

**The**  
*followers*

**By Jody Shenn**

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The

Followers

By Jody Shenn

*Great men need to be lifted upon the shoulders of the whole world, in order to conceive their great ideas or perform their great deeds; that is, there must be an atmosphere of greatness round about them. A hero cannot be a hero unless in a heroic world.*

*—Nathaniel Hawthorne*

*Don't be a salad, be the best goddam broccoli you could ever be.*

*— Felix Kjellberg*

Part I  
The Boy Who Played Wolf

# Chapter One: Most of His Attention

No doubt about it: There were plenty of moments when Connor had reason to be annoyed at his friend. All those years they'd known each other, so many things had come up. But Connor knew, deep down to match the way he acted, that the two would probably always be friends. Or at least that's how Seb imagined it.

It was like one was like the other's favorite game, and the other was the only console that you could play it on. Like Nintendo had its Zelda, or Xbox owned Halo. It was like superhero sidekicks, he sometimes thought.

Even that one time that Seb caused them to miss meeting Connor's parents to pick them up at the water park.... because of his misplaced keys... which they finally found wrapped in a ketchuppied napkin on top of a garbage bin by the snack bar.

He'd been distracted there plotting out their next few hours on a park map, and then led them out briskly. Connor had remained patient, almost brotherly, Seb thought to himself, as his friend started shivering in his mushy blue towel and shaking his head.

Or that time they'd snuck away on a field trip to the planetarium, looking for the gift shop and ending up going all the way down a dead-end hall and needing to sneak back without the teacher noticing.

More confident and a few inches taller than Seb, if also a bit chubbier, Connor carried himself as if he thought he could be quite popular if he'd wanted. Like he could, but that he was choosing not to be, currently. And implying a

strong hint of loyalty as the reason. And maybe that would have been, in fact, true if it wasn't for his limited manners, or for his irritating bouts of high energy.

In truth, Connor was a lumbering boy, the type of companion who regularly created moments to be annoyed at him, since he often forgot to censor himself, and ended up the suddenly embarrassing one in a group. Nevertheless, Connor's endless and earnest sarcastic quipping impressed Seb, at least in its vigor.

Seb, on the other hand, knew that he himself often grew moody or manic. And, of course, he knew that sometimes he would turn nasty in his messages, or even just obviously intentionally ignore Connor's imploring ramblings on his screen for hours. Sometimes he just gave up on plans.

Or, like that one time, when he sat furrowing his big eyebrows under his floppy hair in the corner of a birthday party of someone who invited basically all his peers... He left Connor spinning in circles between his grouchiness and the animated crowd of children revved up by sugar, lights and noise.

All the same, Connor was pretty much wholly accepting of Seb's sulking. Seb figured, starting years ago, that it was probably subconsciously because Connor knew his father had died when he was just two. However, he often wondered if it wasn't more about Connor's quirky ways.

For his part, Seb remained mostly untroubled by his friend's uncouth outbursts and delusions of popularity. Ultimately, it was a good thing they knew each other.

That Wednesday at school -- the dated but clean Steven A. Krauza Middle School, of Middleville, New Jersey, all brick and concrete and neat rectangles of grass -- it'd been pretty much like any other Wednesday for Seb and the rest of his classmates...

Long hallways full of banging sounds as the morning started...

Then, doors shutting and near silence except for a few sudden bursts of laughter from unseen students, or the slams of books dropped accidentally on the tiled halls...

Then, sitting in the tidy classroom rows...

Then, cheerfully barked lessons and slowly droned instruction...

Then, lunchtime...

That was the best time.

Seb and Connor met up that day to eat and then to share recess. It was something they'd basically been doing everyday since even before kindergarten. It made sense because they liked the same games and books, Twitch, GoVidGo and YouTube channels, movies and comics. They shared the same interests down to favorite Marvel characters and fourth favorite sub-blog.

Sometimes, Seb would forget which beliefs he'd started with and which he'd taken on from Connor, but they also each had very particular opinions about the details.

