a sip.

“I think,” he says, “that your life, your family, should be... uncomplicated.”

“I like it that way.”

“You owe me nothing,” he says.

You’re waiting for the “but...” This conversation reminds you of the first

time Brian talked to you. How he hinted at the many felonies you had committed but said he wasn't trying to blackmail you.

"We have a friend in common. His name is Contreras. Mín Contreras. He works up north, in the mining. I think you remember him. He tells me that you owe him a favor."

You take another sip, raising the cup slowly, trying to hide how nervous

you're getting. There must've been cameras in the catwalk above the smelter. But how could they get a clear picture? You could barely see up there. Everything shimmered, in the waves of heat that rolled in front of your goggles. Maybe the cameras just captured Brian falling. But falling *backwards*. "You say he was *leaning over the rail*?" You remember Contreras leaning forward over his desk.

“He did not say why, but he said you owe him a favor.”

Your mouth is very dry now. There is no juice left in the drink, but you suck on some crushed ice, in case you have to speak.

“Mín and I have some business contacts in Arizona and New Mexico. Paul McCormick and Agustín Beltrán. Maybe you know them. They are good people. Mostly, their business is

uncomplicated. But their business is a little bit complicated. You understand?"

You nod. You don't know the names. But now that he has said them, you are involved. He has given you no choice.

"These guys have holding companies. Lots of little businesses. And you are in the government. You know that the government is sometimes a

problem for people in business. There are always many laws. Many regulations. Sometimes governments will do these investigations. Investigations that go nowhere. They are pointless. Maybe they spend a lot of time and money investigating businesses that are run by good people. But this is a waste. They should be going after the *real* bad guys. You understand?"

You nod.

“My life is complicated. I know some of the real bad guys. I could tell you who they are. Some names. But I do not want your life to be complicated. I want your life to be simple. Very happy. You do not have to do anything. In fact, you need to do *nothing*. But of course, it is *something*. You need to keep your people at work from being too busy. You understand?”

You nod, but you're wondering how long it will be before Echeverri will need you to sic the Dodge on "the *real* bad guys."

"Ah. Here is the waiter. *La bebida es pa' él*."

The waiter hands you a fresh piña colada. You start reaching for some cash, but the waiter waves his hand and walks away.

“Another thing, Thomas. Mallory knows nothing about this. It has nothing to do with Mallory. *Na’ que ver*. I think it is best that she knows nothing. Of course, she must know a little bit about my business. But I never involved her in anything. Always I was careful to protect her.”

You wonder if that’s true. Maybe Brian really had nothing on Mallory. But the Dodge has caused a lot of

trouble for people who did nothing. You see it every day.

“We are men, Thomas. We do the tough things. Mín tells me you are very tough. But I can see this. We protect our families, Thomas. Mallory is very big in your politics. She can be tough. I know this personally. When Jennifer was born – before that – she cut me out. Completely. I was thinking maybe. But no. And this is exactly the right

thing. This is all for the best. But it is always for the man – the men – to protect the women that they love. You understand. You know this."

You nod. The rum is kicking in, but you still can't speak. You don't want to speak. You won't sound very tough, if you do. You raise your cup to him. He raises his bottle of Coke. You have reached an understanding.

He sits, surveying the beach in silence. You do the same. Some minutes later, you see that Mallory and the kids are starting to make their way back. You're supposed to go fishing later in the morning. Echeverri puts on his shirt and loafers, rolls up his towel, and walks in the opposite direction.

You watch your family stop along the beach to pick up shells. Mallory appears to be resolving a dispute

between the kids about who gets which shells. You think about how easy it was for Echeverri to get you in on his game. A hint of blackmail, some talk about protecting your family, and now you're an accomplice to a *narco* syndicate. Just like that.

In your new role at the Dodge, it should be easy to run interference for McCormick and Beltrán. The good news is that you have effective control over FinCEN's AI data pulls.

Every quarter, you're the first to get the long preliminary lists of potentially suspicious businesses. Before anyone else gets a chance to look at them, you can tweak the parameters so that McCormick and Beltrán's interests avoid any deep-dive investigations when you send the revised lists to your subordinates. And now that you're a Level Six, you can block investigations in the Perp Tracker system.

You're thinking about Echeverri's talk about being a tough guy, a manly protector of women. It was obvious manipulation. Trying to make a government accountant feel like a tough guy. But Contreras probably told him you killed Brian. Maybe Contreras left out the part about you crying in his office. Or maybe they sympathize. They know the first time is rough. But now, Echeverri knows you *can* kill people. Maybe he really was admitting you to the *macho*

tough-guy club. It could be the rum, or some effect of the adrenalin, but you're thinking that maybe you're not just a patsy. Maybe you have some control over the situation. Echeverri does need you. Maybe you're more like a partner? A *narco* partner, sitting on a beach in Mexico. Sipping rum. Thinking about the big picture. A man with a *complicated* life. A man who doesn't hide from the tough things he has to do.

The kids are showing you the shells and telling you which ones are theirs. Junior is not happy. He feels like Jennifer got a shell that really belonged to him. You call him "Tomasito" and tell him that there are millions of shells on the beach. He will find the perfect one. Maybe this afternoon. Or he can trade with Jennifer. He starts to protest, but you tell him he's a big boy now. He will find a good solution.

As you walk back to the condo, you notice Mallory watching you. Maybe she saw Echeverri talking to you. You talking *with* Echeverri. Like partners. Whatever she is seeing in you right now, she likes it. She tells the kids that they need to play a game in their room while she and Daddy "go to our room to plan out our schedule."

THREE GOLD COINS show up at your house in Bisbee in late May.

You and the kids are staying at your house for a week. School's out and Mallory is in DC. Your house is decrepit, but the kids like staying there. They call it "camping." They bring sleeping bags and spend the days roaming the town, which always feels half-abandoned, even during the peak tourist seasons. They explore the staircases and alleys and gulleys

and marvel at the clever ways the miners and hippies built their houses on the steep hills. Sometimes you tromp up and down the hills after them, but increasingly, you give them opportunities to roam by themselves.

You find the coins on the second day of your vacation, while the kids are on a long afternoon expedition to get ice cream downtown. The coins are in a paper envelope on the floor of your bedroom. The envelope was shoved

through one of your window screens, through a corner that is not properly attached to the window frame. Someone has written “For you and the children for emergency” in pencil on the outside of the envelope. They’re one-ounce Canadian maple leaves. They have that bright, 24-karat yellow color that has always looked edible to you. Maybe because you associate it with chocolates you got as a kid that were wrapped in a gold-colored foil.

You've never held a one-ounce coin. The ones you buried up at Windy Point are tenths. Now you have three ounces. They feel dense. From the latest spot price you saw, each is worth about $14,000. The message seems clear: Echeverri wants you to keep one for yourself and one each for the kids. Mallory must not know about them. The deeper message is even clearer: you cannot back out. You have been paid. Even if you get

cold feet, there is no way to return the coins.

You go into the bathroom, stand on the kids' stool at the sink and open the small handgun safe you have hidden above the mirror cabinet over the sink. The cabinet has an ugly, oversized wooden frame that Mallory hates, but it's convenient for concealing the safe, which is cabled around a stud in the wall. You got the gun – a little Sig .380 – from your dad

a year or so after you made Level Five. It's loaded, but you've never fired it. Your dad gave it to you because having a gun was one of the perks for law-enforcement Fives – even if they were "Office Fives" who sat in front of computer screens all day.

You start getting dressed to go out and find the kids. In the past few years, you've taken to wearing Guayabera shirts. In part, they're a

symbol of your commitment to staying in the Southwest. You've even worn them to some meetings at the Dodge in DC. It's a way to subtly suggest to your superiors that you are committed to Operation Tequilaville – and to discourage any thoughts of transferring you back to DC. Also, the shirts typically have four pockets, which are useful for storing the random objects your kids collect during your journeys. You keep Jennifer's treasures in the bottom

right pocket, and Junior's in the bottom left. You keep receipts in the top right pocket, and your sunglasses in your top left pocket.

As you're leaving the house, it occurs to you that the Guayabera would be good for concealing your gun. Now that you're a Level Six – even an Office Six – you're allowed to carry. You're supposed to get fresh training before you carry, but technically, the three days you spent on the range in

Quantico 20 years ago count. Your .380 has a slim inside-the-belt holster. You slide it into place in the waist of your jeans at your right kidney. You look in the mirror on the door of your ugly armoire to make sure the gun doesn't show.

Mallory also hates the armoire. In fact, she hates everything about your house. She wants you to demo the whole thing and start over. She has even offered to pay for half. Your

vague plan is to build it yourself, once you've acquired the necessary credentials. You're thinking you'll pay for your half with *narco* gold, if enough comes in – and if you can figure out how to launder it.

You trudge down the 94 steps to Mayer, getting used to the snug feeling of the gun on your waist. Now that you're in "the business," it's possible that at some point, the *narcos* may decide that you're too much of a

risk and try to take you out. You remember your SERE training. The most important thing in a kidnapping situation is to resist as early as possible. You should never get into a car when somebody pulls up and tells you to get in.

You're also wondering about Echeverri's instructions: "For you and the children for emergency." You will stash the kids' coins at Windy Point. But what about *your* coins?

Clearly, the *narcos* would prefer that you stash them. Or at least, spend them very quietly and very slowly.

You're probably a safe bet for the *narcos*. You're a snob about food and wine, but you're an accountant. Your track record as Mallory's kept man has been good: so far, you haven't adopted an extravagant lifestyle. Any internal auditor who sees your house and your ancient 4Runner will conclude that you're barely getting

by. The *narcos* don't have to worry that you're suddenly going to start wearing Swiss watches or throwing parties with hundreds of people or rolling around Southern Arizona in a fleet of tricked-out SUVs.

Even so, you're feeling flush. You think about the coins and their delicious yellow color. The color is like a fine cheddar cheese that has magically turned into a soft metal. The thought makes you hungry. You

decide to take the kids to Roka for an early dinner. They've never been. You and Mallory were going to wait until they were older and could appreciate the quality of the food. So much for *that* plan.

THE NEXT MORNING is a Sunday. You tell the kids that you're going on a "cultural field trip." They ask if it's the Copper Queen mine tour. They like the tour, but they've already been

twice. You tell them you're going to a new place. In the bathroom, you put your gun in the waist of a pair of pressed khaki chinos, under a pastel-yellow Guayabera. While you have the safe open, you look at the coins again. That color. You decide which one is yours and slip it into an inner fold in your wallet.



You stroll downhill through the town until you find the kids. You walk straight down the sidewalks, with the kids wandering back and forth across your path the way kids do. They

point to various landmarks, trying to guess where you're taking them. As you pass Roka, Jennifer comments that she liked the pressed tin ceiling panels. It's "Old West." Junior says he liked the French fries (which came with the steak frites you shared). As you head up the stairs next to the mining museum, the kids get excited. They like the pancakes at the Copper Queen Hotel. You tell them you'll get pancakes after you go to church.

You point up to the left, at a cute little red building with a white steeple. It looks like something from the East Coast, or the Midwest. It's almost 150 years old. In Arizona, that's the equivalent of a European cathedral from the Renaissance. The kids are intrigued. They've never been to a church.

You haven't been to a church in almost a decade. The last time was Tyler's wedding. He finally settled

down and got married to a churchy girl at some megachurch in McLean. The church was disappointing. It was a nice old-fashioned building on the outside, but the inside had huge TV screens and a music stage. The band played bad rock music and everyone raised their hands and repeated the same eight lines that were projected on the screen with pastoral imagery. Because you were Tyler's best man, you didn't have to sing or raise your hands. You just had to stand there

and look halfway dignified. Which was difficult, because Tyler kept whispering things like, “This is the price I gotta pay for not marrying a crazy slut.”

By contrast, the inside of the Bisbee church is wonderfully old-fashioned. It’s small. In your mind, it’s more of a chapel than a church. It smells like varnish. It has rows of wooden pews and thick wooden ribs holding up the ceiling. There is no TV screen. Your

only complaint is that the sanctuary is warm and stuffy – only slightly cooler than the 90 degrees outside.

There are a couple dozen people in the pews. You grab a bulletin from a small table and spot Robert, sitting near the back. He waves you over to sit with him. He still looks like a hippie, though his beard is more trimmed than before. Jennifer doesn't remember him, but she's an extrovert, and slides in next to him.

“I’m not stinky today,” he tells her. “I try to clean up on Sundays.”

The service is old-fashioned, too. The first hymn, according to the notes in the dusty old hymnal, is a traditional Irish tune. The only thing you don’t like about it is that the writer insisted on making “heav’n” one syllable to fit the meter.

The pastor is a frumpy middle-aged woman. Her gray hair is cut in a bob, just long enough to rule out lesbian status. Her sermon is about how people must love everybody, because Jesus loved them even though they didn't deserve it. She goes meta at the start. She's a "dog lady," and says she's trying to steer her message somewhere between a "good dog sermon" and a "bad dog sermon." The kids like the dog references: they look at you, because they've been

pestering you for months to get them a puppy.

The people in the pews listen quietly. They're mostly older and reserved, which is par for Presbyterian churches. Robert is the exception in the room. When the pastor says that people are bad dogs, and prone to wreck the good lives God wants to give them, Robert says "Amen" in a medium-loud voice. When the pastor says people are saved by grace,

Robert says “Amen” in a louder voice. The pastor seems to appreciate that Robert makes her sermon interactive. She pitches him some softballs, ending sentences with “Jesus,” to which Robert responds, “Praise Jesus” in varying volumes. For years afterwards, the kids refer to Robert as “the Jesus guy.” (It helps that he looks like the stereotypical Jesus.)

When they get to the collection, the minister promises that she's not going to give another "Sermon on the Amount" (she gets some laughs) but reminds the congregants that the church is still $9,000 away from being able to afford a new air conditioner. She jokes that it's a good thing to be in the literal shadow of the Copper Queen Hotel on summer mornings. She promises that she will preach every Sunday during the summer, but she wonders if she'll be alone in the

sanctuary. Or if they'll have to move the service to 6:00 am to make it tolerable. She also mentions that it will be hard for outside groups like the local AA chapter – she half nods towards Robert – to keep meeting over the summer. They could get swamp coolers, but there's supposed be a big monsoon season this year.

When the collection bowl comes around, you toss in a hundred bucks. But you're thinking about the coin in

your pocket. You're thinking about the *narcos* in Mexico who used to build beautiful churches in their hometowns, before the *narcos* went underground. From the old investigation reports you've seen, those gifts were rarely money laundering operations. They were outright gifts. They bought goodwill for the *narcos*, and the money rarely went back into the pockets of the donors. The gifts were like medieval-style guilt offerings, paying for

prayers to protect the *narcos* in this life and the next. In America, FinCEN ostensibly tries to monitor cash donations to churches. But internally, there's an unwritten rule to go easy on church audits. And from what you've seen, there's very little *narco* money going to American churches.

After the service, Robert and the kids get cookies and talk to old folks who are happy to see kids in church. You

take the opportunity to corner the pastor, who is picking up bulletins at the entrance of the church. You introduce yourself and make small talk, making sure to say you don't spend a lot of time in Bisbee – to cut off any questions about joining the church. The pastor's name is Cynthia, which she says is an "old lady name." After confirming that no one else is nearby, you hand her the coin and tell her it's for the air

conditioning. She has a look of shock.

“Praise the Lord,” she says, recovering a churchy bearing.

You say, “Amen” for want of something to say. You hasten to add that you don’t want Robert or the kids to know. Or anyone else. It should be an anonymous donation. Maybe the HVAC people can “donate” the new unit?

She chuckles and says that the HVAC people might indeed be persuaded to "donate" the unit. Then she gets more serious and asks if the church can pray for you. Maybe she senses that it's a guilt offering.

You tell her you're covered by the part in the general prayer she read at the end of the service, about people who don't believe but who are trying to do good in a difficult world.

“Help us in our unbelief.”

“Right. That part.”

She squeezes the coin in her little fist and promises to pray every day for you and your kids. She says it won’t be difficult to remember: every time she feels cool air in the sanctuary, she will remember.

MORE COINS APPEAR over the next year. A lot of them. Helpfully, the coins sometimes come in smaller weights: half ounces, quarters, tenths. You tell Mallory where the stash for the kids is hidden. You tell her you got “a few old coins” from your dad and that they “might be worth a few thousand dollars.” But after a year, the total for each kid is over a hundred thousand.

As for your share, you give away almost everything. You do your philanthropy anonymously. Officially, America is in “the incipient stages of explosive growth.” But from what you can see, the country seems to be in a deep, inflationary recession. (Mallory calls it the “tail end” of CentComm’s “strategy of financial repression.”) In any case, Bisbee is in especially bad shape. You put coins in envelopes and slip them through the mail slots at

Roka and other businesses. When you find out that the elementary school in Lowell needs new AC units, you slip three ounces through the mail slot of an HVAC shop, along with a note suggesting that they "donate" two units to the school. One day, you overhear the owner of the Kafka coffee shop explain that he's working the counter because he can't afford to hire anyone. A week later, you drop four half-ounces in an envelope through his mail slot, along with a

note: “Please don’t close. And maybe bring back those guys who play gypsy jazz.” A month later, you notice that the guitarists are back, and they’ve brought a violinist.

In less dramatic fashion, when people aren’t looking, you slide semi-crisp Benjies into tip jars and next to cash registers all over town. You’re not turning Bisbee into Brian’s City of the Future, but you’re helping people to

squeak by a little easier in hard times. You like the feeling.

In the cool months, you start rebuilding your house. The City Manager is grateful for your work on the park, and he rubber-stamps all the paperwork, including an "emergency" waiver that allows you to avoid hiring union labor. (He doesn't have much power – the City's money mostly comes as a pass-through from the Cochise Administrative Unit – but he

can sometimes exercise vetoes on building projects.) You hire Robert and some guys from his AA group to help you knock out walls, pour new slabs, set rebar, and lay brick. Wood frame would be cheaper and faster, but you want the thing to be solid. You also want the job to take a long time, to give Robert and the guys some steady work and avoid creating the impression that you're loaded. You pay them minimum wage with trackable DD payments, and then

supplement their wages generously with spare cash – usually, old Benjies without tracker strips. When the guys start knocking out walls, you install a good lock on your bedroom. You're saving it for the last stage of construction – in part because you want to leave the screen window in place for the drops from the *narcos*. As a side project, you also have the guys make a wine cellar in the old mine tunnel that goes 20 feet into the rock on the hillside behind the house.

The space is perfect for a wine cellar: you just need to seal up the entrance with masonry and a climate-proof door.

You're not religious, and you've never read much philosophy. But somewhere (you think you were on an airplane at the time) you remember reading an essay summing up "ancient wisdom" about happiness. The takeaway was that the key to happiness was to *not* try to be happy.

And certainly, not try to *buy* happiness. Instead, you should do good things for people who can't do anything for you. It didn't make a lot of sense at the time. You were busy trying to get ahead. But now it's starting to make sense.

Of course, your secret gifts are also guilt offerings, like the ones made by the old *narcos* who built churches in Mexico. You don't believe in God or prayer, but you sometimes think about

your weight in a vague moral balance in society.

Officially, America is winning the Drug War. But according to internal memos at the Dodge, the country is seeing a new wave of drug overdoses and "deaths of despair." And the prisons are full of new and relapsed addicts. By steering Dodge investigations away from Echeverri and McCormick and Beltrán, you are contributing to that misery.

You could make excuses for yourself. You were in fact blackmailed into "the business." You didn't start the Drug War, which has been going on for at least a century. And if Echeverri's network suddenly disappeared, other networks would fill the void. But you want to be honest with yourself. You've always hated the self-justifying perp mentality. You must face reality: you are one of the bad guys. At the very least, you

are helping bad people who are doing bad things to get rich on other people's misery.

In the vague social-moral balance, you like to think that maybe the little windfalls you're sprinkling around Bisbee can give a few people some hope and keep them from falling into despair. Maybe you can save a few people on the margin from turning to drugs. It's a nice thought. You hope it's true.

More than anything else, giving away the coins is about control. Echeverri forced you into his game, but you don't want him to control your life. You don't want to buy things for yourself and get attached to those things and then be constantly reminded that you got those things from him. Better to give the coins away.

EVENTUALLY, YOUR DESIRE for control – or at least, a *feeling* of control – leads you towards a different relationship with the *narcos*. For a couple of years, you follow Echeverri's mandate to "do nothing." You keep an eye on the financial empires McCormick and Beltrán are building and run interference at the Dodge.

But there are two problems with the *narco* businesses. First, they're

getting too big. McCormick's interests are pulling in about $40 million per year in gross revenue. Beltrán's are about $30 million. They're about as big as they can be without getting *leveled*. Getting *leveled* means their employees go on Bureau of Labor pay scales, with Level designations. Right now, all the employees and sub-owners in the networks are Level Ones – even people making over $100K per year. If the government figures out that

dozens of restaurants, yoga studios, hardware stores, and small property developments are ultimately owned by two holding companies, McCormick and Beltrán would have to join the Three-Legged Stool. Aside from increased labor costs and more scrutiny into the sources of their revenues, the result would be tons of additional paperwork, including the requirement to submit annual business plans for approval by the Department of Commerce.

Second, their accounting is sloppy. If you weren't regularly tweaking the Dodge's investigation lists, the businesses under the holding companies would raise multiple red flags. For example, the "cash" coming in is all Digital Dollars, but most of the DDs come from non-preferred apps that don't run good IDs on vendors and customers. Most of the IDs are legit, but the drug money is probably coming from a few dozen

dummy IDs. Businesses are supposed to report any suspected dummy IDs, but no one in the McCormick and Beltrán networks ever reports any.

In other areas, the businesses are *too* compliant – which can also raise red flags. For all the businesses involving tip income to employees, the aggregate annual tips always fall between 16 and 18 percent. That's where tips are *supposed* to be, according to the official guidelines

sent to the accounting profession. But the statisticians at the Dodge want to see more variance: ideally, between 13 and 22 percent.

The businesses also use straight-line depreciation schedules. In an ideal world, that's what they *should* do: they shouldn't play games trying to write off more by increasing their short-term depreciation expenses and thereby reducing the income they report. But in the real world,

businesses are always playing games, trying to front-load depreciation expenses. They're *expected* to play games and to haggle every year with IRS auditors over the schedules and arcane provisions of the tax code. Sometimes the IRS approves the front-loads. Sometimes it dings the businesses and assesses small penalties. From the point of view of FinCEN, the outcome doesn't matter. FinCEN just wants to see some

haggling. If a business doesn't haggle, it's suspicious.

The lead accountant for McCormick is Jaden Bingham, who has an office on North Campbell in Tucson. Bingham signs off on most of the paperwork for the businesses in the network. From deep dives into his Social Credit data, you figure out that he goes for an early lunch most Fridays at Casa Molina. You start doing the same.

The second time you go to Casa Molina, Bingham is there, sitting at a table by the south wall. He's 47 – a year younger than you – with short blond hair that's graying around his ears. He's from an old Mormon family in Tucson. You take a seat at the table next to him.

"How's the *topopo* salad?"

“It’s good,” he says. “That’s what I always get.”

“Unless you get the *chile relleno*.”

He laughs in the way people laugh when they’re trying not to look nervous.

“Somebody’s done his homework. How can I help you?”

You reach into your valise and press a button on your signal jammer. It's a small one. It's legal, but not as good as the one Brian had, or the ones Mallory has at the house. It's effective in a ten-foot sphere. Bingham looks at his phone, sees the jam, and seems to relax a bit.

"I'm Ted. I work at the DOJ, running FinCEN investigations."

"Ah. Nice to meet you, Ted."

“There are no immediate problems with any of your clients. I just want to give you some accounting advice. Just a professional courtesy. Unlike a lot of people in the government, I don’t enjoy busting people. I just want everyone to be compliant.”

You speak hypothetically. You tell him that a “normal business” reports at least a couple of suspected dummy IDs per quarter. You tell him that

weekly tips “normally” fluctuate between 13 and 22 percent, but reliably average 17 percent over a quarter. You tell him that typically, a third of “normal” businesses in the one-to-five-million-dollar revenue range try to front-load their depreciation schedules. You give him section numbers for the deductions and credits that are used commonly for depreciation games.

He thanks you, saying the guidelines are helpful. But he also suggests that the guidelines are likely to change over time. He asks how often you come to Casa Molina.

“I dunno. If I had to guess, probably the second or third Fridays in January, April, July, and October.”

He chuckles at the quarterly schedule and says he’ll be there. If Casa Molina isn’t open for some reason,

he'll go to the nearest Mexican food place on Campbell. You switch off the jammer and the two of you eat your lunches in silence, looking at your phones.

A month later, you have a similar conversation with Beltrán's accountant – she's a 32-year-old named Kylie Jijana – at a bar in Las Cruces.

WHEN THE KIDS are 12 and ten, you tell Mallory you want to start taking them to church. You're sitting in the kitchen, and she's making you a macchiato. You tell her you've talked to the kids about it, and they want to go. She pushes back.

"We don't believe in any of that stuff."