The pair took only two classes together at the same time now. So it was especially important to meet up, and swap observations and updates. Connor brought the doodles he made under his desk. Seb lately just goofed off on his phone.

Where the pavement met the grass on the side of their school, the part of it toward the doors, the sun didn't reach. Seb sat on the ground there, his thin arms hunched over, in a dazed and agreeable mode.

"You know, I just can't stop thinking about how it's going to be, like... like a challenge," Connor said, leaning against their building's red walls and erasing his shadow. "Like a total and complete challenge for Endeavorright to make a better game than that. Like make it *better* better."

Seb let him run on. Connor was like an auto-play video in an open window tucked behind the current one on his computer, mostly overlapped.

Connor didn't wait for his friend to respond from below.



“It’s kind of impossible basically,” he continued. “Almost as if no one could do it ever, in any universe. Like they’d need to be miracle makers, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“But, really, maybe, just maybe, they could, no? You gotta admit that video, BZ showed from Strategicon, that looked pretty good, right?”

Lifting his fingers from the matching game beneath them to a volley of white smoky bursts, Seb raised his eyes to stare up at the lumpily rectangular (yet not quite un-athletic) form of his friend.

He cleared his throat.

Seb thought of playing the game, CityRiddle, his favorite game, as a gamer, with Connor. A flood of happy thoughts rushed into his head, before suddenly giving way to a feeling in his stomach like he hadn’t eaten enough at lunch. He wasn’t sure why. He remembered his sandwich had come with an apple and bag of mini-muffins.

“We’ve talked about this,” Seb said. “There’s no way they’re going to make a better game with CityRiddle 2.” He tried to speak with an even tone of sureness. “It’s absurd. Flat out.”

“Why? So, I know what made the first one so good is... it had everything. You could keep playing it and playing it. With the mods... the Potter mod, Tron mod, whatever, it’s always new already, whenever you want it to be. And I mean, it’s different than everything else in the way it brings everything together. Perfect. Just stellar. Absolutely stellar.”

“Right... So, there’s no need for a sequel, you’re only gonna make something worse.”

“Oh yeah, you always say that, though,” Connor said, glancing down at his friend. “Always a chance it’s going to be different. Remember when you thought Jurassic World would be awful.”

Seb wore a pair of jeans ripped in one knee and a red-and-blue shirt, normally striped, which he wore usually twice

a week. The playground air blew his shaggy brown hair flatter. It was beginning to feel cool, not crisp but perhaps enough to raise a patch of goose bumps.

Sitting of himself sitting there, he imagined he looked only a little bit less forgettable than he felt.

“Maybe, I’m wrong,” Seb replied. “Maybe there’s a chance. You can’t ever be too sure what’s next.”

“And, oh, how amazing Surf Wars 2 was? Even you’ve got to acknowledge that.”

“Right. I guess I was pretty down on that before it came out too.”

“You were.”

“I guess you’ve gotta keep an open mind. Thanks for reminding me. But I still don’t think it’s going to better.”

“Whatever.”

Seb’s vision began to take in his surroundings, the vista of little bobbing shapes, jabbering away.

“You know what would be pretty cool,” Connor said, “is if we could play that Star Wars mod level this weekend? For CityRiddle. Obviously. Unless you need the time to keep leveling your character in KDO? I’d certainly understand completely.”

“Yeah?”

Seb paused to let him deliver the line.

“He’s pretty weak. Like the YouTube girls who open TinkyTinks blind bags and end up needing scissors.”

Seb’s vision drifted back to his phone and he started swiping more intently. The bright fruits kept popping up under the glass, faster and faster. And then slower and then awkwardly.

Even with the tiny pings of the game, just three bars of sound, his ears were still open to Connor. The rhythm was just relaxing. His shoulders, lifted and drawn in, confined his world to a smaller, slower space.

“Ok, Connor, whatever you want,” he said back, after a minute. “I don’t really have any dates lined up or anything.”

But, I know you know: I'm probably at least three levels stronger than you in KDO. And I haven't played in, you know, two months."

"Awesome, Seb," Connor said.

The plump boy stepped away the wall, bobbing aimlessly from foot to foot. He tried to arrange the thin calendar of his own weekend in his mind.

"Or, hey, you know what, Seb?"

Seb rocked a bit in his hunch, breaking only to pull in his lips and silently curse with every crackling puff that he couldn't avoid.

Around them on the playground, the colors of other children seemed to flow left and right, bumping into each other and passing through. At least three wore MineCraft shirts; others sported vivid prints of ninja toy men or big-headed gothic girls. There were several types of animals wearing sunglasses. And at least a few with rows of fluorescent letters, calling attention to a child's supposed state of mind or general attitude.

Out of the corner of Seb's squinting eyes, the bright clothing and dry grey day made it feel like being in the middle of a game or a television show, or a commercial or something.

"Yeah, Connor?" he responded with a slight lag caused by his dulled and comfortable state of concentration

"Did you want to eat over tonight? We could watch Batzinger on GoVidGo? If that's cool with your mom."

"That'd be ok with your mom and dad?"

"I haven't exactly asked Mr. and Mrs. Tippet, but if you want to, I'm sure they'll say yes."

"And Paige won't be annoyed?"

"C'mon. My sister loves you way more than she loves me. Which is only true because that's not much at all."

Seb looked up again from his game.

He thought of the time that Paige had brought them popcorn during a sleepover, only to dump the bowl on top of

Connor's head. They were all much younger, it was one of the first times he'd stayed over. Or when she'd hid Connor's fish under his bed, but at least remembered to feed it.

Across the schoolyard, Seb watched a group of girls arranged in a circle, like pegs in a wooden rest-stop game. They swayed and then every once in awhile they would all double over in laughter, turning away from each other. Seb thought of the time that Paige had been laughing so hard after hiding eggs in his shoes, turning red in the face.

"That's so false," Seb grinned. "Your sister loves torturing you. And you love her for that much, at least. It's kind of gross actually."

Playfully, Connor shot back, "That's not appropriate for you to say. At all."

"Why not?"

"Because you're such a momma's boy, I should get you a bib."

"I guess so because I'm going to need to me text my mom about tonight. As you know, of course, she's my ride."

"Good. I think it's supposed to be Waffles Wednesday. Maybe we can drive you home, not that I can, or Mrs. Tippet can, if she's been drinking Sangria."

"Your family is pretty weird."

"Hey, whatever. I'm not sure it actually will be Waffles Wednesday," he shrugged. "But it could be, which is good."

The glow of the cloudy horizon dimmed a bit. A slightly older girl in blond braids whom Seb and Connor barely knew wandered by, a small purple-and-black backpack slung across her shoulder.

Wearing something between a vacant and a stubborn look atop her grey sports brand shirt, she began slowing as she started to pass by, before finally stopping in front of Connor. She looked down at Seb.

"Hey," she said in a chipper tone. "Your parents let you have one of those in school?"

"Uh, hey. A what?"

“A phone.”

“Like that,” Connor said, pointing, unhelpfully, to the phone to gripped in Seb’s right hand.

“Oh yeah,” Seb said, studying one her soft ears beneath one of her yellow braids. “Sure. I guess. My mom just doesn’t want me using it during class.”

“That’s pretty neat,” she said. “I mean totally awesome. You should do a little dab every so often for that.” She demonstrated by ducking her head rhythmically into the crook in her right arm.

“Thanks,” Seb responded again. He couldn’t help feeling Connor watching him, ready to jump in with assistance.

“Yeah, like, you know I would really obviously get in so much trouble if my parents let me bring one,” the girl said. “Or at least that’s what they think. Don’t you find it hard not to play on it or text and tweet and stuff during class?”

“Sure. But they’ll take it away pretty quick if they catch you, so you pretty much can’t,” Seb said. “Totally you can slip it out for a minute here and there, but they’ve got eagle eyes, it’s not worth it.”

“You know, teachers...” Connors added.

“You need to say something, Leonard?” the girl suddenly snapped at Connor. “I’m just having a conversation with your friend here. Last time I checked, that was legal in this country.”