"Yeah, but I think it would be good if *they* did."

“Why would it be good to believe in something that isn’t real?”

“A lot of bad shit happens to people in life. I think it would be good to believe that there’s some higher power out there – some good power – that’s going to take care of everything in the end, no matter how bad things get. I think it would be good for the kids’ psychology.”

“And you want me to come with you? Like every Sunday? I have to travel a lot for work.”

“I was thinking we could maybe try going twice a month.”

“We’re not married. I don’t need to hear some hillbilly preacher talking fire-and-brimstone and trying to lay some big guilt trip on me.”

"We can shop around. There's a wide variety of options. I think the Presbyterians might be a good option. The pastor in Bisbee – Cynthia – says Presbyterians usually don't tell you *what* to think. 'They just tell you that you *do* need to think.' It feels more like philosophy to me. She says they don't do a lot of 'bad dog' sermons. No big guilt trips."

"Okay. I'll try it. But speaking of bad dogs: this will not be like

Humphrey. If I hate the church – I mean, if I don't like it for any reason – we're bailing. All of us. No debate. You have to make sure the kids understand that."

You agree. Humphrey is the beagle you got for the kids. The kids love him, but he's terrible. He's very smart and very neurotic. He needs constant attention. If you leave the house and forget to put him in his crate, he gets into everything. He can

even get into the cabinets that still have child locks on them. If you leave him in the crate too long, he whines for hours. A month ago, he woke everyone up in the middle of the night with horrible nonstop screaming. It sounded like one of the kids was being tortured. He had gotten his jaw stuck wide open on the bars of the crate. Mallory had to reach into the crate and push his head forward while you pried his teeth off the bars. (You got a different crate

after that.) A few weeks ago, when you asked Mallory what she wanted for her birthday, she said she wanted you to take Humphrey out in the desert and leave him to be eaten by coyotes. She might've been exaggerating. But maybe not.

"And," Mallory says, "we can't let the kids be alone with any pedo priests."

"There aren't any pedo priests anymore. CentComm fixed that."

Mallory laughs. You still don't talk much about politics or policy with her, mainly because both of you deal with the government all week, and it's the last thing you want to talk about when you're alone together. But she enjoys your sarcasm.

Your comment refers to CentComm's takeover of the American Catholic Church five years ago. The first two publicly stated rationales for the

takeover were financial and patriotic. CentComm wanted to stop the Church from sending money to the Vatican (a "foreign government") and to ensure that Catholic teaching in schools and pulpits was pro-America. Priests and bishops are now on leveled salaries. Most of them have gotten big pay bumps since the takeover, which is designed to influence their loyalties. And much of the Church's wealth is now "safely" in the custody of the ASIF, which has recently begun

leveraging the church's vast real estate holdings. (Given that freshly-created Digital Dollars tend to translate rapidly into price inflation, the government has figured out that it gets more real spending power when it collateralizes actual physical assets and borrows money from actual investors.)

The third rationale CentComm gave for the takeover was that it had to put an end to an "epidemic of pederasty"

in Catholic churches. Most Americans these days are cynical about CentComm's financial management of anything and about its endless appeals to American patriotism. But Americans still hate pedos. In a (rare) unadjusted public poll conducted by the government, 87 percent of Americans said they favored having the government take over management of the American Catholic Church to eradicate pederasty. Only eight percent said

that the Church should be “fully independent of government oversight.” (Five percent were undecided.)

It was such a popular issue that Congress even held a fully televised floor debate. Unanimous votes in Congress are routine, and Members rarely want to grandstand these days. Especially with fiscal matters, the government has run out of win-win solutions. The outcomes tend to be

bad and worse, and Members would rather not be caught on camera endorsing any of CentComm's strategies.

The floor debate was a rare case of the government publicly addressing opposing arguments. CentComm and Congress were gambling that Americans hated pedos so much they would endorse any measure that might stop pederasty. CentComm's

solicitors teed up arguments and let Members line up to attack.

For example, a solicitor said, “Some Catholics and some civil libertarians argue that having the government take over the American Catholic Church is an assault on the First Amendment. They say that it would be an unconstitutional establishment of religion.”

535 Members stood in line for three days for a chance to go on record against such arguments. They boldly declared that the Constitution was not meant to be "a suicide pact." They held that First Amendment freedoms were not absolute. Constitutional freedoms in general were only for citizens who "behaved responsibly." The refusal to submit to "reasonable regulation of rights" was evidence of irresponsibility – or evil intent. Members who were lawyers argued

that legal propositions were inherently gray, rather than black-and-white. Other lawyer-Members argued that the beauty of the law was that it evolved over time to handle new situations.

In response to such arguments, a solicitor said, “But who should decide where to draw the line between reasonable regulation and the free exercise of constitutional rights? Isn’t it dangerous to have CentComm – a

committee of eleven people – acting as judge, jury and executioner?"

Members lined up to rebut the argument. They declared that the members of CentComm were elected by Congress, which was elected by the American people. (The solicitors didn't dare to call into question how exactly American elections were conducted, or the difficulties faced by candidates and voters who did not belong to the American Party.) Other

Members declared that separation of powers and judicial review were alive and well, policed by "independent judges, with lifetime tenure." (The solicitors didn't mention that any judges had who dared to buck CentComm over the past two decades had been removed pursuant to corruption scandals – both real and manufactured.)

For two more days, Congress lingered on the salacious details of various

actual and alleged pederasty incidents in the Church. For the first time in two decades, words such as *genitalia*, *penetration*, *oral*, *anal*, and *vaginal* beamed across the airwaves and filled digital screens.

The predictable result was a 535-to-zero vote in favor of the National Order Removing All Pederasty from Ecclesiae (NORAPE) Act. Several hospitalized Members arranged to be wheeled in on gurneys to cast their

votes. To avoid looking anti-Catholic – and to assert power over non-Catholic churches – CentComm was granted the authority to take over *any* church or religious organization suspected of harboring pederasts. Even the handful of non-AP Members voted in favor (though some expressed concerns about civil liberties and other constitutional issues).

As for the actual incidence of pederasty in Catholic churches, you're not sure that the CentComm takeover has achieved anything. You have access to the Dodge's internal investigation reports, and you've seen the investigators and prosecutors struggling to find any hard evidence on various leads. The one success you've seen – which was highly publicized – involved a priest from Roswell named Father Bruno. After he was caught trying to pay a teen boy

for sex a decade ago, the Church transferred him to Montreal. Because Canada had become integral, CentComm got him extradited to Las Cruces for a rare public trial.

The lone witness for the defense was an obviously gay monk from some cloister outside of Albuquerque. On the stand, the monk lisped that "Father Bruno ith not a bad man. He'th jutht a thick man." It made for hilarious television, but you felt some

admiration for the monk. Out of 300 million Americans, he was probably the only one who had the balls to argue for clemency for a pedo. And it may have worked: Father Bruno got life without parole, rather than being dispatched to hell or purgatory or oblivion via firing squad. He also got sent to a relatively humane Canadian prison in Ontario. (People at the Dodge joked about how guards did things in Canadian prisons: “We’re

going to have to let the sods bugger you now, eh. Sohry about that...")

Mallory slides the macchiato across the countertop. She tells you to be serious.

"You see the inside data. Have they done anything real about the pedos?"

"Sure," you say. "It's been hugely successful. All the pedos are on a government pay scale."

She laughs.

“But,” you add, “you should see the data tracking active dissenters. The whole thing has been a huge victory for CentComm. They’ve put the kibosh on any talk of going back to the old Constitution. The Constitution is seen as a document that protected pedos. At this point, people probably think that George Washington drove around in a creeper

van handing out free candy. Dissenters don't talk about it anymore. Mostly, they just talk about how shitty the economy is."

"They're not wrong about that."

"Can't you fix that?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. You're a labor leader. And an economist. I talk to high-ups back

East. From everything I've heard, they respect you. They listen to you. And I'm not just saying that because you're the mother of my kids."

Mallory thinks while she's frothing up the foam for her cappuccino. This is a new topic. Over the years, you've made plenty of sarcastic comments about CentComm. But the economy has never been this bad. Officially, unemployment is at eight percent. The real number is probably double

that. And you've never suggested that she might be able to do something about it.

"Well. I'll give you the standard economist answer. It's all about tradeoffs. Bad tradeoffs. I've always been candid about that. In a shrinking economy, if one group of workers gets higher wages, another group gets lower wages. Or they're out of work. I was pretty good at convincing my people to take half a loaf. That's why

CentComm liked me. But then they started printing money. You know it's not actual printing. Digits in ledgers. And it became a free-for-all for a while. They could give more to everyone. And reduce the cost of borrowing."

"But then we got inflation."

"Right. Prices went up for everything. So now we've increased reserve requirements at banks to try to

keep people from spending all the money. People get statements showing that they've got money in their various ASIF accounts. But they can't spend it, so they get pissed off about that. Spending contracts, the economy slows down. And borrowers are on a short leash right now with higher interest rates – except the government, of course. But no one will buy bonds at the current rates. So they shovel bonds into ASIF."

“My account is 80 percent bonds, last time I looked. What about the IMF? *The Economist* says we’re working on some kind of deal.”

Mallory laughs.

“The people in Brussels aren’t stupid. They want at least nine percent. And it would have to be paid back in euros. And we don’t have a lot of euros because they’re not buying

enough of our exports. And the loan isn't huge money, in the big scheme. It might float us for a couple of years."

"There's no way out? No good way?"

"They'd have to blow up the whole thing. Deregulate everything. Start slashing all the tariffs and subsidies. Cut the hell out of spending. Like that guy Milei did a while back in Argentina. It would get pretty ugly.

Things would get a lot worse before they get better. And even if everyone knew it would get better, the problem is starting. Every interest group would be holding out, hoping the other interest groups would get cut instead."

"Would you hold out?"

Mallory sips on her cappuccino.

“I would negotiate. I would start by telling the committee members – in private, one-on-one, totally off the record – that I’m willing to put half of our subsidies and tariffs on the table. That would be a lot more than the starting offers for most of the unions. Or the other legs. I would do that to show CentComm I understand the depth of the problem. Show them I’m a team player. That would earn me some points. But I’d tell them I was only in for half if everyone else –

absolutely everybody, no exceptions – went half. Otherwise, no deal. I'm not going to throw any of my people under the bus unless the bus is actually going somewhere."

"You think the others will go in for half?"

"No. But after they all freak out at a half, maybe we'll settle at a quarter."

"But a quarter wouldn't fix things."

“Right. Neither would a half. But we could get people used to the idea that everyone has to take a big cut. Then CentComm can keep chipping away. If they have the guts to stick with it.”

“Isn’t that the point of having an authoritarian regime? So they can make tough decisions?”

“In theory. But they don’t want to lose control. If they start

deregulating, people might decide that anything goes. They've never had 300 million people openly bartering and paying each other with blackies and paper money and not paying taxes. 90 percent of buying and selling is still tracked by the Social Credit app. And if anything goes in the economy, people might start thinking that anything goes politically. CentComm has never faced mass dissent. They've never had millions of protesters in the

streets. If things get out of hand, they would risk a total collapse of the regime."

You don't ask Mallory if she thinks that might be a good thing. From the safety of her kitchen, the idea of a total collapse sounds good to you. If there were no rules, and no one to enforce them, you could make a clean exit from the drug business. You change the topic.

“I think the Presbyterians are a good option. From what I can see, their Sunday schools are run by nice old ladies. And they follow the CentComm mandate. Two adults with the kids at all times. Supposedly, they were already doing that. The church in Bisbee is too small to have a lot of volunteers. So they don’t do Sunday school much. The kids have to sit through the sermons. But the kids like Cynthia’s

sermons. She always talks about her dogs."

"So I've heard. That's how we got Humphrey."

You nod.

"Maybe," Mallory says, "you can find us a priest – a pastor, whatever – who can explain to the kids that God hates horrible dogs and is happy when

people leave them in the desert for the coyotes.”

AFTER VISITING A few churches in Tucson, you end up at a Presbyterian church in midtown. It has a big steel cross hanging in the sanctuary that’s made up of a network of steel tree roots. Mallory likes the cross. She says it’s like a yoga mandala. She likes to stare at it while her mind is wandering during the service.

The head pastor is a young guy named Mark. His parents were Scottish, and he has a light brogue. When he talks about his family's latest hikes, he says they "went up on a wee croft." He refers to Junior as the "lad" and Jennifer as the "lass." Like you, he wears Guayabera shirts, but he favors the hybrids with flower patterns called Hawaii-a-beras.

Mark is a consummate joker. When you first meet him, you try to manage expectations by telling him you're not regular churchgoers. He says, "Ach, here they come again. Sketchy people trying to boost their Social Credit scores by going to an approved church." Whenever he sees Mallory, he asks her how she's dealing with "the dog situation." He often reminds her that coyotes are "vicious, mangy brutes," but he says it with a smirk, suggesting that they would make

quick work of Humphrey. Once, he suggests to her that she shouldn't try to leave the dog at the top of Redington Pass, because he would catch up to the car in the tight hairpin turns. He asks her if she has thought about taking Humphrey deep-sea fishing.

Mark's sermons are entertaining and thought-provoking. The laptop he uses as a teleprompter has a sticker on it that says, "Avoid religion. Follow

Jesus." He sometimes describes himself as a "neo-Calvinist," adding that "neo" means "sort of, but not really." But he does speculate a lot about predestination. He's always encouraging people to think less about "the long list of dos and don'ts." He wants them to think more about what God is already doing in their lives – and to respond with gratitude.

On an early visit to the church, while the kids are running around with the

Sunday school class in the courtyard, you and Mallory confess to Mark that you're "not really with the program."

"Well, I've noticed something..." He pauses for effect. "I've noticed that you're *here*."

He's prompting you to wonder about whether God brought you to the church. From some online research, you gather that's standard Calvinist psychology. Other flavors of

Christianity attract people who already have a strong sense of right and wrong and want to make sure there's a God out there enforcing the rules. Then they worry about whether they and other people are using their free will to follow the rules.

The Calvinist psychology works on people's compulsive habit of pattern recognition. A lot of people are natural conspiracy theorists: they can't believe that the universe is

random and undirected. (You often think that you're naturally immune to that kind of thinking, but after what the Guardians did to the country two decades ago, you're willing to concede that big conspiracies do happen sometimes.) Once people start wondering if God is behind everything that happens, they wonder if God has a plan for them. In theory, the Calvinist God could predestine a totally bad person to go to Heaven and a totally good person to go to

Hell. But the Bible strongly suggests that only good people go to Heaven. So people start looking at their lives, wondering whether they're acting like the kind of people that God sends to Heaven. Christian morality walks in that back door.

As such, Mark doesn't need to do a hard sell in his sermons. He often tells the congregation, "Nobody was ever argued into the Kingdom of Heaven." And, "My job is not to

argue with you. My job is to get you to give money so I can stay in this cushy job."

Although Mark is a joker, you learn over time that he has a serious side. He spends about 20 hours a week as a chaplain at local hospitals, ministering to the sick and dying. He sees many things he says are uplifting and that confirm his faith. But the overall impact of time in hospitals is depressive. His antidote is exercise

and vitamin D, mainly hiking. Two or three days a month, your family goes hiking with his family. Sometimes, they go bouldering with you and Mallory and the kids. You also take him to the law enforcement gun range sometimes when you go to practice drawing and firing your .380. He's okay with the .380, but he likes it better when officers let him shoot their rifles. (He talks like John Wayne when you're at the range. You've never watched any John

Wayne movies, but people say it's a good impression.)

TWO YEARS LATER, Jennifer and Junior get baptized and confirmed. It's their decision, and the ceremony doesn't involve any vows by you or Mallory. Mark reads a passage about a time when a lot of the followers of Jesus were abandoning him. Jesus asked the core group of disciples if they were also going to leave him.

Peter responded by saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

When Mark asks the kids if they will “renounce the works of evil,” you think of the baptism scene in *The Godfather* where Michael Corleone is renouncing Satan while there are cutaways to scenes of Mafia violence. As a government accountant, you’re not really in the same boat as Michael. But you do wonder what

kind of *narco* violence might be going on right now, somewhere between Ecuador and Mexico. And you think about all the addicts north of the border, overdosing on Echeverri's supply.

There's a part of the ceremony where the kids kneel on the chancel and a bunch of people go up and lay their hands on the kids' shoulders. You place your hands on Junior and Mallory places hers on Jennifer.

You're surrounded by a couple dozen people, including a dozen kids from the youth group. You close your eyes and feel hands touching your back and shoulders. It's awkward. You don't like having people touch you. While everyone is praying, your "prayer" is a hope that your own bad deeds and lack of belief don't contaminate the kids or the people around you. Mallory is more emotional. You hear her sniffling next to you.

The kids are staying after the service for a youth group excursion, so you and Mallory drive home by yourselves. She's still emotional. You're riding with the Soft Mallory.

"That was nice," you say.

"That was more than nice," she says. "It was beautiful."

There's a long pause, and then she unloads. She's been having "something of a midlife crisis" lately. (You both turned 50 earlier this year.) She's been "thinking about life." Thinking about the kids growing up, becoming independent. She's glad they're reaching that stage in a good community at the church. She's thinking about getting old, about the kids going away. About becoming an empty-nester. She feels that for the first time in her life she has finally

found a community. She likes seeing the old couples in the church. And the groups of widows who do crafts together. She says she thinks a lot about Jesus. She thinks about the steel tree roots in the cross in the sanctuary. She thinks about herself as one of the roots. A root that comes from a long way off but joins the others. She's thinking about meaning and purpose. You're trying to track where this stream of consciousness is going.

“It’s like that passage Mark read,” she says. “And the question he asked the kids. ‘*Who else* are we going to follow?’”

“You know me, Mal. CentComm is my lord and savior.”

Mallory usually laughs at your cynical comments. But she doesn’t laugh.

“I want to get married in this church.”

“Absolutely. Let’s do it.”

“The church rules say one of us has to be a member. A baptized member.”

“Well, it’s not going to be me. I still feel a bit hypocritical about taking communion.”

For about a year, you and Mallory have been taking communion. Mark’s standard invitation during the

sacrament is to “all those who *would* follow Jesus.” And you *would*. If you could believe. Who else were you going to follow? But Mallory is much further along.

“I’m going to do it, Thomas. I’m going to get baptized.”

“Good. I’m in full support.”

“Really?”

“Yes. As long as we keep having sex.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem. Especially with these hormone replacements I’ve started on. They’re not as good as the Euro ones I’ve read about. I get these crazy spikes. When you see me running around like a headless chicken, that’s a good time.”

“And we shouldn’t give away everything we own. Or rather, everything *you* own.”

“But we should give more.”

You think about how many coins you’ve dropped around Bisbee in the past six years. The drops have all been anonymous, but some of the recipients seem to have made the connection to you. You also use your credit card pretty freely there. The

last time you were all in Bisbee, Mallory commented that everyone treated you like you were the "absentee mayor" of the town.

"Yeah. We should. Starting with the youth group."

"What's wrong with the youth group?"

“Nothing. They could just use some better excursions. It’s always pizza and laser tag.”

“Mark always says that’s the point of youth groups. Have lots of fun on no money.”

“They should get some culture sometimes.”

“Like what?”

“Like taking them to San Xavier or Tumacacori. I could rent a van. And then take them to good Mexican afterwards. Maybe El Charro or Nidito or something. Or maybe go see some of Kino’s missions south of the border. Now that Mexico is less wild. Do Presbyterians do pilgrimages?”

“I don’t know. Probably not to Spanish Catholic missions.”

“I’ll talk to Mark.”

IT HAS NOW been 25 years since the Guardians foisted CentComm on the country. It’s one-third of the way through the “alien experiment” the hottie voice told you about when you got back to Alexandria from your strange year in captivity. You remember the voice saying that the “aliens” would give you a “final assessment” in the year 2100. That

would imply that you're supposed to live to be 100.

That seems highly unlikely. At 50, you're in good shape. But you can feel middle age coming on. Every morning you wake up sore and have to spend a few minutes on the floor on a lumbar roller to keep yourself from tweaking your back. In your late 30s, you could occasionally get a V7 at climbing gyms. Nowadays, you've plateaued at V4. (You can

occasionally get a V5 if you work on it for two or three sessions.) Genetically, you seem to be a clone of your dad. He's 80 now and really slowing down with congestive heart problems. You're in better shape than he was at this age, but you're probably putting more stress on your joints and ligaments than he did.

According to *The Economist* and other foreign sources you access, AI-driven health breakthroughs in Europe

and Australia are starting to achieve some amazing things. They're not as amazing as techno-optimists were predicting 25 years ago, but healthy and active lifespans for the average European have been extended by over a decade. In Australia, the estimate is 12 years. CentComm routinely claims that American lifespans have been extended by "a decade." But it's hard to fake death records at scale. Foreign statisticians estimate that Americans may have gained five

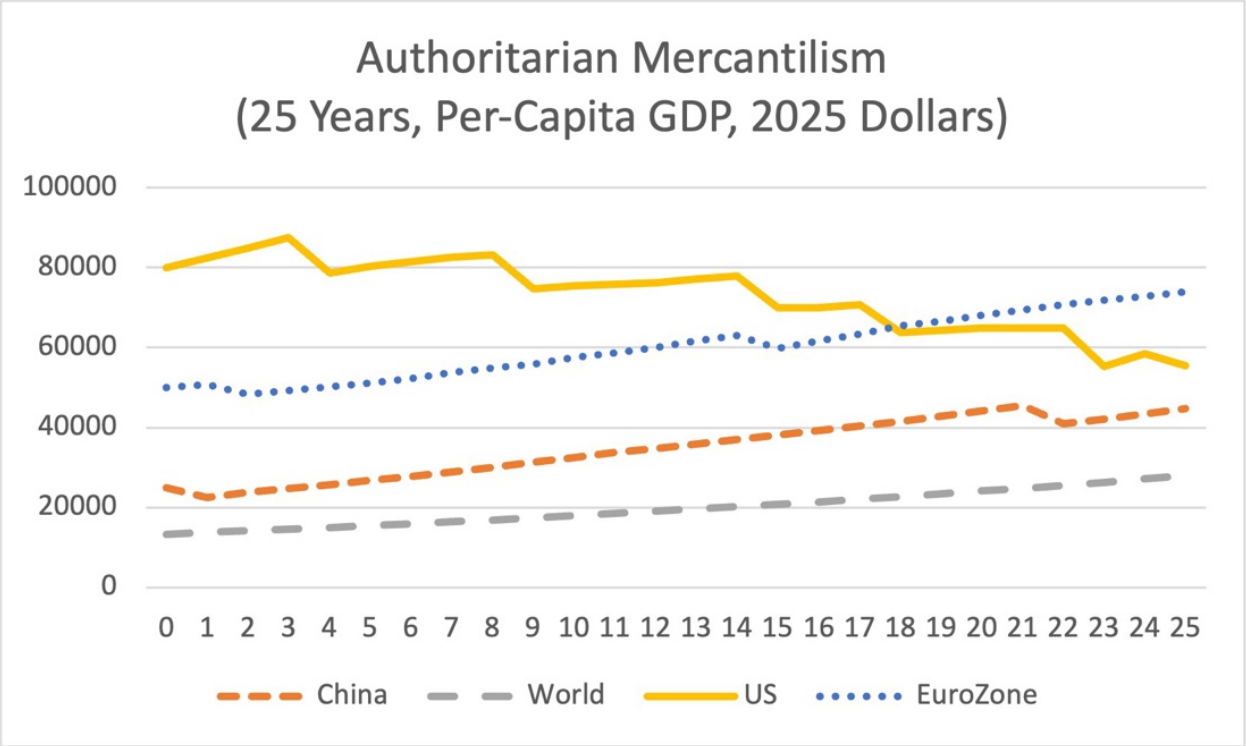
years. In any case, very few Americans have access to foreign news.

Part of the problem for American life expectancy is that Americans still start from a lower baseline. Despite the widespread availability of effective urge-suppressing drugs, Americans are more obese and prone to addiction and alcoholism than people in other countries. Despite extensive surveillance and high rates

of incarceration, Americans still have higher rates of violent crime. CentComm has also been slower than European governments in allowing the widespread use of driverless cars and freight trucks. (In America, the driver and trucker unions are a big part of the Labor leg of the Three-Legged Stool.) And Americans in general are reluctant to give up their cars.

As for the economy, *The Economist* and other foreign sources have been reporting a stunning reversal that has occurred over the past quarter century. 25 years ago, measured by per-capita GDP, the average European standard of living was 30 percent lower than the American average. Now, the Europeans are where America was. The American standard of living has dropped to a little bit above where the Europeans were. (Longevity extensions are weighted

heavily in the GDP statistics, but the Euros seem to have more *stuff* these days, too.)



According to *The Economist*, America's authoritarian mercantilist

regime has caused the reversal by slowing down technological innovation and shielding American producers from international competition. Like America, the Euros also have health care systems that are government-run or dominated by government subsidies. But being open to international competition and international news puts pressure on European governments and entrepreneurs to adapt quickly. Although people talk about “Europe”

and the “Euro Zone” as if it were a single entity, it’s not. There are 28 countries in the European Union, all jockeying to have attractive tax regimes and business climates.

Because it has occurred over 25 years, and because Americans have little access to foreign news, the reversal is not obvious to most Americans. Pastor Mark is a good example of an intelligent but mostly oblivious American. He has remarked that

many of his formerly poor Scottish relatives have moved out of cramped city apartments and now have rural houses with nice yards. They have good HVAC systems and get stuff delivered by drone from the cities. Two of his aunts have lived past 90. But as far as he knows, that's the result of luck and hard work. He doesn't read much news of any kind. (He says he's focused on the "Good News.") And as a Level Three, he doesn't have access to foreign news.

If he did understand the reversal in living standards, he would probably respond with Calvinist fatalism. When confronted with the existence of bad social conditions, he often shrugs and does a voice like a New Jersey gangster. "Fuggeddabboudit. Whaddayou gonna do abboudit?" (Among his many comic schticks, he's good at regional American accents.)

CentComm prefers to focus on snap-shot comparisons with China. The Chinese are still significantly poorer per capita, at two-thirds of the American standard of living. For CentComm, that's the end of the news release. What CentComm leaves out is that China and America have been converging. At present rates, if China continues to grow and if America continues to decline, the countries' living standards will be equal in another decade.

At the kitchen, over a macchiato, you show Mallory a chart [above] from an article in *The Economist*. She sighs, sipping her latte.

"That looks about right, from what I know."

"Does CentComm care?"

"Yes." She smirks. "It's their third-highest priority."

“What are the top two?”

“Number one is staying in power. Number two is keeping social peace.”

“So they don’t really care.”

“No. They do care. That’s what most of the closed-door discussions are about these days. And stomping on insurgencies in Central America. But

the insurgencies are relatively easy to deal with."

"That would seem to be embarrassing. If people found out. If they understood what was happening. That was the whole point of the regime, right? Authoritarian mercantilism. Beat China at its own game."

"Right. A decade ago, it looked like we could do it. Our growth was going

to pick up. We were going to get our fiscal house in order. And China seemed to be slowing down, with their population aging so rapidly. But China has kept going in the past decade, since the Xi Jinping strategy got sidelined. They decided they needed more consumer-led growth. They've opened up trade quite a bit. And they run a much tighter fiscal and monetary ship. They haven't had inflation and devaluations like we have."

“So they’re less mercantilist right now.”

“Less than we are.”

“I asked my dad a long time ago whether he thought the regime – the mercantilism – would work. He said we’re not as smart as the Chinese.”

Mallory laughs.

“To be fair,” she says, “it’s easier to grow faster when you start lower. It’s what they call ‘catch-up growth.’ You can copy a lot of stuff that more advanced countries are doing. You don’t have to invent everything from scratch. You steal the blueprints, or the software code. Or you have your factories reverse-engineer stuff.”

“So why don’t we do that? Why don’t we copy all the best European stuff?”

Mallory sips on her latte. She has the look she gets when she's getting ready to explain something complicated to you or to the kids.

"An economy is not like an engineering problem. It's not like an old-fashioned machine. It's not like there are a dozen levers and knobs that run everything. We can't just pull on a few levers. Twiddle with a few knobs while reading the dials.

It’s more like biology. Like an ecosystem. Millions of moving parts. Billions. It’s constantly evolving. And it evolves on its own. Europe is doing better because they have a half billion people all buying and selling and making whatever they want, whenever they want. They don’t have to ask CentComm for permission. Or wait for CentComm to come up with a plan.”

The example she uses is health apps, which are key drivers behind the improvements in life extension. In the Euro Zone, people use one or more of a dozen of the big international AI health apps. Two decades ago, some of their governments tried to steer people toward apps run by their national health care systems. But the national apps were clunky – like the American one, which is tied into the Social Credit app. People got better

information from the apps run by companies based in Ireland, Estonia, Switzerland, Australia, Dubai, and Singapore.

The international apps have network effects, meaning they get better as more people use them and add their health data. The apps sift through the data, looking for useful correlations between treatments and outcomes. They have become increasingly good at fine-tuning treatment

recommendations according to the genetics and lifestyles of individual users. Most Europeans now have finger-prick widgets they can plug into the ports on their phones, for instant bloodwork analysis and detection of pathogens. The apps are also good at analyzing users' psychologies and fine-tuning the prompts they use to nudge users to maintain healthier habits. Italy's prime minister was recently embarrassed at a press conference

when reporters overheard his app telling him (in Italian), “Hot girls at the Capri junket in two weeks. Skip the breakfast. No sugar or carbs today. You want beach abs.”

If Europeans’ home-country health systems won’t pay for drugs or treatments recommended by the apps, the apps tell users where to go to get them cheaply. The result has been an explosion in European health tourism. Estonia and Lithuania and

Switzerland offer high-end medical spas. Now that Russia has returned to democracy and mostly free markets, it hosts hundreds of discount clinics. Egalitarians grumble about how the apps are undermining the goal of equal service in their national health systems. But the governments that run those systems are mostly pleased: the healthier people are, the cheaper it is to run a health system.

The apps also help authorities keep an eye out for bio-terrorism, as part of the International Convention on Bio-Terrorism and Epidemic Prevention. With the help of AIs, European scientists track the production and distribution of protein-folding precursor chemicals and bio-agents in real time. In the constant search for illicit protein-folding labs, governments sometimes harass small startup companies. Even big pharmaceutical companies are subject

to delays in rolling out new products, if AIs predict that those products might be easily tweaked into dangerous pathogens. But the general public views harassment and delays as small prices to pay for bio-security. National health systems also subsidize pharmacy chains to stockpile and prepare to distribute antivirals and antibiotics at local pharmacies. (By contrast, CentComm's approach to the threat of bio-terrorism has been to institute a "Bio-Fortress" initiative

and run even tighter inspections of everything coming into the country. That functions as a kind of extra tariff, adding costs and delays to imports. China's authoritarian government has a similar approach.)

"I said a half billion people," Mallory says. "But it's more like nine billion people, really, because the Euros are open to the entire global economy. Even ours. You've probably noticed that their tariffs on us are a lot lower

than our tariffs on them. We don't make a lot of stuff they want. Some intermediate tools and parts. But not finished products. They mostly want raw materials from the American Zone, and they want to get them as cheap as they can."

You're tempted to ask her why CentComm doesn't fix the situation, but you remember her answers from the last time you asked, a couple years ago. If they free up the economy,

people might start demanding political freedom. The regime would risk a total collapse.

“Fuggeddabboudit,” you say. “Whaddayou gonna do abboudit?”

“Exactly.”

DURING THE FOURTH decade of the CentComm regime, the “Open Technocrats” gain the upper hand.

Publicly, there is still a lot of lip-service paid to the Three-Legged Stool. But the economic planners in the national government pivot toward economic growth and budget austerity. The new President of CentComm, Dana-Jo Penn, is an unlikely dictator. She is a five-foot-two statistician who looks like a mousy librarian. She started in the Navy, and then came up through the National Transportation Planning Board. She's the only President who

wasn't previously a Senator. But from Mallory's cryptic statements, you gather that Penn is a cunning and ruthless politician. She begins by purging CentComm of everyone who is not with her program and whipping the others in line. She sends two dozen noncompliant Level Nines and Eights to work camps for corruption. Two Nines even disappear suspiciously in "fishing accidents." The good news for you is that she has worked with Mallory for a couple

decades. They are on a similar wavelength about policy.

One of Penn's initiatives is to allow a lot of experimentation at the local level. You are bumped to Level Seven and put in charge of the Cochise Administrative Unit – everything inside the old Cochise County lines. You have a triple mandate: 1) increase tax revenue, 2) increase economic growth, and 3) stamp out crime.

Penn has already started on the first mandate. As she has done with freeways around the country, she has turned the pothole-ridden I-10 freeway into a toll road and contracted its management to a private company, American Mobility. (The government doesn't publicize the fact that AM has minority stakes owned by French, Italian and Spanish road companies.) Mallory explains the logic. For toll roads around the

world, the life-cycle cost for freeways that are privately built, operated and maintained is often as low as one third of that for government freeways. Penn usually allows the companies to keep half of the toll revenue – more, if they're building new lanes. The rest goes to the national government. There's no good alternative to I-10 for getting across this part of Arizona, so American Mobility has something of a monopoly. Penn has also contracted Highway 60 in the Gila Valley to a

competing company. The Transportation Planning Board sets the tolls high enough that they provide revenue to the government, but not so high as to push people to divert onto small county roads. Because they're putting their own capital at risk (instead of using government bonds), the private companies have good incentives to operate and maintain the roads efficiently. But they also know that

Penn will yank their contracts if they don't.

As for increasing economic growth, you go for what you call the Mallory Model. You meet with the administrative bureaucrats in Cochise. (You also meet with the city and county elected officials, who still exist, but in largely ceremonial roles, because so much policy was centralized under CentComm over the past three decades.) You tell the

bureaucrats that they must approve all new business applications, all new building permits and all zoning variances within five days. If the bureaucrats have any concerns about projects, they must email you.

For the first few months, you get dozens of emails per day. You usually reply with a single word: "Approved." A guy wants to put up an ugly 50-foot sign for his business on Fry Boulevard in Sierra Vista?

“Approved.” Some guys in Tombstone want to open a noisy gun range just outside of the historic district? “Approved.” A lady opening a new nail salon in Douglas wants to hire unleveled employees, instead of union Threes. “Approved.” A new ten-story hotel by the freeway in Benson would block the views of nearby residents. “Approved: tell the residents they can sell their properties or build their own hotels.”

Occasionally, you get tougher problems. A new 10,000-unit master-planned housing development between Bisbee and Tombstone would threaten the water table in the San Pedro Valley. After consulting with Mallory and doing some research, you come up with a solution: the water conservation district for the Valley must institute a new pricing regime. Every resident gets 400 gallons per month for $50. Beyond that, every 100 gallons is a

flat $50 per month. What about their proposed golf course and community swimming pool? “If they can figure out how to pay $50 per 100 gallons, go for it.” (The developers opt to create a nature park instead.)

Another tough problem is traffic congestion. In Bisbee, where a few dozen new businesses have launched, the old Route 80, Main Street, and the Tombstone Canyon Road are so clogged with tourist and worker cars

that sometimes takes an hour to get in or out of town. With connections from Mallory and Penn, you set up a toll concession for Route 80 with American Mobility. (Remembering Brian's vision, you ask American Mobility if they can build a monorail, but they tell you that rail transit is a "sure loser" everywhere outside of the DC-Boston corridor.) As the "absentee mayor" of Bisbee, your plan gets a warm response from the City Council and from key business

and community leaders. The response is even warmer when you tell them that American Mobility will give residents who have lived at least a year in the town special transponder stickers for their cars so they don't have to pay the tolls or stop at the toll booths.

Through Jaden and Kylie, the *narco* accountants, you arrange to have one of McCormick's companies build secure parking garages at the west and

south entrances to the canyon and to have one of Beltrán's companies build a garage at the eastern entrance. They also operate jitneys that run all day and night along Route 80 and Tombstone Canyon. (You arrange for Robert and his friends to get jobs driving the jitneys.) The garages and jitneys are cheap in part because the *narcos* are laundering money through them. The legit revenue is tracked though the Digital Dollar app. For the moment, the laundered money is

booked as “shrinkage” – losses from alleged phantom drivers who park elsewhere and phantom riders who hop on the jitneys without paying.



You also put the kibosh on any kind of tariffs or import restrictions by telling the Arizona Customs director that CentComm is running a “Level Ten experiment” to find out if lower duties can be made up with toll revenue from increased trucking. When word gets out that the Naco and Douglas border stations are operating a *zona franca*, imported goods start flowing in from Mexico. Foreign beer and wine begin to appear in bars

and restaurants in the county for the first time in three decades. The vineyards in the Santa Cruz wine country apparently have some political clout, so their Admin Unit puts up checkpoints along the old Route 82 to search cars for imported wine. The checkpoints are obnoxious, but they also help to funnel marginal northbound traffic up to the toll road on I-10.

As for crime, you are ambitious. You meet with law enforcement chiefs and dozens of officers down the chain of command. You explain that they are to allow "anything that's peaceful and quiet." They have one job: to stop violence and theft. No more traffic stops, no more bribes, no more extra-judicial beat-downs. If you see good evidence that the cops have stopped soliciting and taking bribes, everybody will get big year-end bonuses. The new rules also go for

drug users and drunks. If they are not engaged in violence, drug users and drunks caught outdoors are to be gently escorted home or sent for a week to lock-up shelters. You encourage the police to disable the cars of drunk and drugged drivers. You order several pallets of naloxone and other anti-overdose medications from a national repository in Las Cruces and distribute them to local police departments.

Most law enforcement chiefs acquiesce quickly – especially when they find out how big their year-end bonuses will be. They're used to following orders from Washington. The exception is Chief Embry Waldron in Willcox. He's an old-school cop from central casting, with a buzz cut and a handlebar mustache. He's a little older than you, early 60s. You've met him a few times. For three decades, he has actively encouraged a culture of head-busting

in his district. He's a Level Five. After you explain the "peaceful and quiet" regime to his patrol officers, he huffs audibly and walks out of the briefing room.

You find him in his office. You enter without knocking and close the door behind you. He's reclining in his desk chair.

"You got a complaint, Chief?"

“Yeah, I do. We have a tight operation here in Willcox. You DC dickheads are going to fuck everything up.”

“Fuck up your bribe operation? We’re going to give you plenty of cash. And none of you will run the risk of getting caught up on a 127 and playing butt darts at Biden-Trump.” (Chapter 127 is the national anti-corruption legislation enacted by CentComm three decades ago.)

“My boys are pretty clean. I’m sure that some of the Benjies and blackies go missing when they do a drug bust. But they’re not walking around like gangsters shaking down decent people. That kind of chicken shit goes down in S.V. and Douglas. But not here.”

“I believe you, Chief. Mostly. You have a good reputation at the Dodge. Some of your guys have lifestyles that

are out of line with their official income. But nothing too extravagant."

"We can't all be married to rich union bosses. And none of us went to prep school in McLean."

You nod. He's done his homework.

"In addition to the bonuses, I'm thinking you and your boys should get

a piece of the new economy in Cochise."

He gives you a skeptical look.

"What are you thinking?"

"Shares in American Mobility. As you know, they have a concession for all the rest stops and gas stations in the turnoffs from Las Cruces to Tucson. I can justify the shares as aligning your incentives. The better

you do at keeping the Willcox turnoff peaceful and quiet, the better their stock will do. And if I get you shares before June, you'll get in on their next dividend. They're paying 12 percent, last I saw."

"How many shares are you talking?"

You do some quick math in your head, trying to figure out how much of a hit the shares will be to your

overall budget for the Administrative Unit. It's not much, in the big picture.

"Let's keep the math easy. 100 per level. So you'll get 500."

He leans forward in his chair and cracks a smile.

"I've been on the Labor leg for all my life. It'll be nice to get on the Capital leg. With inflation, ASIF ain't paying

out shit these days. Even if we could touch it."

"Penn's trying to fix that. But it's going to take a while."

"Okay. I appreciate you looking out for us. I do. But it's not about the money. Okay. It's not *all* about the money. If we start being all Andy Griffith and go easy on the shitbag druggies, things are going to come unglued around here. You're going to

have dealers and traffickers crawling around this place. Slinging dope. Shooting each other in the streets."

"We don't already?"

"They're pretty sneaky. They have to be. At least in my town. You know how I deal with things."

You nod. Waldron's officers often set up random checkpoints on the roads around Willcox. When a car pulls up,

one officer goes to check the driver's ID and inspect the car, while two officers cover him from behind sandbags with a belt-fed machine gun and grenade launchers. Willcox is *very* peaceful and quiet – in part because nobody wants to go to a town where they might get shot in a routine traffic stop.

"And right now," Waldron says, "they're not shooting each other in the streets. The Western Cartel has a lock

on this part of the country. You probably know better than I do."

You do. Echeverri, Contreras, McCormick and Beltrán are all in the Western.

"If the Gulf Cartel – or some other upstarts – find out that the druggies are running free up here, they'll start trying to muscle in. Instead of shooting each other down there, they'll be doing it up here. You've

heard that Juárez has gotten ugly again?"

"Yeah."

That's old news. Ciudad Juárez, across from El Paso, is split between the Western and Gulf Cartels. Everything west of Avenida Tecnológico and the old Pan-American Highway is Western territory, everything east is Gulf. For several years, the treaty seemed to be

holding. But some of the smaller operators on both sides got greedy and started encroaching – using border crossings that were supposed to be monopolized by the other cartel. Two years ago, gun battles erupted in the streets. America sent troops to Juárez to help the Mexican national government create a DMZ along the Tecnológico and the old Pan-Am. At the moment, things are relatively peaceful.

“In any case,” Waldron says, “I will comply with orders. I’ll even make my boys carry naloxone and keep the junkie shitbags from turning blue. But I hope you DC jackwagons have a plan for how to handle the cartels.”

“CentComm has a plan,” you tell him. You’re lying. *You* have a plan, but you’re going to have to clear it with CentComm.

TO GET YOUR plan approved, you need to go to the top. Mallory arranges for you to have a ten-minute meeting with Penn in DC on a Thursday afternoon in late September.

It's a convenient time for the family to spend a week in DC. Your mom and dad are declining, and you want the kids to spend some time with them. And Mallory is stopping in DC on her way to Estonia. She has been diagnosed with an aggressive breast

cancer – the same one that killed her mother. Americare has begun letting patients use their health savings account money to do some AI-guided individualized gene-therapy treatments, but only after the traditional protocols have been exhausted. By the time most patients run the gamut of legacy chemo and broad-spectrum gene therapies, they're so worn out that they usually opt for palliative care – even if they're allowed to access their HSAs.

You and Mallory have been trying to raise the kids without the frills of wealth, so instead of chartering a jet, your family flies commercial. There is some airline deregulation in the works, but for now, service on the Big Three is shitty – especially on a Tuesday-night redeye. Given Mallory's condition, she wears an n95 mask and gets a reclining seat in business class. But you and the kids flop around in bad seats in economy

all night, trying to sleep. (For her flight to Europe, Mallory will fly first class on Eurolinea, which has recently been granted permits to fly from East Coast cities.)

After a morning at museums on the National Mall you bring the kids with you to CentComm headquarters, which is in a hideous 20-story concrete bunker. (It's the only building in the low part of the city that is taller than the Capitol.) You

and the kids pass through several security checkpoints on your way up to the tenth floor. Penn's office is in the center of the building, inside a maze of corridors. When you enter the lobby for her office, you're met by a 40-something man. Like you, he's dressed in a dark gray suit with a plain tie. He is friendly and begins asking you and the kids a series of innocent-sounding questions. The kids are unaware of what he's doing, but you know that the man is doing a

psychological profile of you – trying to figure out if you might try to assassinate Penn.

You remember your Quantico training and answer the questions honestly. You make yourself less nervous by telling yourself that any nervousness you might have is natural, because you're meeting the Big Boss and asking for some leeway in policy. The good news is that he doesn't ask any specific policy questions.

At exactly the appointed time, he opens the door to a dark office and ushers you in. As he closes the door behind you, you hear a woman's voice: "Let your eyes adjust for a moment before trying to sit down."

The room is lit only by some dim computer screens and LEDs. You remember Mallory telling you that Penn served for several years on a submarine. She had studied nuclear

engineering at Annapolis. After her stint in the Navy, she went to grad school for economics and statistics. Mallory said Penn “almost certainly” has some kind of autism, like Asperger’s.



“When your eyes get adjusted, go ahead and sit down in the chair in front of you.”

You find your way to a simple metal folding chair. The message is clear: Penn does not like long meetings. Across the desk in front of you, you see computer screens reflected in big Coke-bottle glasses. The face and the body behind the glasses are tiny.

“State your request.”

You try to break it down into what you think is military-speak.

“Permission requested to pursue an arrangement with the Western Cartel in Mexico. They get a monopoly on operations in Cochise, in exchange for keeping things peaceful and quiet.”

Penn says nothing.

“Also, we allow them – and people in Cochise – to launder blackies and Benjies as tax revenue. And gold.”

“How is the Treasury is supposed to deal with those assets?”

“We use them to run Cochise government functions, and the Treasury can reduce our global budget proportionally. I can set up a repository. In one of the old bank buildings in Bisbee. We can keep a ledger in a FinCEN forfeiture fund. Or we could set one up directly in the Fedwire system. You can send people

from Treasury to inspect the physical balances."

Penn is silent. You can see her eyes. They're dark, and they flit back and forth to the screens. She's thinking. You've said enough, so you hold your tongue.

"No inspectors," she says. "But I'm going to cut off your budget at the end of this upcoming fiscal year. You will run everything in the Cochise

Unit on the laundered assets. And whatever other tax revenue you can raise."

You briefly imagine yourself driving around the Unit every two weeks, handing coins and Benjies to government employees.

"I'll need to convert those physical assets into DDs to pay salaries. And for purchase orders."

“Link to Fedwire through one of your forfeiture funds.”

“Normally – as you can imagine – not much ends up in those forfeiture funds. Coins just magically disappear from crime scenes. And I don’t think any of the stuff in DOJ evidence lockers has ever been converted into DDs. People will ask questions.”

“I’m giving you Level Eight permissions. If any Nines have

questions, you tell them you're running a Level Ten experiment. And you say nothing to anyone else. Including the Eight to whom you're married."

"We don't talk about work."

"One of the keys to a happy marriage."

"You don't want to send inspectors? Hypothetically, I could leverage the

physical assets with inflated market values. The values are pretty hard to pin down."

"You're already getting 2X, if you spend any of the hard assets that you collateralize into DDs. That's one of the reasons I'm cutting your budget appropriation to zero. But your unit is very small, in the big picture. Even if you started laundering a huge portion of the Western Cartel's annual revenue. But let's make a deal. You

will only expand your total budget each year by enough to keep up with inflation."

"Official inflation? Or real inflation?"

"Go one percentage point below what the *London Financial Times* says the rate is. That way, your budget will shrink a tiny bit each year in real terms. That's the program we're

trying to do for the whole country. Cochise can be a model."

"Got it."

"Also..."

"Yes?"

Her dark eyes study you for a long moment.

“All of this assumes you can work out a deal with the Western Cartel. Do you have any direct contacts with them?”

“I know where to find them.”

She makes a little snorting noise, like she’s stifling a laugh. But you can’t see enough of her face to know for sure. And if she’s autistic, maybe you couldn’t tell. If she is laughing, it’s probably at the irony of your

statement: if you know where to find the cartel people, presumably you could have busted them already.

“Okay. Be careful with those people. And remember: we never had this conversation. If you have to run interference with the drug people at DOJ, you are on your own. Don’t pull the Level Ten experiment card with anyone below Level Nine. When things come to my desk, I will just say that Cochise has maximum

autonomy. But officially, nothing has changed. You understand?”

“Understood.”

You have two minutes left in your ten-minute meeting, but you and Penn have said everything that needs to be said. When you return to the museums with your kids, you think about how Penn said, “Be careful with those people.” If she has any compassion, that’s the extent of it.

More likely, she was just warning you not to set up any crazy arrangements with the cartel that will draw undue attention to the experiment.

INITIALLY, THE *NARCOS* are skeptical. But they come around.

Through Jaden, the McCormick accountant, you arrange to meet with a character named Rowdy at Big Nose Kate's saloon in Tombstone. It's late

afternoon. Rowdy looks like Sam Elliott, with a long, gray handlebar moustache. His official day job is playing a gunfighter at the OK Corral. But he's involved in a lot of the businesses in Tombstone. You know that McCormick is laundering a lot of money through the town. The saloon has been restored to a high level of Victorian-Edwardian splendor, with gorgeous mirrors and stained glass and gilt trim. One of the picture walls has AI-altered scenes of what's

happening on Allen Street. It fades between grainy black-and-white and 1960s technicolor and hi-def. In real time, it dresses the tourists in 19th-century garb and adds props – it puts six-guns and whiskey jugs in people's hands or mounts them on horses. There's also a powerful jammer installed somewhere in the saloon.

The fact that you're meeting with Rowdy makes you suspect that he's also high up in the drug operations.

When you sit down with him, you see the print of lightweight Swiss Mithrifiber – the latest in bullet-catching armor – under his high-collar Old West shirt and his ornate vest. You're guessing that at least one of his big Navy Colt revolvers is loaded with real rounds. He seemingly never lapses out of character. After you order whiskies from a cute waitress in a saloon girl outfit, he says in a raspy Old West baritone that you can "speak plainly here."



You explain your plan for drugs in Cochise. The mules and dealers will

drive three different models of car, in three different colors. The cars will all have small stickers with smart codes on them that can be read from a distance. Stash houses will have stickers in their windows. Street dealers will wear the stickers on their backpacks. Everybody will keep a low profile. Law enforcement will give the Western Cartel free rein, and only stop cars and people without stickers. There won't be a lot of stops in the Cochise, per your standing

policy, but if any operators from the Gulf Cartel are spotted, you'll make sure they're arrested. The Western Cartel is also free to deposit hard money in Cochise banks. But if Western mules move any "product" across the Cochise lines to other places, they are taking their chances.