Connor took a step backward in shock, but then he lips curled upward around their edges. Seb, shrugging at her, could tell Connor was warming up to the thought that they’d be ignored again soon, but enjoying the brief interruption.

“No,” Connor finally said. “I was just thinking that you seem nice.”

Seb could tell he was also thinking something along the lines of, “And I hope you understand because you also are nice to look at,” with a batting of his mind’s eyes. His face told that story.

“Well.... I guess, that’s ok,” she spit out at him, turning away. “Hey, anyway, kid with the phone,” she said over her shoulder to Seb, who had with a moment slipped gratefully toward being immersed again in his game, “thanks for the chat, and have a nice day!”

“Oh, yeah,” he replied, looking up at she strolled away.

As Seb fell back into playing on his phone with most of his attention, Connor jabbered about the interaction with the braided girl, chuckling. But his animated immediate retelling of those recent events was just another sound that blended with all of the rest of the hum of the schoolyard.

Seb was clearing levels at progressively better intervals. Some were timed, some were strategic, and it didn’t matter: he killed off the fruit below his fingers like a drought.

He found that there were a few different cadences of finger action that offered the most success, and tried picking the right one as the challenges progressed.

“Just one thing, why’d she call for you Leonard?” Seb stopped to ask after mistiming a tap, slightly unsure where Connor was had already given slip of some explanation while he was only half-listening.

“No idea,” Connor answered, shaking his head. “I don’t think she meant it in a pleasant way.”

Seb’s bony thumb mashed a rainbow of fruits, and then struck at a good distance from where he’d aim. He kept losing his attempts at fastest time on the stage he was working on by the tiniest of margins. He was just one bad move or slight hesitation away. Seb knew he was getting close. He could feel it in his boney arms.

Connor, quietly watching the other students bouncing like atoms in the distant crowd, chattered on.

He touched on how he’d gloated that morning to someone about having finished a Rick Riordan series that the other boy had only just started. He brought up the time they’d watched six hours of Let’s Play videos in Connor’s basement some Saturday, and Mr. Tippet had come down

with a broom to get them outside. Then, he started moaning about his sister's threat to make him watch the next Ali Gramaleni movie on Disney Channel, Teen Tour Hullaballoos.

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And, then Seb... after several more times through his stage of near misses -- a kaleidoscope of pops on the screen deflating his euphoria -- and then just a few more... Seb got there at last, by two whole seconds, and with an extra life to spare. The short winner's jingle went off, trumpeting accomplishment, just before the school bell rang out from the doors flung wide open, hiding rusted a bit on the outside.

A charge of excitement over the feat lingered inside Seb.

To be sure, that's not what made that Wednesday the start of his boring life - or their boring lives, he'd think - ending and an exciting and important adventure beginning. If you think about it: The kick of winning, of typing in his name, was a good feeling, a soaring of positive emotions, a state that it's natural to relish. It was victory earned, triggering muscle memories meant for hunting. It was fun. But it was just a small thing, really.

And, yet, there it was: A forgettable flash of internal meaning, of progress, in Seb's young life that was plopped down at the start of things. Like many adventures, his was just relatively boring at first.

Except in that moment, nothing was as important as that win on his game on his phone that he was stuffing back into his pants. That contentment lingered as Seb headed in with Connor, and for just that fleeting moment, with only the slightest twinge of the itch for more action starting to need a scratch, Seb doubted that anything could ever be so thrilling again.

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True enough, the next period, was just another gym class, which Seb had alone. Or rather with kids other than Connor, who was in either art or English, Seb could never remember which.

It certainly wasn't music, with Mrs. Killian, a warm woman in purple dresses who gently urged appreciation of her forty-eight minutes, instead of seeking perfection from her students. Seb knew because he had told Connor how she played the Mario Brothers music on the flute, before she had ever shown Connor's class.

In her classes, their feet rested on a thinly carpeted floor as her rough voice doled out directions through silly little stories. Through the flashes of her joyful digressions, Mrs. Killian's classes stumbled through the dots and swishes on sheet music before them in state of pleasant calm, producing mildly unpleasant but certainly not revolting sounds.

Gym classes with Mr. D were not that way.

There were always the shrill shrieks of sneakers and whistling escaping upward toward the high up rafters. On the sidelines, the dark goateed man loomed like an oversized black chess rook. Pacing, he added to the cacophony, barking out discouraging words loudly.

Things like, "If that was any more pathetic, kid, I'd have to call your mother right now," or "I'd fail you for something like that if I wasn't worried I'd need to see your butt flopping around here again." Or, "what's the difference between you and my sock? You stink worse than my sock."

His head moved from side to side from time to time in a prowling motion as she shuffled around the room.

"Get there, Sawyer, c'mon!" he shouted at Seb's classmate, after the boy barely moved while a feathered badminton birdie dropped right in front of his feet. The kid looked back with a sheepish lift of his brown eyebrows.

The teacher looked down on him from at least halfway between six and seven feet up, his grey shirt embossed with



the figure of an athlete resting over his ill-fitting shorts.

Mr. D (for Di Pietrantonio) had grown up in the town, even went to the very same school, before growing up more, starring in football and moving away to attend college in Tennessee on a scholarship, reaching his athletic ceiling during NFL try-outs, finding a girl, and settling back down where he started and finding his career in physical education. All the students knew the story.

A hulking man, Mr. D wasn't scary, per se, in the class environment - because he didn't seem crazy enough to hit a kid -- but he succeeded in causing distress.

Sawyer's teammate picked the birdie up again and bounced it off his racket and over the net with a small whistling sound.

"McGinn, I'm looking at you. Show Mr. Sawyer again how it's done," Mr. D. boomed off all the padded walls and up to the tall ceilings. McGinn readied himself for the serve.

Across the gym, Seb held up his racket a little too straight as an object whizzed toward him but he was still able to bounce a birdie back with a plunk to his classmate, Raghuram, on the other side.

It returned and he smacked at it again. This time, it clanked off awkwardly into the thin plastic ropes between the two sides.

As his teammate at the moment (a nice boy who didn't speak much, he didn't even know his name) picked up and tossed the shuttlecock under the net, Seb looked at his racket's precise strings and then studied it's somewhat sticky rubber grip.

He tried to think of it as a sword or a new type of weapon. If he needed to use it like that, he thought he could. He imagined himself meditating.

"That is just ridiculous Howards," Mr. D shouted from a few of the makeshift badminton courts away. "This isn't a difficult sport. Show me you're not completely useless."

Seb turned and watched the skinny, runny nosed kid grab the birdie and try to hit it over the net, only to discover he'd completely missed the fast-floating white blur he had dropped from his clench. Across the net from Seb, Raghuram let out a quiet gasp.

Mr. D shook his head as blew into the blue whistle floating in the dark hair around his mouth, signaling for the teams to switch. "Make sure to say hello to your new friends," he barked.

"Hey," said the boy from Texas, Jerry, joining Seb on the court. "You're not so good, right?"

"No, not really," Seb said.

"That's okay. I'm pretty good, they had this last year in my school in Texas."

"Thanks. I'm getting a little better... "

"No, really, let me take care of this," Jerry assured him easily. He wasn't wearing boots or a big hat, but he seemed gentlemanly like he was from Texas.

And, for the next few minutes, his shiny head bounced around Seb, barely giving him a chance to contribute. Every time their opponents got a rally going, Jerry got winded and sweaty and red, but played on, seeming to float with load slaps across the floor.

Seb bounced it back, mostly, when the birdie was sent right at him. A couple of times, after the other side got tangled together defending against his teammate's strong volleys sprayed across the court, Seb tapped the birdie over the net for a score. Jerry grinned in appreciation.

And then Mr. D's whistle blew and they changed teams again.

Seb turned around to see Cordell, a black boy with a cheering smile and tight hair, approaching. His shirt, a black soccer ball and some words centered in a sea of powder blue, hanging a little too tight on him, he strolled up with a hint of a prance.

They'd been friends in kindergarten, which Seb felt like he was already starting to forget, and for a small part of first grade. By fourth grade, they were no longer even really friendly, as can happen, really.