Rowdy says nothing, but you can tell that he's skeptical. The cartel's drivers already have a never-get-stopped policy – a policy of always

shooting first. It's one of the reasons why they've mostly been able to operate with impunity. For years, police throughout the Southwest have tended to harass "little people" – people who don't shoot back. Only Waldron's officers in Willcox have been able to operate roadblocks successfully. Rowdy finishes his whiskey in silence.

"I reckon I'll have to talk to some folks."

“Understood.”

“Give me exactly one week. Same day, same time. We’ll meet back here.”

A week later, you meet Rowdy again at Big Nose Kate’s. He walks in at the appointed hour and sits down.

“We’re gonna try it,” he says. “If it don’t work, your life may be forfeit. Understand?”

“Forfeit. Understood.”

The waitress comes to the table. Rowdy orders whiskies and slips a couple of Benjies into the garter on her right leg.

“You put those into the bank, little lady. Earn yourself some interest.

This man here has got the banks fixed. They're takin real money these days."

After discussing the logistics of the sticker system for the mules and dealers, you tell Rowdy that you want the drugs to be packaged for Cochise users in clearly marked quantities and concentrations. Now that the cartel has a monopoly – and every dealer is controlled directly by the cartel – they

should be able to control the quality of the product.

“To do that right,” Rowdy says, “I reckon we’ll need a testing and packaging lab. Somewhere rural. On the outskirts of Douglas, I’m thinking.”

“Done. Can you make it look like a truck repair facility or something?”

“Yup. And hell, we can include a naloxone kit in every big bag.”

You also bring up a “personal matter” with Rowdy. Now that you’re higher-profile, you want the *narcos* to stop giving you coins.

“Sorry, pardner,” he rasps. “Can’t do that. It’s our insurance policy. You stay on the payroll.” You nod to indicate that you understand. The cartel has probably been keeping

records of the drop-offs at your house. Likely, high-def video with time stamps. If they go down, you go down too.

THREE YEARS LATER, on a chilly March evening, a dapper middle-aged gentleman sits down at the next table while you are enjoying a martini at the rooftop bar at The Holliday, an ultramodern seven-story hotel at the west end of Tombstone Canyon in

Bisbee. (Like many new enterprises in Bisbee, it was built in a partnership between the McCormick syndicate and apparently legit outside investors.) He speaks with a thick Russian accent and announces that he is “tourist from Tampico.” He raises his martini glass and gestures east down the valley, where the lights from building cranes twinkle in the twilight above the town.

“A toast,” he says, “to all great *busy-ness* going on in Cochise.”

You raise your glass and mumble something like, “Yeah. It’s great.” You glance at your phone to make sure the hotel’s jammer is functioning. You also lower your right hand briefly to your waist, trying not to be conspicuous, to make sure the .380 is in its spot. From the reports you’ve read, there has been a big uptick in violence between the

Gulf and Western cartels. Reportedly, the Western has been trying to push out the Gulf in a bid to control all the supply routes in Mexico. Several high-ranking cartel bosses have been assassinated across the country, as well as some politicians and police chiefs and army commanders in Mexico's Gulf states. There are space heaters under the tables, but the fear gives you a chill.

“You are doing great job here. I like high-rise buildings are at edge of town. But down there, town is old buildings. Fixed-up. But old-fashion. And tourist walks everywhere. Cars in tunnels and garages underground. And these tunnels. This is Elon Musk company, yes?”

“It’s not his company anymore. But he started it. It was the Boring Company. Now it’s called RBT. Rapid Bridge and Tunnel.”

“This is very nice town.”

“Just the free market, you know. Doing its thing.”

“Yes. Free market. Very good. Competition is very good.”

You raise your glass and say, “I’ll drink to that.”

“But I am thinking. Competition is not monopoly. When only one *busy-ness* – one company – is allowed to do *busy-ness*. I am right, yes?”

“Right. A monopoly is not ideal. But neither is a... *cartel*.”

He laughs. It sounds genuine.

“Very good, my friend. But if there are *two* cartels, then there is some competition. This is better than one.

I am right, yes? If one is not good, you can make *busy-ness* with other. You get more production. Lower prices. This is very basic. Textbook."

"Yeah. But if the product is a bad thing – just hypothetically – maybe we don't want more production. Maybe we don't want lower prices."

"This is true, my friend. And if you are in government, maybe with

monopoly *busy-ness* and high prices, government can control things. And as bonus government gets tax on high prices. Maybe hidden tax. It goes into pockets of high officials. Just *hypo-teh-tic-ly*."

You're not offended. But if he's trying to work out a deal for a piece of Cochise, it seems unwise for him to insinuate that you're corrupt.

Channeling Rowdy, you say, “I reckon so.” You sip on your martini and look down the canyon. But you keep him in your peripheral vision.

“I am sorry,” he says. “I think maybe I said this wrong way. Maybe monopoly is good. For this kind of *busy-ness*. We talk *hypo-teh-tic-ly*. Government can control things. Everything is quiet. You do this in one place. But maybe there is other place. Far away. In other place,

government makes deal with other *busy-ness*."

"How far away?"

"We talk *hypo-teh-tic-ly*. Maybe somewhere along coast of ocean. America is very big. Much ocean all around."

From what you've heard from Mallory, Maine and Alaska also have experimental trade zones. You have

no idea if they're also experimenting in drug policy.

"I've heard that the government might be flexible in Maine and Alaska."

"Yes. I know. This is too far."

"I thought you said, 'much ocean.'"

"I am more specific now. Maybe you have friend in Mobile, Alabama. Colleague. Colleague in Corpus

Cristi. Or Florida. Redneck Riviera? Maybe is not place with special rules. But maybe you have colleague who is administrator for local unit in this place."

You don't know anyone along the Gulf. You've been doing your own thing in Cochise and trying to keep a low profile. You haven't even coordinated with other Unit admins in Arizona or New Mexico, except for a few conference calls about small

modifications to the I-10 tolling system.

“I don’t know any of those guys,” you tell him. “Besides, you should reach out directly and see if any of them want to make a deal.”

“These guys are not – how do you say? – *receptive*. Not for carrot and not for stick. You know carrot and stick?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe is time to use bigger stick with these guys. My friends in *busy-ness* are having much trouble with your friends.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Is why they hire Russian guy, with many Russian friends. But I am not big stick guy. I am problem solver. I like carrot. I have many carrots. For

your colleagues. And for you. You tell me about carrot you have, and I get you bigger carrot."

You channel Rowdy again: "Ya gotta dance with the one that brought ya."

"I do not know this expression. But I understand. Is very good rule. But my friends have big sticks. And they are angry. This is not always rational *busy-ness*, you know. Too much emotions."

“I reckon so.”

He finishes his martini and slides a Benjie under the base of his glass.

After he leaves, you decide not to take your 4Runner, which is in the garage under the hotel. You’re thinking it might be bombed. Or there might be gunmen in the garage. Or maybe they could get you at the underground lot near your house. You go down the

emergency stairs at the north end of the hotel and out one of the back gates of the hotel by the garbage dumpsters. You ready the .380 in your hand and trot off in the dark along the dirt utility trail that winds around the spurs and draws on the north side of the canyon.

In about a mile, you reach the spur overlooking your house from the west. The main staircase is 200 yards further, in the next draw, but you're

thinking that the Gulf people might be watching the stairs. You drop to your belly and crawl to the edge of the steep hillside behind your property. Then you crawl along the edge, trying to peer down into the dark to spot anyone who might be waiting for you in your yard or along the main staircase. You don't see anyone, so you go back to the spur.

The old staircase that used to be on that side of the property had mostly

crumbled away by the time you bought the place, and you've never repaired it. You begin sliding slowly down the steep track, moving a few inches at a time. You use the manzanita bushes to stop yourself from sliding – and as cover. If a sniper is glassing the whole property from a roof with an infrared scope, you'll be an easy target. But if there is a rifleman, he's probably just watching the stairs and the front yard.

You make your way down to the back yard and crawl behind a stack of bricks left over from the rebuild. That could be a good spot to wait and call Rowdy, but you have what you think is a better idea. You grab an old canvas tarp and make a break for the entrance to the wine cellar. You unlock the thick climate door, duck into the cellar, and latch the door behind you. It's cool in the cellar, but not as cold as it is outside. You remove your sweaty undershirt and

wrap yourself in the tarp. You open a bottle of wine with the corkscrew on your pocketknife and drink until your nerves feel steady. Then you call Rowdy on an encrypted line. You tell him where you are. You tell him you had a "bad meeting with a Russian guy who said he was from Tampico" and that you think you "may need security."

"Yeah," Rowdy rasps. "I reckon there's a lot of that going around.

We'll get teams out to your position and to the house in Tucson. About a half hour. Anywhere else?"

You tell him that Junior is at a night class at the Eller building at the U of A. Rowdy says he'll "have a team cover that angle, too."

You tell him that the teams covering your family should "try to be discrete."

“Of course. They’ll never know we’re there.”

“Sorry about the trouble.”

“It ain’t no trouble. You’re what they call a ‘high-value asset.’”

Rowdy calls back 45 minutes later to say that the Bisbee security team has cleared your property and verified that there are no bombs on your truck. The other teams are also in place.

Your family is safe. You ask about the Russian.

“Well,” he says. “The good news is it looks like that Russian feller was workin alone. The bad news is he got away. If we pick him up somewhere, we’ll be askin him a lot of questions. But I reckon we’ll keep a closer eye on you from now on.”

TWO YEARS LATER, your family is on a backpacking trip to the Power Cabin in the Galiuro Mountains with Pastor Mark's family. You and Jennifer having a belated celebration of your 60th birthdays. It's a tough hike, especially getting broken in on the steep approach into the mountains on the eastern side. But you and Jennifer are on some new Swiss vitality med cocktails, which she first started taking during her cancer recovery. You can now get batches of

the meds through Customs without much hassle. CentComm has relaxed inspections on *de minimus* imports under $10,000 to persons who are Level Five or higher. (That has effectively exempted nearly everyone, because people under Level Five can usually find Fives to import stuff for them.) If you had to put a number on your age, you would say that you feel 40.

Your kids are grown up now. They are 24 and 22. Jennifer still lives with you and Mallory and works full time (but gets paid part time) as a youth leader at the church in Tucson. Junior has graduated from the U of A and followed you into accounting. He runs the finances of The Holliday and a few other Cochise businesses and lives at your house in Bisbee. Like you and your dad, he has the hereditary discretion of a Guardian, or a mob accountant. The first time he

found a packet of coins at the house, he simply asked, “What should I do with these?” In response, you gave him the combination to the safe above the sink mirror. Recently, you began having him deposit them in family accounts you opened at two different banks in Bisbee. He has never asked where the coins come from.



When your party of ten reaches the top of the eastern approach to the Galiuros, you find a clearing in the pines on the saddle. There's a rusty stand on one side of the clearing with

a registry book inside it. You drop your packs and sign the book. In a digital age, signing pencil to paper feels momentous. You have a couple hours before dark, so the kids leave their big packs in the clearing and head off in different directions to explore. You and Mark scout out the main trail where it goes along the ridge to the west. It's a gorgeous afternoon in late May, with stunning views north and south. The lowering sun gradually cuts through the haze

and brings the valleys below into relief.

You know that Mark is a big fan of silence. He talks for a living and needs to take long breaks. It's also part of his spiritual practice. You know that he's listening for the voice of God in the light breeze and the beat of wings from the little birds with sharp wings that occasionally dart across the ridge. You listen, too. You

don’t hear God – or at least, you don’t think so – but it’s very relaxing.

Somewhere down in the valleys to the west is the cabin, which was the scene of a shootout in 1918. The two draft-dodging Power boys were hiding out with a hired hand at the cabin, where their father, Jeff Power, was working a wildcat gold mine. Early on the morning of February 10, a posse of four law enforcement officers from Safford attempted to arrest some

members of the group. In a brief shootout, Jeff Power and three of the officers died. For a month, the Power boys and their hired hand evaded the largest manhunt in Arizona history, but they were eventually captured in Mexico. The hired man died in prison, but the Power boys were pardoned in 1960. (In the American Party era, the government is never wrong, no matter how badly its officers botch no-knock raids...)

There weren't a lot of names signed into the registry, and even fewer listed the Power Cabin as their destination. In 1918, the Power family used a rough but drivable dirt road they had built in the inner valley of the Galiuros that went from the hamlet of Klondyke to their cabin. Even though it has been reclaimed by a century of erosion and wild plant growth, the old road would be an easier trail than the one you've taken. But it's tucked into the middle of a wilderness area

surrounded by ranch properties with feisty owners who are serious about blocking trespasses and preventing adverse possession. As a Level Seven, you could've forced the ranchers in Klondyke to let you through on some fictional pretext. But you're trying hard to keep your authority from turning you into a dick.

As you had looked back to the east coming up the big hill, it looked like there was another hiking party parked

near your vehicles. But if they came up the trail, they seem to have given up before getting to the top. Your group will have the wilderness to yourselves, maybe for the whole weekend.

As night falls, you set up your tents in the clearing at the saddle and Jennifer and the kids make dinner. Junior has some wine with the old folks, but Jennifer is in youth leader mode. After dinner, everyone has hot cocoa

and sits around a campfire. This is not an official church outing, but Jennifer leads everyone in singing hymns and praise songs. You and Junior are the oddballs. He sings along, but from conversations in recent years, you know that he has inherited your deep skepticism about everything.

While everyone else is singing, your thoughts turn south over the county line toward the Cochise

Administrative Unit. (Right now, you are in the southwest corner of the Graham Unit.) Things have gone remarkably well for the past five years. By all measures, you have succeeded in executing Penn's triple mandate.

National tax revenue in Cochise is up a little bit, but Unit-specific national expenses – what the national Treasury pays for – are almost zero now. The Unit mostly pays for itself. The

Biden-Trump prison is a drain, but most of the inmates who come from outside of Cochise are housed and fed with Treasury dollars from outside. There are some Unit expenses related to the Fort Hawley base, but the base is national security, and the expenses don't count against your budget. You have also cut the hell out of the expenses the Cochise Unit pays for with local revenue. That includes the revenue you call "the vig" (Mallory calls it "seniorage") that the Unit

makes when you convert the banks' deposits of hard money at the Bisbee repository into Digital Dollars. You have cut the Unit's overall budget by about five percent per year in real (inflation-adjusted) terms. With higher user fees, you have even managed to lower property and sales taxes. Penn has not communicated with you directly since your conversation in her office, but she has pointed to the Cochise Unit as a

positive example in several of the Eight-Plus memos Mallory has gotten.

Economic growth in the unit is booming. The Digital Dollars you create by converting hard-money deposits aren't counted as economic growth by the bean counters at National Accounts, but they do get counted when they change hands in daily transactions. According to the bean counters, annual growth in Cochise is about ten percent. In most

years, that means real growth of about five percent. Population in the Unit has gone up by about a quarter in the past five years.

Crime is very low. Things are "peaceful and quiet." As word has gotten out, there has been an influx of a few hundred "drug tourists" from other places, but the police do a good job of keeping them out of sight. With a dependable supply and known concentrations, most of the druggies

even manage to hold down jobs. Cochise has become a major storage point for the Western Cartel's drug shipments further north and west, but that is also out of sight. What *is* visible is the rapid growth of shipping centers for legit foreign goods enjoying "relaxed" duties at the Customs ports at Douglas and Naco. (It's possible that the *zona franca* experiment is actually working to replace lost duties with increased toll revenue on truckers, but you haven't

collected any stats or tried to do the math.)

Even the rift between the Western and Gulf cartels appears to have quieted down. The Russian has never resurfaced, and no one from Gulf has attempted to contact you. From what you read in DOJ memos, things have gotten relatively quiet south of the border. Reportedly, Gulf has ceded Juárez to Western in exchange for Gulf control over Mexico City.

Two weeks ago, you saw a report from the Sierra Vista police, saying they had arrested a car full of unknown Mexican nationals who didn't have smart codes and who were carrying a lot of gold and Benjies. The police suspected they were from the Gulf Cartel and were holding them for "questioning." You told them to "go easy with the questioning." You're okay with outsiders depositing hard money into

Cochise banks – even if they're Gulf Cartel – but Rowdy's people don't want the Gulf to have any local presence whatsoever.

The report said the police seized just under $36 million. You wonder how much they really seized, but skimming by police isn't your main concern. Your main concern is inflation. In a typical year, there has been about $50 million of hard money going from Cochise banks to the

Bisbee repository. That isn't a problem. $50 million in the repository becomes $50 million in fresh DDs in the banks' asset ledgers. That gets multiplied when the banks make loans and the money circulates, but it's a rounding error for the Cochise economy. (Typically, your vig is $10 million in hard money you pull from the repository for year-end bonuses for Unit employees – who have started calling you "Santa Claus.")

Your concern – which you've been thinking about for a couple years – is what will happen when hard-money deposits get into the mid nine digits per year. Multiplied out, that could create a speculative frenzy and push prices up past the national inflation average. You might have to convert to DDs at less than one-to-one, or force the banks to keep higher hard-money reserves. When you first told Mallory about your concerns she

laughed and said, “My husband, the central banker.” (Like Junior with the coins, she must know where most of the hard money in Cochise is coming from – but she never says anything.)

You sit at the singalong for a respectful duration and then head to your tent to crash out early.

The next morning, the group decamps at a leisurely pace and descends the canyon to the west to the junction

with Rattlesnake Canyon. You see a lot of bear and mountain lion scat on the trail down.

“Bears and mountain lions,” Mark says to Mallory when you take a rest. “You should’ve brought Humphrey. You know, to protect us.”

“Yes. That would be perfect. But Humphrey’s not much of a hiker.”

“Exactly. He would have to stand and fight.”

You and Mallory tell him how the kids begged you to give Humphrey vitality meds after you started taking them, and how you refused. The last thing you need in an obnoxious beagle is vigor. In his old age, he has finally started to mellow out.

At the junction, everyone throws down their packs in a grove of trees

next to a marsh. The group wants to do a day hike north along Rattlesnake Canyon to see what's at a place called Powers Garden, but you saw a lot of bear scat on the trail down, so you tell them you'll stay with the packs to make sure bears don't get into the food. Mallory elects to stay with you.

When everyone else heads off, you and Mallory eat lunch. Then you pull out some ground pads and make love. (The vitality meds have delayed

menopause for her, so you still use condoms these days.) The two of you then nap until the mosquitos find you and start buzzing around your faces. You get up and put on repellent. Then you make coffee with the jet boiler and read. These days, you and Mallory read actual paper books. Part of the reason is nostalgia, but part of it is an act of quiet defiance: you want to have books that the National Endowment doesn't know you're reading and can't delete from your

cloud libraries. You read fun books, usually pulp mysteries and thrillers from the 90s and early aughts. Mallory reads headier stuff: literary novels and think pieces. On this trip, you're reading a James Patterson. Mallory is reading a thin book by Jeannette Winterson, something about a lighthouse.

When the rest of the group returns in the late afternoon, they are mostly exhausted, but they put on their packs

and trudge over a hill to the south to the draw where the Power Cabin is. The cabin is mostly ruined, with big gaps in the wooden beams and slats that form a semblance of walls and roof. The floor inside is covered with dust and fallen debris and trash left by decades of campers. The tall stone chimney on the south wall is the only thing that looks dignified. You're supposed to spend two nights here, but nobody is very impressed with the place.



You’re the only one who wants to sleep inside the cabin. (You’re also the only one who has spent any time reading about the shootout and the

fate of the Power family.) Mallory is resistant. After your earlier experience with mosquitos, she insists on sleeping in a tent. You compromise and pitch your two-man tent inside, in a corner under what looks to be the strongest part of the roof.

The group builds a campfire in a spot between their tents in the clearing outside. You eat dinner around the fire in the twilight. The others are

wiped out from two days of packing and hiking, and not up for a singalong after dinner. You announce that you're planning to do a day hike tomorrow to a ruin to the south called the Hooker Cabin. Mark declares "as an ordained minister" that the excursion to the Hooker Cabin will be "for men only." You're the only one who finds the joke funny. After dinner, you relate the story of the shootout and the others listen with

their sleepy eyes staring into the dying campfire.

You awake at dawn with a full bladder, wiggle out of your sleeping bag, and put on your hiking shorts and a fleece. You think of "Old Man" Jeff Power, getting up to piss on his last morning on Earth. In some sense, he was probably killed by an enlarged prostate. Your .380 is in its holster, down by your boots. During the day, you've been keeping it in a side pouch

on your pack. You decide to put the holster on your waist, thinking you might encounter a mountain lion or an agitated bear while you're pissing. When you get out of your tent, you can see east through an opening made by a missing slat in the cabin wall. The sky is bright, but the tents outside are still in the shadow of the eastern wall of the draw. Mark is emerging from his tent.

You’re about to call out to him and make a joke about how he’s too young for an enlarged prostate when you see two figures standing at the far edge of the clearing. They are wearing camo-colored flak jackets and holding small, short-barreled rifles that look like they might be MP5s. You crouch behind the opening in the wall and draw the .380. As Mark stands up, the closer man shouts.

“You! Stay in the tent! Get back inside! Everyone stay in your tents!”

The accent sounds Mexican, but it’s not heavy. You’re thinking this is a security detail. Maybe Rowdy’s people followed you out here. But they wouldn’t make themselves known unless you were in danger. The man continues shouting, but more calmly now.

“No one is going to get hurt. We are doing a prisoner exchange. You are prisoners. When our people are released, you will be released. We must talk to the Administrator. We need you to make some phone calls. Show us your hands and come out. Very slowly. And you” – he is talking to Mark, who is standing still – “get back in the tent. Very slowly.”

You remember the report from the Sierra Vista police, saying they had

arrested some people they suspected were from the Gulf Cartel. The men seem to be looking at the tents, not at the cabin. Maybe they don't know you're inside the cabin. Maybe they miscounted the tents, if they were watching last night.

You remember your SERE training. Kidnapping. Hostages. The earlier you resist, the better.

You're starting to shake from adrenalin, so you sit down on your butt and rest the front frame of the .380 on the beam below the opening in the slats. The closer man – the one who was talking – is about 50 feet away. If you aim for the middle of his head, you might hit his neck. Above the top of his flak jacket.

You breathe in and out. You try to relax. You aim. You squeeze. There's a boom and a flash and you

see the man start to drop. You swivel to the right, past Mark, and fire at the farther man. He makes a startled motion, but you can't tell if you hit him. You keep firing at his upper body. Your vision starts to get weird, and you can't count how many shots you've fired. When the magazine is empty, the second man is down but still moving. You are confused. You want to reload, but you can't remember where the spare magazine is.

In the fog of your mind, you hear more shots. Some are coming from Mark, who has the first man's gun and is firing it up the draw to your left. Your main thought is that Mark has good form. You remember him firing the SWAT rifles at the gun range. He moves the muzzle back and forth, firing at two different targets. You see the dirt kick up twice near his feet. He fires some more rounds up the draw and then stops.

He turns around, aims carefully at your second man, and fires a final shot.

“That was some good shootin with that little gun.” Mark is speaking like John Wayne. “But I had ta finish him.”

Then he gets serious and returns to his normal brogue.

“Is everyone okay? Is anyone hurt?”

The voices respond from the tents that they're okay.

Mark drops to his knees and lifts his hands. It's an odd picture: his hands are in direct sunlight, but the rest of him is still in the shadow of the eastern side of the draw. He begins praying loudly. It goes on for a long time. You hear the words "grateful" and "providence" and "sovereignty" many times.

You look in your tent, to check on Mallory. You want to ask her if she's okay, but she has her eyes closed and her hands open. Her cheeks are wet. She is listening to Mark's prayer and murmuring amens.

When Mark is done with his prayer, you tell the group to pack up quickly. You and Mark collect the four rifles from the dead men and make sure they have fresh magazines. You and

Mark keep two and give the others to Junior and Charlie (Mark's oldest son) and show them how to turn off the safeties and switch them to semi-auto. Otherwise, you leave the crew's equipment – including pistols and phones – with the bodies. The leader had a satellite phone. That was probably how they were going to have you call to get their people out of prison. You think about using the phone to call the Graham County administrator, but you decide to wait

until you reach the eastern slope of the range, where you can call him on your cell. You take photos of the bodies with your cell. There's a lot of blood. It's too early and cold for flies, but some big black ants have started to find the blood.

You instruct the group to hike with twenty yards between each person and to take cover when they stop. You and Mark will be in the lead, and Junior and Charlie will be at the rear.

Before leaving, you swap magazines in the .380 (the other mag was in the side pouch of your pack). You chamber a round and put it in its holster. Then you hand it to Mallory.

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Put it in your side pouch. If you need it, you take it out, point, and shoot.”

She looks skeptical. And scared.

“In case you have to protect Jennifer.”

She nods and takes the gun.