He'd been popping up to say hi and check in with Seb a bit in school for a while, but it was already long ago that Cordell had really finally drifted away to be with a new group, more admired, more available when Seb wasn't, and into things he couldn't be into.

It wasn't like Seb himself didn't have new things he was into that were different than the scuffed trucks with eyeballs they once played together with in the dirt, though.

Cordell smiled as he walked up. "You want to serve first, Seb?"

Seb shrugged, before pointing to his former friend, with a friendly nod.

Their matches were fair, not great, and they barely said a word. Cordell tried to keep the game away from Seb. But Seb wasn't as bad as he feared, really, and he caught one of his hot streaks. Over on the next court, the two sides began taunting each other.

One of their own opponents was leaning in toward the other, his mouth expressing somewhat impassioned plotting. Their lips kept moving after he moved away.

"So, you doing anything new?" Seb asked, as the other team began a serve.

"Not really."

"Still playing Surf Wars?"

Cordell shifted the game back to their opponents' side with a backhanded flick of his wrist.

"Nah, I'm not really doing that," Cordell said with a shrug after. "Play games. I don't really have time."

"Why? You were really good at the North Shore level."

"Ha, yeah I was. I'm just too busy."

"We're eleven, Cordell."

“I know, I know,” he responded, knocking the shuttlecock again over the net. “What’s the possible reason I’m so busy aside from soccer? But it’s like never-ending.”

“I get it,” Seb said, hitting the birdie as best he could in the right direction. “That’s cool.”

Cordell stood up straight, and caught his breath. Seb knew for almost sure that Cordell realized he wasn’t going to be an Olympic soccer star, or play in Europe or anything.

“Yeah. It sucks having to practice so much for the travel team. But I mean, you know how it used to be even when I was just a kid.”

He swatted the birdie over the net and it appeared to shrink as it dove to the shiny wooden floors. A racket flew past it, too late, and then its owner jogged to retrieve it.

“Anyway, if you want you can check out the highlight videos, Coach Roccamano posts them on our page.”

Seb felt a twinge of guilt over how boring it sounded as he responded, saying, “Sure, totally.” He tried to cover up with a few hops between his feet. “I’ll watch with Connor.”

“You guys still hanging out a lot?” Cordell asked.

“Yeah. You know, we do stuff.”

“Your mom still driving you around in that big white car?”

“Well, it’s not so big as it was,” Seb said. “I mean, you can tell when you can actually get in without my mom helping you. But yeah. Same one as when we did karate.”

“You’ll probably end up driving it,” Cordell replied.

Another set of long volleys, impressive enough short movements on both sides, and Cordell and Seb won two more points. And once again, the birdie came flying back under the net.

As Cordell bent down to grab it and serve it back, a presence grew over Seb’s shoulders, the manifestation of Mr. D, and he could have sworn he felt the man’s breath as his big body took short breaths and exhaled.

Mr. D, leaning backed with a clipboard clutched in his left hand and left rested inside the elastic of his shorts, pulled

up to watch Seb and Cordell and their antagonists compete. Seb focused more intently on the game, and soon, as Mr. D lingered, a cone of quiet exuded outward around them.

The two sides bounced the birdie efficiently back and forth, quickly trading of the focus of play, but it wasn't too long before their weaker and weaker strikes left each jointly lunging closer to the net and then finally tied up in it. The plastic-coated strings scratched Seb as he twisted his way out.

Behind them, the big man started yelling words that were the opposite of encouragement. While Cordell looked as he might laugh at any moment, Seb stared up, knowing he'd been judged, and his eyes settled on the basketball nets tipped back and lifted high off the floor. He thought of how the right kind of power-up would let him reach it for a dunk.

He was brought back to reality.

"Come on now, Sebastian Liddel," Mr. D said, clearly unaware that Seb's successful hits had been lucky. "Make just those guys look foolish here instead of all of you. You can hit the little birdie ten yards, can't you?"