When you reach the top of the draw, you look back at the cabin one last time. 142 years after the first shootout, the Power Cabin has claimed another four lives. You’re not sure you believe in God. But you

have a deep sense that the place is cursed.

You move quickly, but it's a long hike back up to the saddle on the eastern ridge, made longer by the fact that you're constantly scanning around you for any *matones* who might've been posted along the route out. When you reach the clearing at the saddle, you wave for Mark to join you and step into the pines for cover. Your phone has a weak signal.

“I’m going to call Safford,” you tell him. “Have the others stay back. They can be together but tell them to stay down. Behind rocks. Then come back and cover me while I make the call.”

When Mark comes back, he takes a position in the trees a few feet away and begins scanning around slowly over his rifle. You lie down on the ground so you’re not in his way.

“Hey, Mark.”

“Yeah?”

“You handled that whole thing really well down there. Thanks.”

He keeps scanning while he talks.

“Everything was in slow motion. I actually heard your first bullet buzz through the air in front of me. I could

almost see it. And I could hear some of the bullets behind me. I could sense the hand of God, moving them through the air."

You say nothing.

"Of course, I'm a pastor. A Calvinist pastor. So I'm supposed to say things like that. But that's how I actually experienced it. I was thinking, 'Okay, God. So this is Your plan. What do You want me to do?' When I saw the

first guy fall, I knew I was supposed to pick up his rifle. I knew there were other guys up on the hill. Even before I could see where they were. Before they started shooting at me. I was right on one of them, aiming almost right at him, when I saw the flash from his gun. Then I started shooting. I remembered some drill from the SWAT guy at the range. I fired twice at one guy. Quick. And then twice at the other guy. Then back to the first."

“It was different for me,” you tell him. “I got really confused after the first couple of shots. I couldn’t think straight. Maybe I need to become a Calvinist.”

“I don’t think we’re all like that. And not all the time. Like right now. I feel like I have to concentrate. I have to tell myself to keep looking. And where to look. Down there, everything just flowed around me.”

“Okay. You concentrate. I’m going to make a call.”

THE COMBINED 75TH birthday bash for you and Mallory is a blowout event. Hundreds of people. Although the latest vitality meds have made you and Mallory a little more extroverted, she still doesn’t like having large numbers of people at the ranch, so Jennifer and Junior have thrown the

event at the condo building you built in Bisbee.

The nine-story building, The Jennifer, is at the east end of the downtown area. It's very modern inside, but its west facade has a lot of Victorian and Edwardian elements to help it blend into the downtown vibe. The premium condos look west and north over the town, where the rehabbed buildings still have their old character. To the south, The Jennifer overlooks

the old Lavender Pit, which now houses the main interchange for the network of road tunnels that run under the town and out to the west to Warren. The building has been in foreclosure since the global “Big Setback” recession in 2070, and there are a lot of vacancies.

The kids have set up the main party in the 8th-floor community room, which looks west up the canyon over the Copper Queen. The main party is

Mexican-themed, with a 15-piece mariachi band playing outside on the deck. Your personal party is Paris-themed and catered by Roka. It's in a 9th-floor luxury suite that looks over the Pit. On the deck of the suite, Jennifer has installed a 20-foot-tall plastic replica of the Eiffel Tower that has been painted to look like steel. A new quartet from the Kafka is supposed to show up around midnight and play gypsy jazz. For the party,

you've brought out most of your collection from your wine cellar.

Mallory is holding court on the rooftop suite. Her personal party is labor-themed. There are lots of posters on the walls in the style of socialist realism, featuring miners who look like "virile men" and women who look like Rosie the Riveter. Jennifer has installed two life-sized 3D-printed statues in the living room of the suite. One is

Mallory's father, Old Man Wilson, accurately depicted as a fat labor boss in a three-piece suit. The other is her grandfather, Ray Wilson, who was an actual Pennsylvania coal miner. He looks lean and tough in his overalls and hard hat.

At your Paris party, Colin helps his chefs fry up hanger steaks on a hibachi on the deck. You co-signed a loan a decade ago to help him buy out Roka, so he's catering the food for

free. You're serving in the living room as the sommelier, taking sips from your collection before pouring out glasses for the guests. Robert and some of his recovery friends still look like hippies, so they're playing the role of Bohemians. They sit on the central couches, puffing on Gitanes and Galoises e-cigs and reading poetry aloud. They mostly read Bukowski but pause during the raunchiest parts if polite company is within earshot. Mark is attracted by

the roars of laughter, and they let him into the circle. Soon, in response to the worst of Bukowski, everyone is shouting the Calvinist refrain of "Total depravity!" (Robert informs you that the group has taken booze blockers for the night, but you notice that they're also keeping a close eye on each other.)

At some point, Echeverri appears. You haven't seen him in 30 years. He looks almost the same, but his

ponytail is streaked with gray. He walks over to your wine bar.

“I saw your girls upstairs,” he says. “They’re beautiful.”

“They are. Did you get a chance to talk to Jennifer?”

“No, not yet. I don’t think she knows.”

“No. I don’t think Mallory has ever told her.”

It’s loud in the room, but some of Roka staffers are nearby, so you suggest to Echeverri that you go out to the deck. You grab a couple glasses and a fresh bottle from a special stash you’re keeping under the bar. It’s a 2036 Malbec from Tucumán. Echeverri notices the date when you’re uncorking it.

“2036,” he says. That was a good year. Maybe not for wine. I do not know. But for daughters.”

“Here’s to Jennifer.”

“To Jennifer.”

You drink for a long moment, before you bring up the topic you are both thinking about.

“You are free to tell her. As far as I’m concerned.”

“Thank you, Thomas. I do not know if I will. In my life, there are many secrets. And I think it is good for them to be secrets.”

He thinks for a while. Then he gestures west across the town.

“This place looks amazing. Even after the Big Setback. I came here

years ago. There was nothing. Almost nothing. I remember the big hole in the ground. The mine."

"You guys have pumped a huge amount of money through here."

"Yes. We have." (His "we" seems to include you.) "I do not know how much. But you are the accountant."

"I've lost count. A few years ago, it was like $400 billion. But then it got

multiplied out through the banks. It's hard to say how much stays in the town."

"Yes," he says. "The banks." He looks at you carefully with dark eyes that look like Jennifer's. "You were right, Thomas. About the banking. To let the people from *el Golfo* use the banks. It was a good thing. It helped to keep the peace. The... new arrangement... is very good."

He's referring to how you handled the situation 15 years ago, when the police in Sierra Vista arrested the four guys from the Gulf Cartel who were trying to set up bank accounts. After the shootout at the Power Cabin, you told Rowdy that you were going to allow Gulf people to make deposits in Cochise banks. Under what you called the "new arrangement," Rowdy's people got a five percent cut of new deposits from the Gulf.

“Now,” he says, “we are all bankers. This is a better life. A much better life. It is not *complicated*.”

He’s referring to the near-death of the illegal drug market. The change has has mostly been driven by technology. When CentComm’s Open Technocrats began opening the American market to Euro meds, American addicts suddenly had access to highly effective anti-psychotics, bipolar meds, and addiction blockers.

More recently, high-quality cheap American knockoffs have made them even more available. The demand for opioids and stimulants has plummeted. There are still people who want to get high, but their demand is less than five percent of the old addiction-fueled market. Thanks to your hard-money laundering regime in Cochise, the cartels have moved almost entirely into banking and investing.

CentComm is now allowing hard-money deposits in several places around the country, but Cochise is the hard-money center for most of the Southwest. By converting to DDs, the former *narcos* have access to the wider American financial markets and increasingly, the global markets. From recent tax returns, you calculate that the American laundering syndicates of the Western and the Gulf cartels are managing over two trillion dollars in assets. Among those

assets is this building, which is now owned by one of McCormick's banks. The foreclosure is on generous terms – among other things, you have the option to buy it back for cheap when the market rebounds.

"And you are okay," he asks, "without the coins?"

"Yeah, we're fine. I've converted most of them to digital." You think of

the stash at Windy Point. "But thank you for looking out for us."

When Jennifer walks out to the deck, Echeverri is asking you about strategies for booking short-term capital gains as long-term to avoid higher tax rates.

"Jennifer, this is Julio Echeverri. He's a banker from Mexico – originally, from Colombia. He met Mommy a long time ago in Acapulco.

Here. Have a little splash of wine. This bottle is from 2036. You may be familiar with that year."

Echeverri raises his glass.

"We are *brinda* – toasting? – beautiful girls born in 2036. Girls who have whole buildings with their name."

Jennifer laughs.

“But I have a serious question,” Echeverri says. “Why are you not married? I think your father will want grandchildren. Is this because you are a priest?”

You attempt to deflect.

“I have plenty of grandkids. Junior and Maddie have three already. And I hear there’s another one coming.”

“I can get married, if I want.” Jennifer is used to this question. “I just haven’t found the right man. But I’m very busy with my ministry.”

“Maybe the men are... *intimidated*... because you are a priest?”

“Pastor. That’s possible. Anyway, I’m not worried. I try to let God do the worrying for me.”

“Ah. Yes. But I cannot speak. I never got married. I am not a good... *role model*. And I am Catholic. My family was Catholic. So I do not understand how this works...”

You know that Jennifer is about to start evangelizing, so you take that as your cue to leave. You’re also thinking you should give Echeverri some space, in case he decides to tell Jennifer that he’s her biological father. You’ve got a buzz going from

the wine, but you're not ready to be a part of *that* conversation.

You head upstairs to find Mallory. She's out on the roof deck in the middle of a group of couches around gas-powered flame pits. She's talking with a group of men you don't recognize. She makes room for you and introduces people. They're leaders from different labor organizations.

“Thomas is safe,” she tells them. “He’s with the program.”

By “the program,” she means her labor coalition’s efforts to reintroduce democracy to America. They call their efforts “Solidarity,” which Mallory has explained is a nod to the 1980s labor movement in Poland that undermined Soviet domination. Rather than saying you’re *with* the program, it would be more accurate to say you’re neutral about the program.

But being neutral means that you're at least open to the program. Since the Big Setback, a hardline anti-democracy faction has been gaining ground in Congress and CentComm and the national bureaucracy. They tend to regard neutrality on the democracy question as opposition.

A young black guy in bright neon rave clothes is sitting across from you, taking hits from a vape pen. He has short hair that's frosted white and

wears spectacles that are probably smart glasses. He's an organizer from some tech worker union. His name is Cecil. (His is the only name you remember from the flurry of introductions.)

"Thomas might a good case study," Cecil says. "You're the administrator for this area – this unit."

"Correct."

“And you’re aligned with the Open side?”

“I guess you could say that. I think Penn has done a great job.”

“In spite of the Setback?”

“Sure. Shit happens, right? Financial markets are locked down for three decades. That gets opened up, and people start doing stuff that isn’t in lockstep with ASIF. They start

speculating, and it gets messy. It's good, because people are moving a lot of capital to where it needs to go. Experimentation. The growth has been pretty amazing, right? But some of the capital is going into a bunch of bubbles. And you have people running AI programmed trades. That could make people smarter traders, but the people are still in charge. So that makes the bubbles worse. Maybe." (You're relying heavily on

Mallory's explanations, but they make sense to you.)

"But you're with the program?"

"I don't want to sound like a spineless bureaucratic yes-man. But I figure if Penn is good with the program, I'm good with it. Is she on board?"

The labor leaders look around at each other.

“We’re not totally sure,” Cecil says. (That’s also what Mallory has told you. Even for Mallory, Penn is “hard to read.”) Cecil continues.

“Back to the case study. You’re an admin. You’ve been given a ton of decision-making authority in this unit. From everything I can find, you’ve been doing a fantastic job. Does this place have a City Council?

“Barely. We bring them in to cut ribbons on new buildings. And the County supes. Who don’t really supervise much of anything. But to be honest, I don’t supervise much, either.”

“Okay. So I’m going to steel-man this, Thomas. Imagine we go back to full democracy. The City Council and the County Supervisors are in the driver’s seat. Along with the state Legislature. And Congress. A real

Congress. They start making a bunch of rules. Some of them are going to be really dumb rules, from your point of view. As a really good admin, an admin who is running things competently. Not just competently. Really well."

You find yourself channeling your dad, who finally succumbed to congestive heart failure four years ago. After you mom died from a

sudden brain hemorrhage five years ago, he pretty much gave up on living.

“Democracy is a feedback loop. The problem with an authoritarian regime, a monopoly regime, is that the feedback loop is really slow. It doesn’t change course quickly in response to new information. It took Penn three decades to get her Open people running the show. And from what I understand, not all of the local experiments ran as well. This place is

a backwater. Nobody cared what I was doing. Union people, for example. Maybe Penn was running interference for me. Maybe you were, Mallory?”

She raises her eyebrows, but you don’t let her respond.

“She and I really don’t talk about work. But in any case, no union people ever bothered me. Not that it would be a ‘bother,’ but... you know

what I mean. Not even the public safety people. But I was handing out bonuses like Santa Claus. So maybe they told their locals and nationals to back off. Maybe they tossed them some hard money and told them to go away."

You look around. Nobody seems offended.

"I'm thinking that local feedback loops would be better. Local

democracy. I barely remember the old Congress. But I remember that it sucked."

"I can't speak for everyone," Cecil says. "But you're on our wavelength. Of course, we want a bigger role for labor. Independent labor. But we're not too keen on Congress. We're thinking it should be state by state."

“Federalism. You guys are like the Founding Fathers. Sorry, Mallory. Were there any Founding Mothers?”

“Abigail Adams. And Mercy Otis Warren. But they worked behind the scenes. They didn’t get to sign stuff. Warren used a pen name.”

“But you’ll need to rebrand,” you tell Cecil. “We can’t go back to the Constitution.”

“Why not?”

“Because the Founders were a bunch of pedos. Or at least, they wrote the Constitution to protect pedos.”

There’s an awkward silence before people start laughing.

“Well,” Cecil says, “they *were* slaveholders. Or a lot of them were. We probably do need to do some

rebranding before we roll out a federalist platform.”

AS THE FIRST blues of the dawn twilight fill the sky, you and Mallory are alone on the roof deck. The mild stimulants you both took early in the evening are starting to wear off, and you’re cuddling on the couch under a comforter.

“So, you’re seriously thinking about this Founding Mother business?”

“You think it’s a bad idea?”

“No. But you know me. I tend to keep my head down.”

“Not always. Not at the cabin.”

“Even there. I was shooting through an opening in the wall. I had cover. And I was shooting at people who

didn’t know I was there. Mark was the real hero that day. I wish you guys could’ve seen it.”

“I’m kinda glad we didn’t.”

“He had ice water in his veins. It was like those old James Bond movies. I think adrenalin works differently on different people.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately about my purpose.”

“I’ve heard that big birthdays do that to people.”

“Maybe that’s part of it.”

“Even with the vitality meds and other stuff getting better, we’re not going to live forever.”

“Speak for yourself, Mr. Skeptic.” She touches her cross necklace where it sits between her collar bones. It’s a

white-gold version of the big cross that hangs in the sanctuary at the church.

"You know what I mean. *This* life. There still seems to be an upper limit with the extensions. They still haven't cracked the telomeres. You hear about people getting to 125, but they're not doing great at that point. So maybe you're having a midlife crisis."

“You think I shouldn’t get involved?”

“Ten years ago, I would’ve said definitely not.”

“But now?”

“I think it’s the grandkids. Ever since Junior and Maddie started having kids, I’ve had this sense that life might get better.”

“I just keep getting this feeling that I’m supposed to have a purpose. And maybe I’m not fulfilling that purpose.”

“Mark says that from the pulpit. Pretty much every time I darken the doors of the church. But he also says that we’re supposed to look around and see how that purpose is already ‘working itself out in our lives.’ Isn’t that what he says?”

“Yes. But it’s not supposed to be pure fatalism. There are times when we have to make decisions. Times when we have to act.”

“The great mystery. Or, one of the great mysteries.”

“You’ve done something really great here, Thomas.”

“As we sit on top of a condo building that’s in foreclosure.”

“Seriously. Penn and her team had their plan, but I know that your experiment gave them confidence to open up everywhere. I’ve told you that. And you heard that we just caught up to the Euros?”

“Catch-up growth is easier. You’ve told me that.”

“Yeah. But it’s real. Look at how people live now, compared to two decades ago.”

“Good thing I had all those great ideas about how to run an economy. Maybe your ‘purpose’ was to give a bunch of great ideas to a lowly accountant who didn’t know jack about economics or policy. Maybe your purpose now is to kick back and enjoy life.”

“Maybe. But I don’t think so. I think there’s more.”

“That could be the meds talking.”

“Okay, Mr. Skeptic.”

“Really. They’re supposed to make people more optimistic. Along with the cognitive function. *The Economist* summarized some studies recently. They were saying higher levels of optimism account for

something like a third of Europe's higher rates of growth. And maybe half of the fact that their birth rates are now higher than replacement."

"The meds don't seem to work on you."

"They probably do. I'm just starting from a lower level of natural optimism."

“Speaking of optimism... here comes the sunshine.”

Jennifer comes out to the deck and snuggles in next to Mallory.

“I had a really great time talking to that guy Julio,” she says.

You and Mallory exchange quick looks of relief.

“He left about an hour ago. I’ve never met anyone who was so interested in my life. I mean, other than you guys. And you guys know all my stories already. But every time I would be telling him a story I would think, ‘Oh, this story is too boring – I’m just droning on.’ But he was actually interested. Like, fascinated. He would ask me about all my friends, and why they were my friends, and how they made me feel. It was like talking to one of those AI

friend-bots, but it was real. It went on so long we had to sit down. And he told me all these stories about growing up in Colombia. About his parents and grandparents. In some little place called Macondo. He said Macondo's dirty and boring. He really wants me to go to Cartagena. He said he would pay for everything. Not creepy-like. You don't think he's creepy?"

"Not at all," Mallory says.

“If it was anyone else,” you say, “it would be totally creepy. But not him.”

“And you should’ve seen how he was when I witnessed to him. He was totally emotional. People do that, but usually they’re going through some terrible time in their life. He seems to be doing totally fine. He says he loves banking, and he says he has a great girlfriend in Acapulco. At one

point, I told him how I converted and how I got this sense that Jesus would always protect me no matter what. He said, 'Jesus will always protect you?' And I told him yes, Jesus would protect always protect me. Not just me, but him. Jesus would protect all of us. Like He does, right?"

Jennifer nods. You try to look affirmative. You remember Julio's words in Acapulco, about how men must protect the women they love.

“But he was more concerned with *me*. He asked, ‘Jesus will always protect you? Always?’ So I started explaining salvation and Heaven and everything. Laying it all out. How we get saved. Grace, faith. Everything. And I told him about that time in the mountains. With the drug people. And he just started crying. And that started me crying. I never tell people about that. He wanted to know everything. Of course, I didn’t

see anything. I was inside a tent, right. With everything going boom boom boom around us. So I told him what Mark told me about how it happened. How you were so good with that little gun and then how God made Mark so good with the bigger gun. And Julio just kept crying. So I took his hands and prayed for him. For his salvation. And then he was praying. He said he had done so many bad things. I said God knew that. God knew everything and would

forgive him. He promised God that he would go to mass every day from now on and give money to the church and to the poor. I was thinking he was getting carried away. Over-promising. I was thinking maybe I should hedge for him. I was thinking maybe I should put a Reformed spin on it, but you don't mess with the Spirit. And that was all Spirit. It was just pouring out."

Now Jennifer and Mallory are crying, and they start praying. You close your eyes and try to pray. You wish good things for Julio. But you're getting really tired. At some point, you feel the rising sun on your face and then you're dreaming that you're on a beach.

THE NEXT YEAR is 2076. It begins with upheaval. America's tricentennial has triggered a huge surge of pro-democracy sentiment.

Much of the movement is organic. Small flash rallies appear on streets in every corner of the country, with people holding small handwritten signs that say "1776." The rallies are peaceful and they usually disperse before the cops arrive. As a precaution, most of the protesters

wear wide-brimmed hats that partially cover their faces from drone surveillance. As an excuse to wear n95 masks against facial recognition, many rally messages tell people that it has been “a bad flu season” and to “use national health protocols.” People get anonymous texts or chat blurbs with a nearby address on them and forward them to trusted friends. The addresses often have “Apt. 1776” or “Suite 1776” in the street address. Locations with 1776 in their street

addresses are often used as rally points. In Tucson, for example, groups of people will appear on various east-west streets a block west of Campbell Avenue, or on north-south streets a block north of Pima. For a while, a grassy space north of the university medical center is popular with students. It's called "NE" in rally messages, because it's close to 1776 East and 1776 North.

CentComm and the American Party initially try to co-opt the movement, issuing bumper stickers and lapel buttons with a small AP logo above a big 1776. (By March, you have whole pallets of them sitting undistributed at various offices of the Cochise Unit.) But the stickers and buttons are easily defiled, with the AP logo crossed out and replaced with slogans such as “Democracy NOW!” At major online portals and platforms that are still under the Social Credit

umbrella, CentComm is able to keep the AP's 1776 branding from being altered. But spoof memes appear in tens of millions of chat blurbs on the (mostly unregulated) portals and platforms of the thousands of new businesses and non-profits that have sprung up in the past two decades. Even when a particular business has gone bankrupt, people will communicate via the chats on the business's otherwise dormant portal.



In April, *The Economist* and other foreign news outlets – whose reporters now have greater access to

everyday Americans – begin doing stories about the “76ers” and the “American Spring” and speculating about the return of democracy.

In the three months before July 4 – which will fall on a Saturday – pro-democracy interest groups get bolder and begin organizing major rallies, including a rally on the National Mall in DC. The slogan Mallory and her colleagues have settled on is, “Free Labor and Federalism.” One morning

in April, you notice the slogan on a sticker on her work laptop. You've just gotten home, after being in Cochise for a week. Mallory is making a cappuccino for Jennifer, who has stopped by to visit before work.

"I hope that's a magnetic sticker. Or an easy-peel."

"Nope. It's stuck-on. You want a macchiato?"

“Yes, please. You’re not going to bring that to work?”

“I am. I’m going to bring it to the Labor Department confab in DC next week. It will be sitting in front of me at all the meetings.”

You study her eyes as she packs the espresso into the portafilter. You’re talking to the Hard Mallory. You don’t argue with the Hard Mallory –

especially in front of Jennifer.

“Those should be some interesting meetings.”

“Yup. The hardliners – including Old Labor – have been knocked way off balance. But they’re finding their feet. We’re going to try to keep them on the ropes.”

Hard Mallory likes boxing metaphors.

“So, you and your friends are ‘New Labor?’”

“Right. Or Free Labor.”

“Where’s Penn in all this?”

“Maneuvering behind the scenes. As always. Trying to hold everybody together. But the hardliners are coalescing around Gipping.”

Senator Sean Gipping is CentComm's Deputy President. Officially, he's a Senator from North Carolina. But he's a lifer from the National Security bureaucracy. He has a reputation as a by-the-book guy. Gipping's memos are always heavy on the word "compliance."

"And lemme guess. New Labor is going to the Mall on July 4."

"That's the plan."

“Is there any move to try to block the rallies?”

“Not so far. Everything from Gipping these days is about the mosquito problem.”

“Yeah. The mosquito problem. Do you actually know anyone who has gotten malaria or West Nile?”

“A friend of mine from Seminary thought she had West Nile,” says Jennifer. “She went to the hospital. But it was just a flu. She’s in Mississippi.”

“They make a big deal about it in DC,” Mallory says. “They’re talking about a spraying campaign. They supposedly have a new version of DDT that doesn’t hurt bird eggs.”

“Lemme guess,” you say. “They’re not talking about the bad flu season anymore? Since all the protesters started wearing masks.”

Mallory laughs.

“No. We’re all done with the flu. But the 76er movement has gotten so big, most people have given up on masks. No one’s talking about masks for the July 4 demonstrations.”

“Well. Lemme know if you want any intel. I still get most of the law-enforcement stuff.”

“Thanks. That could come in handy. But you’ll probably be flagged for a blackout – given our relationship. DC stuff, at least.”

You nod. She’s probably right. If the regime is functioning in July, they’ll shut you off. And if the regime

collapses, they may not be capable of sending out communications.

“I wish I could go to DC with you,” Jennifer says. “I’m very proud of you, Mom.”

“You’ll be up at the Lemmon?” You’re referring to the church’s annual youth retreat, which tends to fall around July 4th.

“I’m going to Colombia with Julio. Six weeks. From the last week of May to the first week of July.”

“Holy crap. I’m gone for one week and you guys make all these big plans. Where are you going?”

“Mostly Cartagena, and some beach resort on an island near there. But I told him I want to go to Macondo first. He said there’s nothing there but his parents’ graves. And I said

that's exactly what I want to see. And the parish church he went to as a kid."

You send Mallory a face with raised eyebrows. She returns the look briefly, then hands you your macchiato and changes the subject.

"What are *your* plans for July 4?"

"I haven't really thought about it. But the way things seem to be going, it looks like I'll be at the County

courthouse, handing over the keys to the Supes or something. Making a speech about the legacy of virile miners."