And so, as the gym teacher watched them begin again, Seb picked up the birdie and served. He appreciated he didn't miss, he sent it arching only weakly over the net. As it crossed over, a hand from the other side rose up and then brought down the taunt strings of his light racket, and returned the birdie straight into the ground, past a lunging Jarrod.

Mr. D stared away, silent for a minute, whistled, and then moved on, softly mumbling something about his regrets for the latest generation.

"Well, never mind Seb, we're winning anyway," Cordell said.

The former lineman never looked back, and Seb heard him haranguing the next court on his long journey around the crowded floor. They finished their game, the dim whiff of burnt sneaker in the air.

Later, Mr. D's whistle attacked their ears with three long blasts. Seb's brain rang a bit as they all laid or tossed equipment with clanks and thuds, bending and turning. As Seb walked toward the locker room wrapped in the cattle-like crowd of mostly taller kids, a shove sent him stumbling forward and off to the side. Letting out half a curse, "Sh...." he nearly fell.

"Watch it, duckling," said the tough voice behind him. "I don't have to time to wait for you to lay an egg."

"What are you even saying Lawrence?" Seb shot back with a sharp nastiness, planting his feet, turning and stiffening. A lanky pig-faced beast in dirty sneakers smirked back at him.

He had really gotten tired of Lawrence Johnson, who was almost two years older than Seb, because it was his second year taking the grade and because of the way their birthdays fell. Lawrence had somehow fallen in with some kids that already found Seb to be an easy target. And by his nature, he was a bully, tall and large-browed, nasty, and dirty. And Seb was easy prey.

"Oh, shut up, butt-munch," Lawrence grunted, and again jabbed his hand into Seb's shoulder, this time from the front.

And as his palm rammed Seb, his foot swung around the back of Seb's leg. Seb tripped over it, twisting and hopping backward, before losing his balance. He slid across the floor and banged against the padded walls. Lawrence laughed, and Seb heard his crew and a couple of other classmates join in.

"Thanks ducky," he tossed off over his own shoulder. "That was really funny. I needed a laugh."

Staying down to ensure his tormentor walked off with his group, Seb looked for Cordell, or Raghuram or Jerry or Sawyer, to provide some cover in case he wasn't done with him. Seb knew he was overpowered. He wished Connor had been around. He was glad Mr. D wasn't.

But the class had all left and he was sitting all alone.

He sat for a moment, until he realized that the soft sound he was hearing in his ears was the defeat music that followed a losing KDO battle. It was not a defeated realization, though. It was more amused, he figured.

He stood and stumbled at first toward the locker room. He caught of a glimpse of two boys that they knew, Josh and Samir, cutting through the opposite end of the gym toward their next class.

As he stepped lightly in the other direction, he thought he heard them talking about CityRiddle. He didn't feel like trying to be friendly.

Seb wasn't sure why he bothered antagonizing Lawrence Johnson any more than he needed. Lawrence Johnson was the type to be wear a white wife-beater t-shirt while smoking a cigar when he was older. He was the type to maybe kill a man with his own hands, bare and bloody.

Seb was not. Instead, he straightened his floppy shirt and started crafting the story for Connor.

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His final two classes of the day, of every other day of the first half of that year, were Health and Life Sciences. When Seb had first gotten emailed his schedule, they felt so right on the screen next to each other. But he found that when they there were every week stacked on top of each other, they were fairly different, and yet equally as boring.

Health class focused on sensitive subjects, like self-esteem and bullying and pregnancy, in a soft and friendly way, with touchy feeling banter from the teacher.

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# Chapter Two

## There Were Words

School officially ended, every day, at 3:24 p.m. Buses were supposed to start leaving ten minutes later but they almost never did.

It was usually more like 3:45 p.m., or later, before the kids were all boarded up and the doors shut. Then, the yellow herd could be sent rumbling down the road out through the oversized metal fences. The last one took about five more minutes before departing.

Those delays, in a self-fulfilling way, left time for students to congregate in the courtyard just outside the doors, as the departing teachers weakly tried to shoe them further away and heckled their slowpokery. Some shot back that they were waiting for parents or brothers or sisters, and others just instated they wouldn't dawdle around for longer, and then did.