"Do they have some ceremonial keys?"

"Probably. They're probably big clunkers, made of copper."

Jennifer interjects: “You could do a 3D print of a huge key, and color it in red, white and blue.”

“That’s a good idea, Jen. I’ll pitch that to the Supes when I meet with them next week. They’ve been going through the ancient documents. Minutes from Supe meetings, County manager reports. They’ve been asking me a bunch of questions about how I run things. I usually tell them I don’t actually *run* things. I let them

run themselves. And when I have to make a difficult decision, I ask my wife."

Mallory laughs at that.

"Except for the money. I haven't told them anything about where the new DDs come from. As far as they know, the DDs all come from Washington. I'm not sure I'll tell them."

“Never let politicians control the money supply. The last 50 years should’ve been a conclusive lesson. You need an independent central bank.”

“I’ve been *very* independent. In 20 years, I think I’ve only gotten five inquiries from Treasury. Maybe six. And they went away every time I pulled the Level Ten card. Except the last time. About three years ago. I told you about that girl. Sarah. She’s

the only one who asked questions. I sent her a table with all my conversion ratios, all the vigs to the Unit, everything. She never got back to me."

Mallory finishes steaming the milk for her cappuccino.

"She probably liked it. You've been a very competent central banker."

“Or maybe the numbers were too small to matter.”

“Right. That’s more likely.”

“Maybe I’ll just shut down the FedWire account for the forfeiture fund. If we get a bunch of financial freedom with the democracy, maybe the Fed or the Treasury will allow hard-money deposits at all the banks. The whole country.”

“You should send them a memo. In case they haven’t thought of that.”

You laugh.

“You know me, Mal. I’m not an Official Memo kinda guy. And I don’t want anyone getting too curious about things in Cochise. You know, I never looked too closely at where the hard money was coming from. I’m not sure I want to know...”

Mallory chuckles and lifts her cappuccino to her lips.

SUNDAY, JUNE 4 is the strangest day in your life. And you've had some strange ones. Like the day, 50 years ago, that you woke up on the "alien spacecraft." Or the day the Guardians drugged everybody and people in the coffee shops were singing "Kumbaya" and joining the American Party.

It’s a warm morning in Bisbee, and you’re waiting in your office at the County courthouse for the newly appointed County Manager to come back with some pod coffees from the machine in the break room. Her name is Jacinda Dunbarton. She’s a Level Four, and currently works as the comptroller for the Cochise Unit Community College system. You haven’t spent much time with her since you privatized the colleges.

She’s a hot little thing – a petite blonde with bob cut – but young enough to be your granddaughter.

You almost never use this office, so you’re not going to miss it when Jacinda takes it over. But it has some decrepit character, with yellowed art deco plaster moulding around the edges of the room. It also has a nice view over the plaza and the street and the statue of the Virile Miner.

You get a message from Jennifer. It's to you and Mallory.

We're in Cartagena. Macondo was great!!! Julio built this huge mausoleum for his parents and grandparents. It's AMAZING. He has tons of cousins. Every day we went to somebody's house for lunch or dinner. Now I realize how weird it was to grow up without cousins. You guys were only

kids. What were you thinking?? :-) Julio and I have been going to mass almost every morning. I've been taking him to some evangelical churches. Some days we do both. I like the masses. I'm not supposed to take communion. But Julio knows all the priests, and I guess he put in a good word for me. It's the start of the rainy season, so we sit in cafes a lot during the

downpours. My translator app works great. We're sailing to the island tomorrow. Love you guys! --J

You're about to write back when Jacinda comes roaring in with coffee and questions. She's annoyingly hyperactive. One of these people who asks dozens of questions in a half-hour meeting and is always ticking off boxes on her long mental to-do list. As soon as you answer one question,

she takes a brief pause to push her hair behind her ears and then launches into the next question. It occurs to you that maybe you're just too old to keep up with her, but it's not that. The vitality meds have great nootropics.

With every answer you give her, you try to emphasize two messages. First, she doesn't need to be in a hurry. Second, most of the things in the County/Unit don't need to be managed. Just because the County

used to do things is not a good reason to have them on her to-do list. She isn't very receptive to either message.

Now Jacinda is asking about the vig. (You use Mallory's word, *seniorage*.) You lie and tell her that the Treasury sets the conversion rate from hard money to DDs. She wants to know who she can talk to at Treasury to figure out how much the vig is going to be so that she can budget for it. You tell her that "they're supposed to

be phasing it out." Then she asks about the year-end hard-money bonuses that have been going to law enforcement. You look out the window, pretending that you're bored with the topic.


STOP

There's a big tanker truck from Mosquito Abatement moving slowly up the street, spraying huge clouds of white powder from jet nozzles. You wonder how safe the new version of DDT is. It can't be totally safe: the driver of the truck looks like he (or maybe she) is wearing a full white hazmat suit and breathing from an air tank. The clouds of white powder are huge. Some of the clouds float by the window. You can see tiny crystals catching the sunlight.

“Typical CentComm,” you say. “They don’t do anything for years, and then they overdo it. I heard they were renting thousands of ag sprayers. I hope they cleaned out the other pesticides before putting in the DDT.”

Jacinda gives a quick nod, and then tries to get you back on topic. She’s asking where you keep the receipts for the year-end bonuses.

“... because you have to have receipts, right? We can’t just hand hard money to people without receipts...”

...

You’re lying on the floor, looking at the floorboards. Close up, you think you can see the grain of the wood under a century of grime and lacquer. When was the last time anyone stripped and polished the wood...?

The dark grooves between the boards stretch out toward the far wall. You can see Jacinda's head. The head rolls a little bit from side to side. Her nose is pointed up at the ceiling. It's a sharp little nose, with small nostrils. You wonder what the face looks like in an orgasm. The face is totally relaxed now, but you could see how...

Big black boots. White pants tucked into the boots. Plasticky pants. Pants from a hazmat suit. Big white gloves

are touching you. That's a phone. Your phone. The glove moves your thumb to the screen and unlocks it. You feel a tug at your waist. Your Sig floats by your face in a big white glove. Your laptop is in front of you. The glove puts your thumb on the haptic pad. Then the laptop is gone. The boots stretch away, down the lines of the floorboards...

YOU WAKE UP. Your phone is buzzing somewhere. It's daylight. You're still on the floorboards. You feel almost normal, but you have a headache and you're stiff from lying on the floor. Jacinda is gone. Your phone and laptop are on the desk. Your holster is on you, but your gun is gone. The screen on your phone says it's 8:35 am on Monday, June 5. You've been on the floor for almost 24 hours.

You type in your code and look at your notifications. Your encrypted apps don't work, but your texts do. Mallory texted you a few minutes ago. That was the buzzing that woke you up. Her text says, "Something weird is going on. I feel like I was drugged or something. I just slept for like 30 hours. I think you should come home." You type back: "Coming. Leaving Bisbee soon."

You go down the break room, meeting some confused looks from staffers. Everyone looks disheveled, and some have bruises on their faces. Apparently, they have also spent the last 24 hours on their floors. You nod to the people you know but you don't stop to talk. You have one mission: to get coffee and water and a mild painkiller for this headache. Then, you're going to get on the road.

As you motor out of Tombstone Canyon in the 4Runner on the toll road above the town, things look mostly normal. The coffee and the pill you found in the break room seem to be kicking in. On the other side of the tunnel, there are a few cars pulled off to the side of the road. Some are in turnouts, but a couple appear to be crashed, with airbags deployed. One is smashed up against a scrub oak, but the driver is on his phone and seems okay. At the toll booth at the west

end of the valley, the attendant has her face down in her phone.

You call up voice activation on your phone and have it start reading work notifications. At the top of the stack is an All-Levels memo from CentComm. It's a voice memo. A cheery male voice in high tenor comes across the stereo in the 4Runner.

“Hello, Citizens! This is President Sean Gipping. Thanks for bearing with us through our recent emergency spraying campaign. Preliminary reports indicate that the mosquito eradication program has been a huge success. But just in case, we are still asking any Citizens who have flu-like symptoms in the next three months to report to their local Health Department offices. Most cases of West Nile and malaria are not fatal to people younger than 80, but approved

treatments can help you recover more quickly and avoid long-term side effects. In other news, the Central Committee has taken the opportunity to do a minor reorganization of our government. Most Citizens and most government employees below Level Six won't notice any changes, but we have changed a lot of the High-Level roles to make the government more efficient and responsive to Citizen needs. When you log back in, you'll see your reassignments at the top of

your Social Credit umbrella app. And speaking of apps, we have also disabled several apps that were exposed to foreign cyber-attacks. If the new apps don't load automatically, they are available in the Our Store page at Social Credit. And be sure to tune in on the Our News app for economic updates. We have big plans for recovering from the Big Setback, in full coordination with Labor, Capital and the State. Onwards and upwards!"

You ask voice activation to read your assignment.

“Level Four, I. Transition Consultant to Cochise Unit Administrator. Social Credit Score 500.” The “I” stands for “ineligible for promotion.” It also means you can be arrested for an indefinite period, without access to a lawyer. The 500 is a huge drop. It used to bounce around in the high 900s. It’s a warning. You’re in the

middle. You could go up, but you could also go way down, if you're not a good boy.

You ask who the new Cochise Administrator is.

"Jacinda Dunbarton. Level Seven."

Almost on cue, you get a call from Jacinda. You let it go to voice mail and listen when she's done.

“Hey, Thomas! It’s Jacinda. Or, Administrator Dunbarton, I should say. I’ll have to get used to that. But I’m glad you’re my consultant. You have a wealth of knowledge. The Supes are pretty clueless. I shouldn’t say that, but they really are. And I gather that they’re not in the driver’s seat anymore. I’m in the driver’s seat. VROOM! We’ll be off and running now. Buckle in! So call me back, okay? We’ve got work to do.”

You dictate a text and send it: “Hi, Jacinda. Thanks for the call. It’ll be great to keep working with you. We’ll get you up to speed pretty quickly. But I need a day or so to take care of family stuff. I’ll call you when I get back to Bisbee.”

As you pass under Tombstone in the recently completed bypass tunnel, you think about Rowdy and the Western Cartel. They’re barely in the drug business anymore, but you wonder

how the new regime will deal with former drug traffickers. You keep your speed down as you approach the old speed traps in the cottonwood groves at Saint David. You got rid of the speed traps when you turned it into a toll road, but you wonder if the police will revert to their old habits under the new regime. They probably didn't put in speed traps in the past 24 hours. But you're a 4-I now, and any traffic stop could be trouble.

You also wonder if you might get arrested getting onto the I-10 toll road. The toll roads inside the Unit don't send real-time data to the police, but the interstate is National territory. And National cops didn't get any year-end hard-money bonuses from you. You try to think your way through the paranoia. If they wanted to get you, they would've taken you when you were knocked out.

Winding through the little canyons between the Whetstones and the Rincons, you wonder what happened to Penn and the High-Level Open Technocrats. They were almost certainly arrested. You imagine them shivering in cold detention cells and being questioned in interrogation rooms. You wonder how far down the food chain they've gone in arresting the ringleaders. Mallory was openly pro-democracy, and a key

union leader, but she apparently didn't get arrested.

One of your thoughts is that Gipping's *coup d'etat* feels clumsy. Especially compared with what the Guardians did 50 years ago. Did they really just knock everybody out, arrest a few ringleaders, and reset the apps on peoples' devices? Is that enough to stop a democratic movement? After all, now that you're back to thinking, you're still thinking the

same thoughts. You're not suddenly feeling all warm and fuzzy about CentComm. Everybody knows they were drugged. Or they're going to figure it out quickly. And there must've been a bunch of people who didn't get drugged. People out in rural areas wondering why everyone in town was knocked out. A lot of airports and trains must've been shut down, with a bunch of transport workers not showing up. Gipping probably focused on government

offices and neighborhoods where key 76ers and pro-democracy High-Levels lived. Still, it was a hell of an operation. Crazy logistics. You wonder how many thousands of sprayer trucks the government must've rented in the past few months and how long the Pentagon had stockpiled supplies of knock-out drugs. Gipping must've came up with this idea years ago.



Junior calls as you’re turning off the toll road onto Houghton.

“Hey, Tomasito. Are you guys okay?”

“Yeah. We’re fine. But what the fuck just happened?”

“It’s a *coup d’etat*.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a French word. A takeover of the government. Gipping and the

Pentagon and the hardliners. They're in charge now."

"Is that... something we can... talk about?"

"They probably disabled all the crypts and jammers. But they have a good profile on me. And on you. You're not a 76er. You're just a business guy. We're go-along, get-along kinda guys. We'll cooperate with the new regime. We're not troublemakers."

You know that DTech is listening. Maybe not in real time, but they'll have the recording. In any case, you're telling the truth.

"Is Mom okay? She didn't answer my call."

"I think so. She texted me. I'm heading to the house now to check on her. I'm thinking she'll be fine. She was not super into the democracy

thing. But it looked like Labor was going with the 76ers, so she went along."

(Here, you're lying.)

"You think they're going to arrest her?"

"I think they would've arrested her already. But if they arrest her – or us –

we'll go quietly. We just want to get back to normal. Among other things, they took my gun while I was out."

"What should I do?"

"Nothing. Just go back to work. Get the kids to school. If school's open. If not, take them for ice cream or something. Give 'em a hug from me."

WHEN YOU GET to the house, you try to adopt a jolly tone. You don't see any signs of police, but you want to project a friendly and peaceful vibe. You walk into the kitchen from the patio. Mallory's not in the kitchen. Her laptop and phone are on the counter. Probably with new apps installed.

"Hey, Mal! How 'bout that *coup*? That was one helluvan operation!"

You hear Mark's voice coming from the den.

"We're in here, Thomas."

The den is *not* a jolly scene. Mallory and Mark are on the big couch. Mallory has her head down in her hands. There are tissues on the floor at her feet. Mark's eyes are red. He hands you his phone.

The page is some blog from a Presbyterian missionary network. Some guy named Nick is writing from an urban mission in Cartagena. It's in English, but you feel like you're translating and picking up fragments: "... our new friends ... Jennifer... youth pastor from Tucson... Julio Echeverri ... generous contributor to our mission work ... crazy storm in the bay ... boat was lost ... wrecked ... drowned ... urgent prayers for their families ..."

You sit down on the couch next to Mallory and put a hand on her back. Your eyes fix on the photos on the hutch around the television. Jennifer at four, on the beach at Acapulco. Jennifer at 13, junior high valedictorian. Jennifer at 14, getting confirmed. Jennifer at 17, wearing a helmet on the ropes course at a Mount Lemmon youth retreat. Jennifer at 21 at Centennial Hall, graduating from the U of A. Jennifer at 29, being

ordained as a minister. Jennifer at 40, this past fall, at a birthday dinner at Roka. Julio came to that dinner. In the photo, Jennifer is standing between him and Mallory. You stand on Mallory's other side, with Junior and Maddie.

The photos are postcards from a lost world.

Mallory isn't going anywhere, but you need to go somewhere. You need

to do something. You need to get back on schedule. You need to get your head clear. You go to the master bathroom and find your pill organizer on the counter. You take the Tuesday meds. Then you dig through Mallory's drawer and find her mood drugs. They're for menopausal depression, but they're not hormones. You take one. Then you head to the kitchen. You can make a decent macchiato. Or a cappuccino. But this seems like a bad time for Mallory to

hear the noise from the machine. Instead, you pour a glass of cold brew from the jug in the fridge. You pour waters for Mallory and Mark and take them to the den. They seem to appreciate the water.

Your phone buzzes. It's a text from Jacinda: "Where are the stickers for the 300th? July 4 is coming up quick. There's supposed to be a pallet somewhere at the Courthouse. But no one knows where it is."

Mallory and Mark watch you as you fumble, trying to figure out how to turn off notifications. Your phone won't let you turn off notifications from higher Levels.

"It's the new Unit Admin. She's busy fucking everything up."

Mallory and Mark give you stunned looks.

“Sorry. I’m really confused right now. I’m not... handling this well.”

“Maybe we should pray,” Mark says.

You appreciate the offer. You know Mark will be tactful. He spends a lot of time in hospitals and hospices. He doesn’t tell shocked and grieving families that death is “God’s will.” And he is grieving, too. And he’s right. You need to stop. You don’t need to go somewhere. Or do

something. But you don't want to think about God at all.

"That's a good idea," you say. "But I'm going to go to Jennifer's room for a while."

You get up and go to the kitchen. You text Jacinda: "Look in the empty office on the north end of the second floor." You text again: "Really busy with family. This is the worst day of my life. I'll get back to you in a

couple of days." Then you shove the phone in the back of a drawer in the kitchen island and head to Jennifer's room.

Jennifer has been living – she *was* living – in an apartment for a couple of years, so her room is more like a museum of her childhood and her years as a young adult. You sit down on her bed and look around at the stuffed animals, which are arrayed at the edges of the carpet. She had quite

a zoo of megafauna. But the collection on her bed is mostly otters. They sit in varying degrees of realism, from cartoonish otters with anime eyes to ones that could almost be taxidermy. She always loved otters, but the bond was solidified in a junior high leadership class, when she took a personality test that classified her primarily as an otter-type and secondarily as a golden retriever. (When she had you take the test, you

were a mixture of the other two animal-types: beaver and lion.)

Jennifer's shelves around the edges of the room are painted in pastel colors. There are a few books – Bibles and devotionals and Narnia and young-adult fantasy novels – but the shelves are mostly full of photos in whimsical frames. Photos of Jennifer with friends. School friends. Seminary friends. Church friends. The kids in the youth group. She was the big

sister or substitute mom for dozens of kids. She also has a few photos of Humphrey, who died a decade ago. In your house in Bisbee, you have some family photos. But you have no photos of friends. Jennifer has – Jennifer had – a dozen good friends. Maybe more.

You have none. No one close. You still see Colin at Roka, but you haven't Robert lately. You text back and forth with Tyler a couple times a

year. Mark's probably the closest. You don't go to church much, but you still go hiking with him every few months. And maybe once a year, you and Junior drink scotch with him. But you share him with Mallory – and they have the Jesus thing.

Looking around the room, you try to keep focused on Jennifer and memories of the times you spent with her. You're not a spiritual person, but you have the thought that Jennifer is

in the room. She's here, but she's leaving soon. You can't leave and come back, because she'll be gone and this will just be a room. You were never much of a crier. Maybe when you were a little kid. You cried with joy when you saw Jennifer on the ultrasound. But you can't remember the last time you cried from sadness. When sadness has hit you – like when your parents died – you have felt it as exhaustion. Despite the meds, despite the cold brew, despite

having slept for 24 hours, you feel exhaustion deep in your bones. You grab Jennifer's biggest otter, which is almost life-sized. His name is Ollie. He used to have luxurious fur, but it became matted after years of absorbing the oils from Jennifer's skin. He's also threadbare in places. You pull him to your chest, lean over, and curl up on the bed.

IT'S STILL DAYLIGHT outside. Jennifer's clock says it's 8 pm. You remember that it's June, so the twilight goes on for a long time. Someone put a blanket over you while you slept. You wrap Ollie in the blanket and go to the kitchen.

There are church people in the house, and Junior and Maddie are here with their kids. Everyone moves back and forth quietly from the kitchen to the den. There's a lot of food. Mark's

wife has brought two big casseroles full of her trademark egg-and-cheese bake. She rotates the casseroles in and out of the oven to keep them crispy. You take a piece and someone eating a brownie comments that she shouldn't be eating sugar. "You really need protein at a time like this." Someone else approves of your choice of a corner piece of the bake. People give you hugs and say appropriate things. Kids from the youth group are crying and praying in other rooms.

You catch pieces of hushed conversation from the older church people. Everyone is sad, of course, but the consensus among the church people is that Jennifer is “at home with Jesus” and “the way she went is a sure sign” because “they had just visited the mission” and she was with “her friend Julio – did you meet him that time? – he was on fire with the Gospel” and Jennifer “lived for Christ and died in Christ.”

You peek in at Mallory in the den. Mark is gone, but two of the widows are sitting with her and holding her hands. She looks up and sees you. You point to the egg-and-cheese bake with your fork. She gives you a no-but-thanks look and you see an empty plate on the coffee table in front of her.

“I’m going to put your phone and laptop in the drawer.”

Mallory murmurs a thank-you.

You go back to the kitchen and retrieve your phone from the drawer. Jacinda has texted: “Hang in there. We need you!” Someone from Cochise National Bank and Trust has called and left a message. His name is Chase. He offers condolences and asks you to call back “when you’re ready – I know this is a terrible time” to discuss “the disposition of the Echeverri estate.” You put your

phone back in the drawer and grab Mallory's phone and laptop off the counter.

You turn over Mallory's phone as you're slipping it into the drawer. The cover screen has her name and a picture of the kids. In small print at the bottom, it says, "4-I" and "SCS 500." Thanks to Gipping's *coup*, you and Mallory are now equal in the eyes of CentComm. You look again at the cover screen on your phone. You

hadn't noticed it before, but now you see the same numbers. DTech must've downloaded the new configuration while you were sleeping. Apparently, they want to give everyone a constant reminder of exactly where everybody stands. You shut the drawer.

You see Mark and Junior heading down the hall toward Jennifer's room. You find the bottle of Lagavulin you keep in a cabinet above the

refrigerator. You get a tray and set out some glasses, a pitcher of water, and a cup of ice cubes. Then you take the tray to Jennifer's room. A small group of teens is in the room with Junior and Mark. When the kids see you setting down the tray, they take that as their cue to leave. You point to Junior.

"*¿Bebida, Tomasito?*"

“Yes, please,” he says. “But just a finger. Maddie’s outside with the kids. If I leave her alone with them too long, she gets pissed.”

You pour him a fat finger and gesture to Mark.

“How much for you?”

“Whatever you’re doing.”

“My dad’s drill. Start with two fingers and equal water.”

After you pour, you hand them their drinks.

“To Jennifer,” you say. You remember one of the phrases Mark says at memorial services. “To a good and faithful servant.”

“Aye,” Mark says, “and amen.”

“Amen,” Junior says.

You stand facing each other and sip in silence until Junior is done. He sets his glass on the tray and gives you a hug. When he leaves, you and Mark pull Jennifer’s “homework” chairs out from under her desk and sit. You drink in silence, looking at the photos.

You pour another round. With the vitality meds, it takes more to feel the

scotch. When you feel the first real flush of warmth, you speak.

“Julio was her dad. Her biological father. You probably knew that.”

“No. I didn’t know that. Did she know?”

“I don’t know.”

“He seemed like a good guy.”

“Yeah... He had a complicated life. But he was a good guy. I’m glad they were together at the end.”

Mark lowers his forehead to his glass where it rests between his hands.

“I see a lot of people die, Thomas. But this one’s hard. It’s a cliche to say that the good ones die young. But Jennifer really was one of the good ones. We talk about the saints. But

there are saints and then there are *saints*."

You want to say, "I reckon so." But you say nothing.

"This life is so beautiful," Mark says. "And so cruel."

He cries for a long time, his head bent down over his glass. You look at the photos, seeing looking for sparks of life in Jennifer's face. From the bed,

the otters stare at you with their blind eyes.

AFTER THE MEMORIAL service, you get busy.

You avoid meeting with Jacinda as much as you can, but she pesters you every day with calls and texts. She is compulsive, and never gets her head around the basic idea that most things can run themselves. Part of the

problem is the new batch of technocrats in Gipping's CentComm. The Three-Legged Stool is back. They're trying to manage everything in the economy. Jacinda wants to be in on the game. She wants to prove to Washington that she's a valuable player.

In your meetings and calls, you often tell Jacinda, "Nobody in Washington cares about the Cochise Unit. We're in the middle of nowhere. There's

barely an economy here." You say that as much to DTech as to her. You want Washington to ignore Cochise.

On one topic, Jacinda is curiously silent: she hasn't mentioned the vig since the day you got gassed. Maybe she has forgotten about the forfeiture fund and the year-end bonuses. You're certainly not going to remind her.

Most of your time is taken up with Julio's trust fund. He named you as trustee. It was mainly for the benefit of Jennifer – with some stipulations about donations to churches in America, Mexico and Colombia. But Jennifer is gone, so you and Chase are supposed to manage it for Junior and Maddie and their kids. You can take "reasonable" trustee fees.

In the Christian zeal of his last months, Julio gave away about $40

million, but there's still a ton left. It's hard to say exactly how much, because the financial markets have been wildly volatile. Everyone is scrambling to "buy American" before CentComm imposes new capital controls, but a lot of people are trying to get in some last short-term foreign plays. Chase is a conservative manager, but he's a young guy, and his fees are based on the value of the corpus. He has bought some August and September calls on the Euro stock

indexes. If they work out – and if the American markets stabilize at recent averages – he figures you might have upwards of $400 million. More likely, there will be a big crash, and you'll end up closer to $250 million. And CentComm will almost certainly engineer a devaluation in the next few years.

You try to do the math. Like most older people, you've never quite gotten your brain around decades of

inflation. In 2025 dollars – pre-CentComm dollars – you'll probably be working with $25 to $40 million. With high interest rates, you might pull in one or two million per year in Old Dollars. But it will probably be less, because it looks like CentComm is going to mandate that all investors keep half of their holdings in ASIF bonds, which pay less and sometimes give you a haircut when you get the principal back. At some point, CentComm will get into deep fiscal

trouble and they'll start raising taxes. And inflation will inevitably become a major factor again. Also, Julio mandated in the trust that 20 percent of the income per year must go to churches and other charities.

There's not much left of your dad's money, but you still have the house in Leesburg. You've been renting it out. Rents have been low, because the national government was downsizing under the Open Technocrats and

population in the DC area was falling slightly. Rents ought to go up under the new regime – CentComm is spending huge amounts of money to try to revive the economy – but they're also talking about re-imposing rent controls. It's probably time to cut your losses, so you'll need to fly back to DC for a couple weeks and see if you can sell the place.

You don't have any spiritual feeling that Jennifer is still around, but you

tell yourself that she would want you to stay busy, rather than mourn. If you were a spiritual person, you would think that she and God purposely left you in charge of managing the money for Junior's family. In any case, Jennifer wouldn't have wanted any part of it.

When you're in Tucson, you *see* Mallory, but she's different. She's visibly sad much of the time. She was forced into retirement after the *coup*,

and many of her old colleagues have disappeared. Some have been imprisoned. According to the rare glimpses you get of foreign news, Gipping rounded up a quarter million people. Others – like Mallory – are laying low and trying to stay off of DTech's radar screen.

Nowadays, she spends a lot of time with church people. It seems like there's a small-group Bible study or a group of visiting deacons at the house

every time you visit. You haven't been back to church since the memorial. You make pleasant chit-chat with the church people when you see them, but you have plenty of excuses to break off conversation, because you get a lot of calls and texts and emails from Jacinda and Chase every day.

When she's alone, Mallory spends a lot of time gardening and grooming her horses. On your most recent visit,

you find her out in the stable. She's brushing the mane on her painted pony. She brushes in long, slow strokes. She hardly notices you. You ask her if she has tried taking any mood drugs.

"I'm sad," she tells you, without looking up from her brushing. "I *should* be sad."

ONE RAINY THURSDAY night in October, you're at Roka, sitting at the upstairs bar. It's a slow night and Colin has left you alone with a bottle of Laphroaig. You're enjoying a pleasant fog of scotch and bossa nova when Jacinda comes up the stairs and bounces into the seat next to you.

"There you are! You've been ghosting me."

"Sorry. I've been really busy."

“I want to talk about the forfeiture fund.”

“What fund? This is a bad year. Revenues are collapsing.”

“That’s exactly the problem.”

“I gotta hit the restroom.”

You stumble to the bathroom and piss for a long time. You think about

going out the window. The window's big enough to get out, and there are some pipes and decent toe holds from the unevenness of the old bricks. If you had climbing shoes, and if you weren't drunk, and if it hadn't been raining, you could make it. You return to the bar.

Jacinda tries to make small chat, which is difficult for her. You drag out the topics, toying with her. Oddly, you're now feeling a different

kind of drunkenness. You've still got a swerve, but it's energetic. You start telling her stories about rock climbing, giving her the move-by-move about long pitches at Windy Point and Joshua Tree. At some point, she can't stand it anymore and gets back to the topic of the vig.

"I want to talk about the fund. And the seniorage."

"What are you talking about?"

She points to her purse.

“I got a jammer. It’s black market, so it works.”

“That’s not very by-the-book, Madam Administrator.”

“I don’t always do things by the book, you know.”

“It’s complicated. I have to remember a 64-digit number. I never wrote it down. Then the system sends me an encrypted text with a nine-digit number. And it only gives me a minute to enter.”

“Maybe I can help... jog your memory.”

She touches your crotch.

In an instant, you have a raging hard-on. You notice that she's wearing a tiny black cocktail dress. She's giving you a sly grin.

"You slipped me some kind of mickey."

"You know you want me."

You *do* want her. Badly. But you're angry.

“So that’s the new thing? Gipping gasses everybody and pulls off his *coup*, and everybody thinks it’s okay to just drug people.”

“Shit rolls downhill, you know.”

Your junk is so hard it’s almost painful.

“How long is this going to last?”

“Six hours, supposedly. I got us a room at the Copper Queen. 311. I’ll go now. You should stay and finish your drink. I’ll go in the lobby and up the stairs. You’ll go through the bar and get us some drinks and go up the back elevator.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“I get a silver fox. I’ll bet you’re really good. Decades of experience.

You can teach me things. I'll do anything you want."

You don't finish your drink. You don't need any more of whatever priapic she put in there. It's already going to be an awkward walk through the restaurant. Luckily, you don't know any of the diners – and Colin must be in the kitchen.

On the sidewalk outside the restaurant, you try to reason. You've

never cheated on Mallory. You're going to feel horrible if you do this. Jacinda is seducing you to get to the forfeiture fund. And she's setting you up for blackmail. If you walk uphill seven blocks, you can get your car and drive home to Mallory. You have no excuses. You're still sorta drunk, but there's no way you could fall asleep on the road with this energy and this hard-on. Mallory has been cold lately, but that makes sense. You're not blaming her. And maybe

she would understand the urgency of the situation and welcome you to bed. Maybe you could restart things.

But the hotel is downhill. It's easier to walk downhill. A 70-minute drive, versus a five-minute walk. You start downhill. You can still go to the empty condo unit you've been using as a base. You could just jack off for six hours until this drug wears off. You stop at the little park below the hotel, trying to think your way out of

this. Straight ahead, 300 yards, is the condo building. If you go there, you avoid guilt and shame, other than the pathetic spectacle of an old man jacking off for hours. You can blame the drug. But right here, up a short flight of stairs, is a hot little thing who wants to fuck. And she knows where your condo is. If she doesn't, she can track you. That's how she found you at Roka. She will find you. She won't take no for an answer. If you reject her, maybe she'll turn you in

for using the forfeiture fund. You walk up the stairs.

Jacinda has arranged everything. Like most hotel rooms these days, Room 311 is certified surveillance-proof. DTech hasn't gotten around yet to making hotels give them backdoors. Plus, her jammer is working – you can tell, because your phone doesn't like it, and is giving you a bunch of error messages. Jacinda has set out a pack of condoms

on the bed. They're from the SvenskaTekniA company. They add some length and a lot of girth, without a big reduction in feeling. From what you read in *The Economist* a while back, the Swedish company's best-selling color is black – except in June, when they sell millions of rainbow ones. The ones Jacinda got are in a pink flesh color. She flashes you a glimpse of a lacy black corset under her dress, but she wants you to undress her.

The first round goes quickly. The second round is more leisurely. You haven't been with a petite woman in 40 years, so you do things that don't work well with Mallory, who is almost as tall as you. From the screaming and moaning and spasms, it seems that Jacinda is enjoying the ride. She keeps saying it's the skill of her "silver fox," but you're guessing that she has taken some kind of female libido enhancer. Her

commentaries are almost nonstop. She calls you "Foxy." If it weren't for the priapic, you would've gone limp a long time ago.

By the third round, about four hours into the session, you're in a lot of pain and you're getting really angry. You're tired of being Jacinda's sex toy. You start doing really degrading things to her – things you would never do to Mallory. But Jacinda loves it. You tell her she's a "dirty little slut"

and she goes wild. For most of an hour, she repeats the phrase, “I’m such a dirty little slut” and many other variations. You wish she would shut up, and you have fantasies about choking her to death.

Around four in the morning, you’re both done. Mercifully, the erection is gone, but everything is horribly sore. Jacinda is ready for that, too. She has brought a tube of lidocaine cream. While you’re tending to your wounds,

your mind starts to clear and you begin wrestling with the guilt about cheating. She puts on a bathrobe, makes coffee, and pulls out her laptop.

“Okay. Show me how to get into the forfeiture fund.”

“They’ve gone back to the old budget model. If you start padding everyone’s salaries, word will get out, and someone will figure out that

you've got your own pot of money and you're printing DDs."

"I don't want to pad everyone's salaries."

"So what's the point?"

"I want money."

"You can't have a crazy lifestyle. They'll catch you."

“I don’t want a crazy lifestyle. I just want to have enough so that I don’t have to worry. I just want a small emergency fund.”

For the first time, you don’t think of Jacinda as an annoying busybody – or as a crazed slut. She’s just a girl from Sierra Vista trying to make her way in the world. You’re starting to feel guilty about some of the things you did to her. And especially, the fantasies about killing her.

You use her VPN to get to the FedWire account. After a few tries, you enter the 64-digit number correctly. (It's a series of birthdays of friends and family.) That part's easy. To get the nine-digit verification number on your phone, you have to shut off her jammer for a minute. The encrypted text comes from a government server, so DTech hasn't blocked it. But it takes three tries before you can get in and do the wire.

You and Jacinda pick a number. You use her birthday, the room number, and the year. $1,105,311.76. You create the DDs and send them to a dormant Cochise Unit account used to refund customers for excess water charges. From there, she can drip the money to her own bank account, or to the accounts of friends and family.

“If anyone up the food chain asks about the text, you have to back me up. I was just following orders.”

She moves to kiss you, but you raise your head and kiss her on the forehead, like the grampa you are.

“You’re a good Foxy,” she says.

“We can’t do this again. I have a family.”

“I won’t blackmail you.”

Somehow, you trust her.

“But I’m totally serious. This was a one-time thing.”

“Oh, Foxy. We had such fun. It was the best I’ve ever had.”

“Please don’t ever drug me again. And we shouldn’t go back to the forfeiture fund. If you need money again, maybe I can find you some gold and blackies. Though you’re in

charge of the cops now. But please promise you won't drug me again."

"Okay, Foxy. I promise."

"You need to find a good man. Someone your age."

You finish your coffee and get dressed. Jacinda follows you to the door and put her hands on your chest. You give her another kiss on the forehead.

You go to your condo. You leave the lights off and grope around in the kitchen until you find a bottle of tequila. You uncap it and take a big swig. Then you crawl into bed and keep pain meds handy on the bedside table. You feel a little queasy, but not enough to throw up. For a long time, you play out scenarios in your head. Various confrontations in which Mallory, or Junior, or other people find out about Jacinda. When you

start to feel tired, you remember that the condo has a bunch of bare walls and the floor is a pale sandalwood. The morning light will be horrible. You pull down the double layers of shades on the windows and find a black t-shirt to put over your head.

YOU DON'T ADJUST well to old age. Over the next decade, you feel like everything is slowing down

around you. But you don't want to slow down.

The American-made vitality meds Americare pays for are okay, by the European standards of a decade ago. Mallory has stuck with those. But you want the good stuff. Now that CentComm has locked down trade, you have to get the Swiss and Estonian meds from Rowdy's crew, which has moved into smuggling high-end pharmaceuticals, illegal

smartphone plug-ins, and anti-surveillance devices. On the good meds – when you can get them – you can go full tilt most of the day. You spend the mornings doing trades. The markets have been going sideways for a while, so you and Chase have been trying to stay above inflation by writing options. You work out in the afternoons. At night, you mellow out with two or three scotches.

Junior is very busy these days, trying to keep multiple Cochise businesses afloat during the general economic downturn. You spend a lot of time with his kids. You often pick them up after school in Bisbee and chase them up and down the staircases in town or take them to the Bisbee Boulder Club – one of the struggling businesses you and Junior started a few years back. It's a beautiful indoor facility, and the Club also rents the southwest wall of the Lavender Pit for outdoor lead

climbing. Most of the Pit is filled with the big interchange of road tunnels, but on that side there's an 800-foot face the staff can use to train people on multi-pitch climbs of varying difficulties.

Sometimes you drive the kids out to the Chiricahuas or the Catalinas for overnight camping trips. About twice a month, you take them for weekends in Tucson. Mallory and Maddie usually take them riding on Saturday

and to church and youth group activities on Sunday.

Mallory is mostly very content these days. She has settled into the life of a semi-active old lady. You rarely have sex, but you enjoy sitting in bed together and reading and falling asleep close enough to feel each other's warmth.

Every few months, you relapse with Jacinda at the Copper Queen. You

use mild priapics and give her long and gentle rides. Afterwards, when you linger in bed and drink coffee, you try to give her advice. You steer her away from her natural tendency to over-manage things in the Unit. You give her small gifts of gold and blackies to hoard and DDs from your ASIF pension. You tell her how to invest outside of the ASIF.

You always encourage Jacinda to move on. You tell her she should

move to Washington – or Phoenix, at least – and find a good man. But Jacinda is lonely and says she's happy with her "Foxy." You tell her it would be good for both of you to break things off. She needs a young man to spend her life with, and you need her to cut you off. You can deal with the guilt of cheating, but it's always gnawing at you. You're able to decline some of her invitations, but she's a hot girl in her mid 20s, and

you only have so much ability to resist.

For the time being, your life is tied up with Jacinda's. You made her cut your consulting fee in half, but she likes having you as an adviser and keeping you on the Cochise payroll. Your status helps to keep you in the good graces of CentComm, which has recently bumped you to Level Five. They've boosted your Social Credit Score by a hundred points, but the big

thing is the Get-Out-of-Jail Free card. It's nice to know that if you're traveling outside of Southern Arizona and have a traffic stop with cops you don't know, you're probably not going to disappear for weeks or months in some local version of the Biden-Trump facility.

On some of your recent relapses with Jacinda, you've slept in until dawn and had breakfast in bed. One crisp April morning, as you're heading

back to your condo and descending the steps to the plaza, you see a familiar figure sitting on one of the benches. It's Robert. You haven't seen him since the big birthday party. He still looks like a hippie, but an ancient one. These days, it's hard to tell how old people are. He's your age – pushing 80 – but maybe looks 65 with accumulated skin damage.

"How's it goin, Thomas? You look good." He says it exactly the normal

way, but you almost sense that he's emphasizing the word *look*. You opt for blunt honesty.

"I'm doing the Walk of Shame right now. You're not supposed to see me."

"Got yourself another sugar momma?"

"The opposite, actually. I'm a sugar daddy now."

“I suppose that’s the circle of life.”

“Yeah. I guess you could say that I’m ‘giving back’ to society.”

He laughs at that one. You sit down on the bench and look up at the hotel, where the roof is catching the first sunlight of the morning.

“How’s your old lady?”

“She’s old. But she’s good. Like, good-good. Unlike me, coming out of a love motel at seven in the morning.”

“I’m not in a position to do any judging.”

You see Jacinda leaving the hotel. You try to avoid looking at her, but Robert notices.

“That her?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow. Then I’m definitely not in a position to judge.”

You believe him. At most, he might be suggesting that God will judge you. But it’s not even that. He’s like the old Zen master from the parable, who always says, “We shall see.”



“How’s your health?”

“Better than I deserve. I keep on walking. And not drinking.”

“Do you think the urge suppressors help?”

“I don’t know. They were pretty good a while back, when everybody was getting the Euro meds. I do believe it’s a spiritual malady. At least partly. But for a while, I thought we might have to shut down the Program. It was just a social club.

But they must've changed the formula. People are starting to wander back in."

"I do about two or three drinks a night."

"You're welcome to join us any time. But I'm not sure you're a real alkie. Though I probably shouldn't say that."

"And you're set for money?"

“With my lifestyle, yeah. I spend almost nothing, so I’m okay. After they gassed everybody and reset things, somebody decided I was ‘qualified early-retired law enforcement’ and started giving me a minimal pension. It’s shit money, given how much stuff costs these days. So I still do odd jobs for blackies. Around here, at least, there’s a labor shortage. I guess

CentComm decided we needed less Mexicans and Central Americans."

"Actually, it's the opposite. They don't want to come. With the general slowdown up here, they've lost interest. Mexico and some of the other countries are doing pretty well right now."

"I guess that makes sense."

“If you ever need anything, let me know.”

“Nah. I’m good.”

“Seriously. Me and Junior are trying to revive some of these businesses here in town. It’s a shit economy. We could use some under-the-table labor. Your hippie vibe might work for the rock gym.”

“Yeah, maybe. Would I actually have to show up on time? On certain days of the week?”

“Listen, young man. Let me explain to you how the world works for grown-ups...”

“I don’t know if that would work for me. But you know, I’ve always wanted to spend the night at the Copper Queen. If you pay for it, maybe we could turn out the lights

and you could pretend I'm that girl. I'm pretty skinny. I could take a shower, put on some of her perfume..."

You both laugh.

"You're still a sick bastard. I thought Jesus would've fixed that."

"He's done a great job. Especially given what He had to work with. You

still hang out with that Presbie preacher? The Scottish guy?"

"Not much. I haven't been to church lately. Not since Jennifer died."

"I'm really sorry about that, Thomas. She was one of the good ones. She was lost in a boat, right? A storm?"

"Yeah."

“That’s about as close as we get to chariots of fire.”

“I reckon so. But I’ve been avoiding church since I took up hoor-mongering again. Too much guilt.”

“You should go. Jesus loved the hoor-mongers. And the guilty. That’s one of the times you feel closest to him. When you know you’re guilty. You might be closer to him than half the people sitting in the

pews. On paper, I'm a good Christian. But I've got enough guilt for a lifetime. I was the innkeeper of Sodom. You should go to church."

"Yeah. I should. And for the record, she's not a whore. She's just a lonely girl."

"Yeah. I know."

He gestures to the little red church next to the Copper Queen.

“If you’re here on a Sunday morning, you should join me. You can just walk downstairs and hang a right.”

You nod, thinking maybe you will. At the very least, you’ll start sending the church some money from Julio’s trust fund.

“Maybe take a shower first? I’m okay with you smelling like booze and

pussy. But for everybody else. They have decent people there."

"Do I smell right now?"

"Oh yeah. Enough to make me want to relapse, almost."

"Sorry about that."

"I'm used to it. But most of the guys in the program aren't getting the high-

class stuff. They smell nasty. America's Best and streetwalkers."

"I'm not better than them. I just have more money."

"That's the road to wisdom, my friend."

YOU COMMIT YOUR last homicide at the age of 92. As with Brian, it's a push. Gravity does the rest. As with Brian, it's a Level Seven. In this case, it's the deputy director of the Southwest Administrative Department (SWAD). A guy named Liam Chambers.

For a couple of years, Jacinda has been working the system and angling for a Level Eight promotion to become director of SWAD. If she

gets the promotion, she will have to move to Phoenix, which you both agree would be a good thing.

Her main obstacle is Chambers. Chambers is a climber, in both senses. The public side of his social media feeds are full of glowing reports on all the great things he's allegedly accomplishing as the deputy at SWAD. His private social feeds are all bouldering and lead climbing videos, mostly from rock gyms in

Phoenix and from the cliffs in the Queen Creek canyon above Superior. He's totally ripped and usually climbs shirtless, doing crazy dynos and grunting and screaming and regularly sending V7s and V8s at the tougher gyms. At the softer gyms, he's sent some 9s and 10s. (These days, you're happy when you get an easy V2.)

Chambers is Jacinda's age, late 30s. At first, you thought they might make a great power couple. You've

encouraged her to get to know him, but she says he's weird. He gives her a 'gay psycho vibe.' And she says she would miss her Foxy.

At this point, you haven't had sex with Jacinda in about three years. You've been attending church more regularly, which might be part of it. But the main reason is vanity, not spirituality or guilt. You're still fit, but your jowls are beginning to sag, your hair is thin, and you have liver

spots on your skin. You could go in for some cosmetic surgery, but the thought feels undignified. At this point, the thought of sex also feels undignified – especially with a woman less than half your age who is emotionally dependent on you to an unhealthy degree.

You don't know if Chambers is gay, or psycho, but from what you hear, he's very ambitious. People who get in his way have a tendency to get rung

up on corruption charges and sent to Florence. In April, at a SWAD confab in Phoenix, he pulled Jacinda aside and told her that he was going to be SWAD director. He said he already had a deputy picked out and that she needed to "stay in Cochise." As a carrot, he said she would get "a great bonus" for the good work she was doing.

Chambers comes to Bisbee the first week in May. He has brought a small

team from SWAD for leadership training and has also invited a dozen Unit Admins from the District. They're staying at The Holliday. Chambers runs a bunch of his sycophants up and down the stairs in town every morning before they have meetings. Jacinda avoids the running, but the climbing session on Wednesday morning is mandatory "team building." SWAD has rented out the Lavender Pit from the Bisbee Boulder Club for some top-rope

climbing. (SWAD is paying the government rate, which is not good, but the Club can't refuse the offer – and at this point, the Club needs all the revenue it can get.)

At 8 am on Wednesday, you and two staffers from the Club unlock the street-level fence to the Lavender Pit and lead the SWAD group out along the top bench on the southwest wall, where the Club has a top-rope anchor. It's a small steel crane that's bolted

into a concrete pad. Its arm projects a few inches beyond the edge of the cliff so the ropes don't wear against any rocks. The arm is also about six feet high, which is ideal for starting a rappel. The rappeler can hook in while standing and be totally snug with friction to start the descent.

Chambers waives away the Club staffers and tells the SWAD group to watch him from the safety of the chain-link fence along the top of the

cliff. The Club sited the pad and the anchor at an inset in the cliff, so spectators can watch climbers from either side.

Chambers is very competent. He shows everyone how to put on their harnesses correctly. He ties knots in the ends of the rope high enough to prevent a ground fall and puts the rope through the locking double D-rings that hang from the anchor arm. He feeds both sections of rope into a

figure-8 descender and steps out to the edge of the cliff. He lowers himself slowly until he's sitting horizontally with his feet against the edge. He shows everyone how to stop and how to lower themselves a few inches at a time, and then demonstrates how to descend faster. Soon, he's bounding downward, pushing off the rock for longer runs. He stops above the knots, which are about ten feet from the ground, and unties them. When he reaches the

first bench, 100 feet below, he removes his descender, ties a knot in one end of the rope and hauls on the other end until the knot is at the top. He feeds his end into a Grigri and gets ready to lower people down.

The first five people are sycophants from the Phoenix office who have done outdoor climbing with Chambers. They tie into their harnesses with help from the Club staffers and then step out with

confidence to be lowered down. The remaining people are in varying degrees of nervousness, including a few – like Jacinda – who have taken anti-anxiety meds for the occasion. Chambers does a good job of lowering them, starting slowly and only giving them fast runs in places where they're in no danger of swinging into the rocks.

Jacinda is the last of the team to be lowered. She gives you a look of

suppressed panic as she backs toward the cliff, so you check her knot and give her a thumbs up. You show her how to plant her feet on the edge of the cliff and bend her knees like springs. The worst terror is when she's being lowered to a sitting position, but she starts to get comfortable after that and begins walking down the cliff. She squeals during some of the longer runs, and you can tell that she's having fun. When all the climbers are down, one

of the staffers – a college student named Carlos – rappels down on the double rope and gets set up to belay everyone with a Grigri. You stay at the top with the other staffer, a 40-something woman named Marie.

The route directly under the anchor is an easy 5.7, a great top-rope route for beginners. But Chambers goes first, and he wants to show off. He opts for the hardest available route, which is a 5.12d sport climb on the left side. He

clears everyone away and pulls the rope down. You watch from the right side of the anchor as he ties in and makes quick work of the bottom half of the climb, moving artfully and clipping the rope into quick-draws that are bolted into the face at convenient spots about ten feet apart. You're impressed. Even in your prime, you probably couldn't have done that route. About 70 feet up, he hits the crux of the climb, which involves a burly gaston. You can hear

him grunting as he presses sideways against the rocks with his hands, which are about five feet apart. He's trying to lift his right foot to a notch where it can take some of the weight off his arms. You hear a pop and see his right shoulder dislocate. Then he drops in an arc to the right, about six feet under the last quick-draw. Carlos is ready. It's a gentle fall and Chambers' feet bounce off the wall a couple of times until he's just hanging. His right shoulder is visibly

dislocated, the arm hanging an inch lower than the left.

Carlos shouts up.

“Want me to lower you down?”

“No fucking way!” Chambers yells. He sounds like he’s in pain.

“We can walk out the bench, man.”

“Up or out! No exceptions!”

“Marie is up there. She can hang a new top rope.”

“No! You fucking finish what you fucking start!”

Chambers crouches where he hangs and pushes his feet against the rock. He swings out and back in, then pushes harder. When he swings back in the second time, he aims his right shoulder for a smooth slab of rock and

slams the arm back into its socket. Then he calls for slack and resumes climbing.

When he returns to the crux, he loads the gaston differently, so that his right arm is less extended. The pressure on his left hand and arm must be incredible, but he manages to get his left toe up to a tiny notch that can barely hold him. Then he drops his right knee and works the heel of his right foot up underneath him to where

it’s smeared on a smooth and vertical spot but provides some support. From there, he manages to stand up and push to where he can dart his left hand up and barely grab a good high hold before his feet cut out. Hanging vertically with only his left hand, he yells down to the group.

“You see?! You NEVER fucking quit!”

The rest of the climb is relatively easy, though you can tell he's babying his right shoulder. When he tops out, he's red-faced and bathed in sweat.



“Wow,” you say. “That must’ve hurt.”

“Fuck yeah it did. It’s my trick shoulder. But I couldn’t send the wrong message to those pussies. They’re not gonna see me fail.”

“You read the climb really well.”

“It wasn’t a first look. I found some of your Club’s videos last night.”

Chambers unties his end of the rope, hooks it through the double D-rings on the anchor, and starts hauling it up. Marie offers to help, but he orders her to hike a duffel bag full of water and snacks down the climbers. He flakes out the rope carefully on a tarp until it reaches the reaches the halfway point, then starts pulling the lower end up through the quick-draws. He flakes out that half of the rope in a separate

pile on the tarp, leaving the midpoint hanging in the D-rings.

“You still climbing?”

He is apparently familiar with your bio.

“Not much. I’m lucky to get a V1 these days.”

“And you’re probably not fucking much these days, either.”

“Nah. I’m getting too old for everything.”

“My people say you and Dunbarton spend the night. But you just talk. You’re a sugar daddy. But you’re all sugar, no daddy. Or maybe it’s all daddy, no sugar.”

Your throat is feeling very dry.

“Yeah.”

“I haven’t figured out what to do with you yet. All that *narco* money you people laundered through here. I should send you and your old lady off to Florence for the rest of your lives. Which wouldn’t be long, once you’re off the meds and eating prison food.”

“I reckon so.”

He gives you a long stare. His eyes are between gray and blue. You stare

back. At this point in your life, you're too old to be scared. You're studying him, trying to figure out if he's really a by-the-book guy or if he's going to work a bribe.

"On the other hand, you've got a lot of money tied up in that trust. What, 200 million?"

"212, as of yesterday."

He gathers up one half of the rope in a bundle, takes it to the edge, and yells "Rope!" before he tosses it down to Carlos.

"I'll tell you what's going to happen. You're going to make me your successor trustee. And then you're going to resign. I'll give you a little to live on, and some for your son's family. Though we'll need to find a way to strike that charity clause. You give away a shit-ton of money."

“Sounds like a good deal. What about Jacinda?”

“Ah. That’s a more difficult problem.”

“How so?”

“She’s one of those little yippie dogs. Like a chihuahua. Always nipping at my heels. But she’ll be arrested soon. Embezzling money from a forfeiture

fund. Or maybe it's counterfeiting. And when I send in the *federales*, they'll find a ton of hard money stashed around her place. She'll probably die in Florence. Before the trial, but after the guards get a few turns."

He picks up the other pile of rope.

"Rope!"

His weight shifts slightly from his left foot to his right as he tosses the rope. At that moment, holding onto the fencepost with your left hand, you step forward and push him with your right. He's amazingly quick. As he starts to fall, he reaches back with his right hand and grabs for the two sections of the rope where they hang close together below the anchor. His fingertips touch the second section, but he only clamps onto the first. He falls with the rope in his fist,

screaming “FUUUUU--” for the two and a half seconds it takes him to hit the bench. You hear muffled screams from the people below at the same time the other end of the rope whips through the D-rings on the anchor, making a “zing” sound.

If anyone saw you push Chambers, no one says anything. Carlos would’ve been the most likely, since he was watching for the rope. But he says nothing. No one seems to have been

taking video. When Jacinda hikes up the bench with the others, she is speechless with horror. Like most of the group, she saw Chambers' head smash like a bloody melon against the edge of a deep rut in the bench that was cut a century ago by the wheels of gigantic mining trucks.

When police arrive, you tell them the same thing you tell everyone else: "I really thought he knew what he was doing. Maybe he was delirious. He

was really pumped after that climb. And he must've been in pain."

The good news for the Club is that CentComm has recently nationalized liability law. It's really a tax grab, disguised as mandatory liability insurance premiums. The premiums are expensive, but if anyone in Chambers' family decides to sue the Club, the damages will be paid from a national coffer.

Two hours later, as you're walking Jacinda to her car in the downtown garage, she's still upset. She grabs your arm and whispers.

"You killed him."

"No. He just fell. He was pumped and he must've been in pain. It's a dangerous sport. I thought he knew what he was doing."

You can tell she's not convinced.

“What do we do now?”

“Nothing. But maybe it’s good that you think I’m a murderer. You should never talk to me again. You should go live your life. You’re almost 40. You need to find a decent guy and have some kids.”

“But Foxy.”

You kiss her on the forehead.

“No, baby. No more Foxy. This is over.”

You start walking toward your condo.

“But what are *you* going to do?”

Without looking back, you tell her, “I’m old and I’m tired. I’m going to go take a nap.”

Two months later, you learn that Jacinda is in Phoenix, having replaced Chambers as the deputy at SWAD. (The new director is the former Maricopa Unit Admin, who was one of Chambers' closest sycophants.)

You print out a photo of Chambers you find on the internet. In the photo, he's shirtless, hanging by his fingertips from some opposed crimps on the roof of some cave in a bouldering gym. He has a ten-pack of

abs. In bold marker, you write, "Never fucking quit!" You put the photo in a frame and send it to her office in a padded envelope. You enclose a note:

Dear Jacinda,

I know that you're still grieving for Liam. He was a truly amazing individual, and a good friend to you. But he wouldn't want you to be sad. He would want you to live your

life and keep doing your job
and give your best service to
the people of this country.
Please keep this photo for times
when you need inspiration.

Best always,

Thomas

Except for the part about wishing her the best, all of that is lies. But where Jacinda is going – in Phoenix and in Washington – she will need to get

used to lies. Her path will be a staircase of lies, all the way up.

YOUR PATH IS downward.

In your mid and late 90s, everything is about tradeoffs. As was the case with your dad, the central issue is slow congestive heart failure. Some of your heart meds give you edema. That means swelling in your legs and sometimes, vertigo from swelling in

your inner ear. But the diuretics for the edema give you cramps and keep you from working out. An hour of gentle bouldering at the Club three mornings a week keeps your muscles strong and helps with balance, but it wipes you out, and then you have to sleep all afternoon. You've even had to quit drinking coffee. Stimulants put stress on your heart, and the respiratory drug you take to keep you from getting too winded already maxes out your tolerance for

stimulants. The only good news is that the docs are okay with you having a scotch before dinner every night.

Mallory has sold the ranch and the two of you have moved to Bisbee permanently. You live in a relatively modest fifth-floor suite in The Jennifer, but it has a good view of downtown. The summer heat is not as oppressive as it is in Tucson, and you get to spend more time with

Junior and Maddie and with the kids when they're home from college. The Unit hospitals and clinics in Cochise are staffed by people you know, and who take good care of you (especially because you give them big tips in hard money). But the Cochise facilities are third-tier, so when you need a real hospital, you have to go on long expeditions to Phoenix.

Two hours at church on Sundays with Mallory make you feel better about

the world. It's great to see families and kids and to hear an uplifting message from the pulpit about how God is going to take care of everything – even if you can't really believe it. But you've never been an extrovert, and being around people is tiring. Visits to Mark's church in Tucson are even more exhausting. It's a long drive, and usually includes an extended brunch with old friends.

Chase does most of your asset management these days. On Tuesday mornings, you get a decaf macchiato from Kafka and stop by the Cochise National office to talk with him about the markets. To the extent that you understand things, the tradeoffs in that realm seem to be getting worse. To try to stay ahead of inflation, Chase goes far out on the yield/risk curve, exposing the portfolio to wild volatility. (The fixed income securities in the ASIF half of the

portfolio are shitty for both yield and market value.) The good news is that your lifestyle is inexpensive these days, and the grandkids look like they will become mostly self-sufficient.

Like the rest of the national economy, Cochise is stuck at a low rate of growth that feels like stagnation. The good news for Bisbee is that it's stagnating at a much higher level than when you first moved here. 70 years ago, its permanent population was

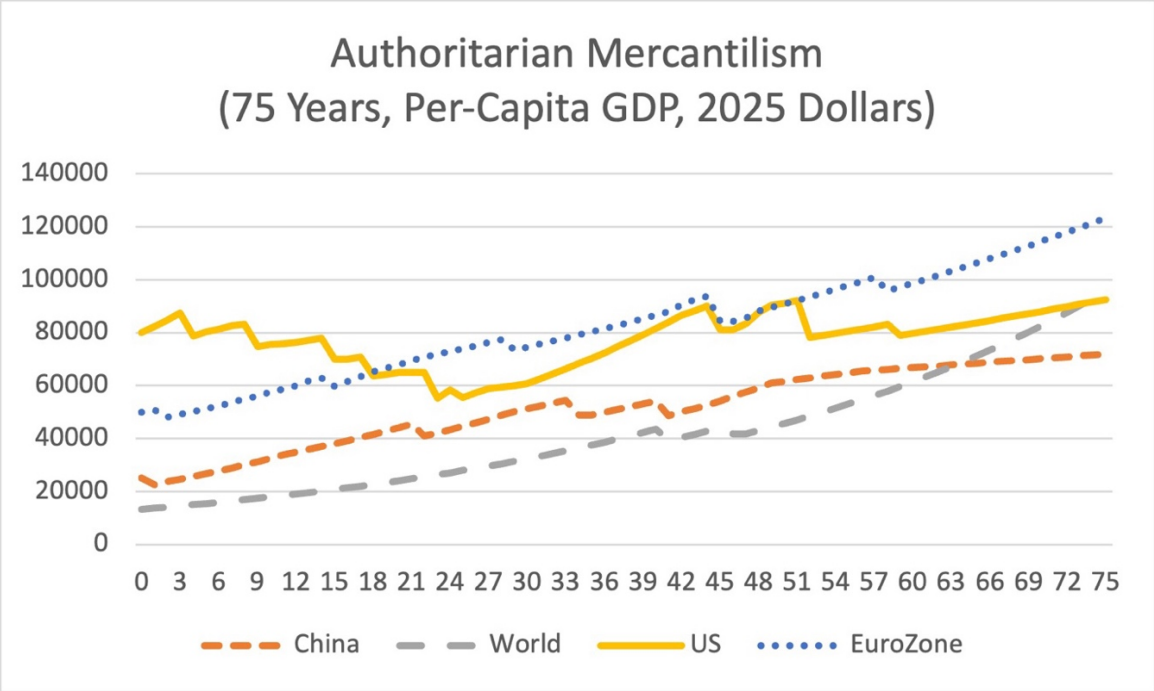
about 5,000. Now, it's 25,000 – with most locals living in multi-story apartments in Warren. There's a steady supply of tourists and vacationers to bring in dollars. Bisbee never became the City of the Future. But it's not a bad town.

BECAUSE COCHISE NATIONAL is in the good graces of CentComm, you can go to Chase's office to get access to much of the foreign financial press.

That gives you some idea about how the rest of the world is doing, and how America is doing in comparison.

Looking back, it's clear that the Good Old Days were the 20 years that Penn and the Open Technocrats were running the country. America recovered to its pre-CentComm standard of living and caught up with Europe. After Gipping locked everything down, Europe pulled away. When the world's capitalists

are free to invest money for safety and high-tech growth, they invest it in Europe. For more speculative ventures, they bet trillions on the huge pools of young labor and growing consumer markets in Africa and the Middle East.



America is now a middle-class country by world standards. While America has stood still, the average country has caught up. As a consolation prize, CentComm can brag (as it sometimes does) that

America is still beating China. But China is a country of old people, and its best young minds all went to Europe decades ago.

The citizens in some of the world's most free-market countries are now three or four times as wealthy as Americans. In countries such as Switzerland, Estonia, Dubai, and Singapore, flying cars have become common. Some wealthy Americans also have flying cars, but the

domestically manufactured ones are fabulously expensive and the tariffs on foreign ones are almost prohibitive. Also, CentComm has been slow to modify airspace rules over cities, so flying cars are mostly a hobby for the rural rich.

People in wealthy countries also have access to the best life-extension and brain-function therapies. You and Mallory will be lucky to make it to 100 – which feels less appealing the

closer you get to it – but the Swiss and the Singaporeans are now living well to about 120 before they slow down.

As for income and wealth inequality, it's hard to say. CentComm publishes an annual Gini coefficient – a measure of inequality of income and wealth (0 = perfect equality, 1 = perfect inequality). Officially, after-tax inequality declined from 0.4 in the pre-CentComm era to 0.25 before the

Penn regime, when it rose as high as 0.45. In the past 20 years, it has supposedly declined again to 0.25. But recent estimates from *The Economist* put it at about 0.35. In the world's emerging markets, the average Gini number is 0.5, and the Western European welfare states are in the range of 0.3 to 0.4.

You and Mallory sometimes speculate about whether America will rebound from the stagnation of corporatist

economics. At some point, when Gipping's faction ages out, there will probably be another round of opening. As you see things, the impetus for the move will likely come from the growing informal sector. Since Gipping's lockdown, America has once again become a nation of tax evaders, welfare dependents, smugglers, and black marketeers. You believe that at some point, CentComm will have to loosen up

regulatory regimes and allow more competition.

The best that can be said for the CentComm regime is that it has apparently been successful at achieving social peace in America. Some of what you “remember” from the old days is CentComm propaganda, but you do have real memories of the ugliness of politics in the mid-’20s: the constant bickering, the increasing political violence, and

the widespread paranoia about what "the other side" was going to do when it controlled Washington. Now, everybody fears CentComm – but at least that's a realistic fear.

There has also been continued progress on race and gender. Interracial marriage and parenting are gradually erasing racial identities and women continue to make gains, limited only by the fact that most women are still willing to give up

advancement in the work world to spend more time raising their children. (And there's not much advancement to be had these days, anyway.) Sexual minorities have done okay, too – Penn's faction quietly liberalized adoption by gay couples, and Gipping's faction has done nothing to reverse that policy.

As for a return to democracy, it's hard to imagine. As clumsy as it seemed at the time, Gipping's *coup* was hugely

successful. He purged the dissidents within the AP government and surgically removed the key pro-democracy leaders from society. Some of the 76ers have only now begun to emerge from prison. Everyone else has been cowed into silence. After all, Gipping gassed much of the country and imprisoned a quarter million people to gain power. Who knows what he would do to hold onto it?

IN THE 75 years since America began its experiment with authoritarian mercantilism, the world in general has turned out very well in material terms. The average human is much wealthier than he or she was 75 years ago – about seven times as wealthy, according to attempts to measure real per-capita GDP. Extreme poverty and long-term unemployment are increasingly rare. There are still big differences between

the global rich and the global poor, but they are getting smaller in terms of educational opportunities, quality of health care services, and opportunities for creative and industrious persons to succeed. Automation and artificial intelligence have continued to make jobs much safer and more satisfying. As one sign of surplus wealth, countries on every continent now have viable space programs.

Around the world, homelessness is increasingly rare, mostly due to the advent of more effective therapies for mental illness. But even with embryo selection eliminating many congenital mental illnesses, and with generous subsidies for addiction therapy, it appears that there will always be a small core of incurable homelessness. In America, the rate of homelessness has been very low, because the authoritarian government was able to brush aside a lot of civil liberties

concerns and force mentally ill homeless people to take meds and force addicts into treatment. There is a lot of corruption in America, but rates of violent crime are lower, mainly because of increased public and private surveillance. Financial hacking, identity theft, and fraud continue to be minor nuisances around the world.

In many countries, the private ownership and management of roads

has led to large reductions in traffic congestion (as it has done in Cochise), and flying cars have made traffic even better in wealthier countries. In most places in America, traffic congestion continues to be bad. With America's recurring debt crises and high spending on health, education, surveillance and the military, there is rarely much spare money to spend on infrastructure improvements. The main factor in America that helps to

ease traffic is increased telecommuting over the internet.

The environment has seen big improvements around the world. The private and government owners of land and water resources have usually managed them with the aim of sustainable long-term profitability, with good results. In the oceans, governments have allowed private owners to homestead sustainable fisheries and allowed charitable

organizations to own marine mammals, which are tagged and monitored for protection against poaching.

Technological changes (including improved batteries and synthetic meats) have reduced carbon output somewhat, and half of the world's power is now provided by small-scale nuclear facilities using ultra-safe radio fuels. To control residual warming, a consortium of governments,

billionaires, and charitable organizations has seeded the atmosphere with sulfur and other particles to reflect sunlight. The consortium has also planted billions of trees and dumped iron filings in the oceans to grow carbon-absorbing algae. As a bonus, it also plans to build platforms in space for vehicles that will use nuclear bombs to steer killer meteors out of Earth's path. CentComm trumpets America's participation in the consortium, but

due to its ongoing fiscal troubles, America is a second-tier player in international efforts.

America has also lagged behind most developed countries when it comes to carbon reduction. Rather than impose carbon taxes or create a cap-and-trade scheme, CentComm focused on developing domestic low-emission products, including solar panels and electric cars. They tended to be expensive and low in quality, and

most American consumers stayed with older technologies whenever they had the freedom to do so. Across the world, carbon reduction efforts imposed big costs on economic productivity without slowing down warming by large amounts (hence the need for sulfur seeding and algae-feeding). The good news is that CentComm was very supportive of nuclear power. New nuke plants started going into operation four decades ago (for the first time in

almost a century) and promise to have a strong impact on reducing American carbon output.

So far, at least, the economic and humanitarian impacts from climate change have been mild. Sea levels appear to have risen by about a meter over the course of the 21st century, caused by the melting of polar ice and perhaps accelerated by carbon dioxide and methane released by the thawing of some of the Arctic permafrost.

Global weather systems appear to have shifted somewhat, but scientists are unclear whether rainfall patterns will change long-term and cause severe problems (such as turning larger parts of the world into deserts). So far, climate change appears to have increased rainfall on net. The damage from flooding associated with hurricanes and monsoons, measured in money, continues to increase, but that may be a statistical illusion: as countries get wealthier, the value of

coastal assets rises. Scientists debate whether hurricanes and monsoon rainfalls are truly stronger or more frequent than in previous centuries.

The good news is that a wealthier world is better able to handle the impacts of climate change. Hundreds of millions of people have moved away from coasts and out of floodplains, and most formerly poor countries can afford to build sea walls and relocate coastal populations.

Relatively open immigration policies in many wealthier countries have helped, allowing climate refugees from desertified regions to move to places with more opportunities. Liberal (in the sense of mostly free-market) trade policies in most countries also help, ensuring that global supply chains (especially those for food) are able to adjust quickly to changing climate patterns.

Technology is the main reason why differences in wealth and material well-being between countries are narrowing. With the exception of America, supply chains are increasingly international and the transfer of productive technologies between countries now happens more quickly than ever. Enforcement of intellectual property (such as patents) across borders has always been challenging, and protectionist America has mostly ignored IP

treaties. Some virtual products and services (such as those founded on blockchains, or those whose transmissions are encrypted) are easier to protect or are effectively self-enforcing. In such a legal environment, most modern firms have stopped relying on a strategy of securing a patent, guarding it internationally with armies of lawyers and lobbyists, and milking its monopoly for decades.

Instead, most firms now compete to rapidly mass-produce and deploy innovative physical products, and to link them to internet platforms that have network effects and give the firms a shot at a first mover advantage. (For example, most pharmaceutical firms do not focus on trying to monopolize the production and sale of physical drugs and therapies, but rather, on building virtual platforms that use AI and encrypted genetic information from

millions of subscribers to individually optimize applications and dosages; as a result, health care innovations spread rapidly to even the poorest of the world's people.) With access to health care, increased longevity, and education becoming more equalized globally, the differences between rich and poor are now less stark. Differences in wealthier countries are mainly measured in terms of how big people's houses or estates are and how exotic their vacations are.

On the spiritual front, things are much the same as they have always been. People are people, and they will always struggle to find peace and happiness. Even with more effective designer antidepressants, most people are unsatisfied with material progress. Some of the ennui and envy is inevitably channeled into the politics of social justice, but many people look for spiritual answers. By the billions, people continue to join

churches, go on mission trips, practice yoga, go on meditation retreats, and join monasteries and other intentional-living communities.

In America, CentComm monitors churches for subversive messaging – and it still keeps Catholic priests on the government payroll – but otherwise stays out of the competition between different religions and sects to win converts. There are still contentious moral debates about

abortion, genetic engineering, and life extension in many countries, but CentComm continues to suppress those debates in America. Thanks to effective contraception and "morning after" pills, and thanks to generous adoption rewards by governments and private charities, abortion is increasingly rare in America and elsewhere.

Under America's continuing corporatist policies, immigration is

still limited, but it helps that would-be immigrants increasingly choose to go somewhere else – they would rather go to wealthier countries that have more open and competitive economies.

Four decades ago, after getting stretched too thin, America withdrew from most major military commitments outside of North and Central America. And recently, things have been quiet in Western

Hemisphere. Officially, Mexico and Canada are still “integral partners,” but they increasingly operate without interference from Washington. The Armed Forces are eager to “blood their troops,” so America has begun participating in UN peacekeeping efforts as a junior partner. For the most part, the world has become an increasingly peaceful place, with a few small separatist struggles and terrorist incidents.

Several dozen countries – including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Chile, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and Myanmar – have followed the Singapore model, running their countries like very market-oriented homeowners' associations, with relatively strict social rules and minimal welfare services. They have prospered. Other regions – including Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Russia, Spain, Italy, South Africa, Australia, Brazil, and Argentina – have

decentralized with the Swiss model in mind, splitting into multiple states with different levels of government control. Most of the resulting mini-states have done very well, and all have been lifted by the general rising global tide of economic prosperity and individual freedom. (Switzerland has not changed its model.)

Most of the old democratic welfare states – including Canada and most of the countries in Europe – have

maintained their models, and several countries have joined them. The liberal welfare states generally have low growth rates, but they are higher than America's. They also have high levels of individual freedom, married with fairly generous social insurance schemes. Despite efforts at international "tax harmony," the welfare states face threats of taxpayer emigration and bondholder revolts, so the social insurance schemes in most

welfare states tend to be workably efficient.

ON YOUR 100TH birthday, you and Mallory wake around nine and start your usual routine. The caretaker – a young woman from Douglas named Magdalena who has been with you for the past year – brings breakfast in bed for both of you and sets out your regimens of meds. Mallory reads her devotional from a small paper booklet

and prays silently for a long time before shuffling off to have a bath. You put on your bifocals and watch the financial news (Mallory calls it "the Gambling Channel") on your tablet, listening with your ear buds. As usual, you try to read between the lines of the commentaries – which always describe CentComm policies in positive terms – to try to figure out what's really going on in the economy and in the financial markets. As

usual, you fall asleep again after 15 or 20 minutes of watching the news.

Sometime later, you wake with Magdalena prodding you to inhale from a nebulizer. She says you're not breathing well. She gives you an extra puff, which Mallory questions from the bed next to you, saying that the docs don't want you taking too much stimulant. Magdalena tells her that your oxygen was really low and suggests that a little extra might be

good today, because Thomas and Maddie and the kids are coming over for your birthday lunch.



Magdalena helps you get out of bed, go to the bathroom, and then strap into the harnesses on the treadmill for your morning “walk.” The window in front of the treadmill faces downtown. As you trod at a slow pace in your slip-on sneakers, you watch tourists emerging from the underground garage and milling about between art galleries and souvenir shops and cafes. Often, your 15-minute walk on the treadmill is your favorite daily

activity. But today, it makes you feel a little queasy and disoriented.

After Magdalena helps you shower, you tell her you want to lie down again. Mallory's also in bed, half dozing as she reads her Bible. Your sleep is strange, which you figure is a result of the extra stimulant. Your mind feels awake but somewhat disconnected from your body. For example, you can feel that your hips and lower back are sore and your right

leg is getting numb, maybe from a flare-up of your sciatica, but you can't make yourself roll over to get more comfortable.

Then you find yourself having a strange dream. In the dream, the "aliens" are communicating with you. They're not visible, but they speak into your mind. They thank you for participating in their experiment and give you three scores, on a scale of 0-100 points: 12 for economic

prosperity, 90 for social harmony, and 30 for individual freedom. You start to tell them you know they're not aliens – you know they're really from the Guardians, or CentComm – but you hold back, thinking that you shouldn't let them know that you know. Then you remember that they were speaking into your mind, so that means they already know what you're thinking. If CentComm knows what you're thinking, why do they have to spy on people? And why would

anyone use jammers or VPNs if you know that they know? You try to follow these threads of logic, but they're hard to hold onto. Then you feel the pain in your lower back and remember that you're dreaming.

There's something plastic over your nose.

"It will help you breathe."

It’s in the way. On your mouth. “Get it off. Let me breathe.” It’s muffled. They can’t hear you. You can’t breathe.

“Just relax, sir. Mallory, can you help me? Tell him he needs to relax.”

“It’s oxygen, Thomas. They’re trying to help you breathe.”

Green eyes. That day at Windy Point. Mal?

“I’m sorry, Mal. I’m sorry. I love you. Mal? Can you hear me?”

The ultrasound. Baby Jennifer.

“Cardiac. Paddles on. Okay... Stay back. One, two...”

(The End.)

[If this story were part of the e-book or the printed volumes, there would be a link or a prompt here to return to the Table of Contents to choose another ideology or another story outcome.]