That time of year, it was hard not to notice several types of birds letting out wild bursts of song from the trees, uneven melodies that ringed across the parking lot. Flocks, flying higher up, passed by occasionally, small black dots in messy groups and lopsided lines.

The hissing and purring of the buses pulling in provided static and a low rumble to the high pitches of the throngs.

Connor, of course, had found Seb.

"I can't believe the fearsome Lawrence Johnson didn't do more damage to you," Connor told Seb as they sat atop a

cold stone wall in the courtyard, watching their classmates scurrying by.

“I would have done some damage to him if...”

“If... ?”

“If... I could have done some damage to him.” His hands rose, opening in mock befuddlement. He knew Connor knew there really wasn’t much to it.

“He’s like 45. He probably could adopt me.”

“He could be your grandfather. No, he could adopt your grandfather.”

“Whatever. It’s fine, he’s a jerk. So be it.”

“I know you’re not like that, Seb. You should watch some videos on how to do karate and totally kick his butt. I’m going to find those for you. Trust me.”

“Like you’ve ever been in a fight.”

“I’m ready to be,” Connor said, kicking his right leg out.

Seb could see Jerry in the distance walking alone past the busses and into the parking lot.

He got into an ancient white pick-up truck with out-of-state license plates, one that Seb had the feeling the cowboy kid would end up driving someday. He thought about the kid’s skills on the badminton court, his warm smile, and seeming normalness, and knew he’d eventually find plenty of friends.

Two girls walked by sloppily singing a song that Seb recognized, with high notes bouncing in a rhyming melody almost like a lullaby. One stopped and swung her arm in a circle before jogging to catch up. Her friend joined her in yelling the chorus.

Off by the wall, a group of older nerds shouted quotes from an old comedy, about the Knights of the Round Table. And from all around them came the catchphrases of make-up and gaming and music vloggers on Youtube, GoVidGo, Twitch, and Vine, giggling impersonations in voices high and low -

“And now it’s tiiime to be fabulish...”

“No apologies, just follow me, get yourself some skills, pay the bills...”

“For the thrilllll. Of. The. Killlll...”

“Gotta get it great great!”

“So who’s looking like two billion bucks now?”

-- escaped from and rounded out the ambient noise made by the energized crowd.

They often got lost for fifteen or twenty minutes there, just milling about and soaking it in, the two friends, charging up on the youth. Seb tugged at his shirt and studied his friend’s filthy sneakers.

Looking up, Seb saw her first, the girl in the faux dark brown fur. Behind her, she was rolling an overstuffed backpack in floral prints, and it seemed outsized for her but she dragged it well. With shiny hair and particular lips, she looked way too pretty to talk to ever. Even, though, of course, they knew her. She’d been in the same grade the whole time, the same classes.

That Wednesday, she looked a bit lost in thought, or maybe a lot in a rush. As soon as he realized that Connor had seen her too, he grimaced.

“Hey Holly,” Connor said loudly as she arrived closest to their position.

Holly Hernandez looked at them and smiled, and who could tell if it was genuine or on instinct? But, no, it was probably genuine, Holly was genuine, he knew.

“Oh. Hey Connor,” she said. “Hey Sebastian.” Even as she paused, she was looking around getting ready to pass. It was as if someone had hit the pause button twice in a row. “Hope you guys are good. Anyway,” she laughed, distractedly. “I’m sorry gotta go, I’m late. My mom is picking me up for tennis lessons. There might not be much longer the outdoor courts, you know. Anyway, I hope you guys did better on that social studies quiz than me.”

“Tell me again why I need to care about Eli Whitney?” Connor said.

“No worries, Holly, see you around.”

Taking the opening, she smiled and stormed on. Seb watched her clipped gait interrupted in intervals by her bag’s roll bouncing over creases in the ground.

“Nice girl,” Connor couldn’t help but saying, with satisfaction, “nice girl.”

The din of the area cut with a hush between them.

Connor looked at Seb, who was suddenly aware of his silence. “Dude, she called you Sebastian. That's pretty formal. You going to be okay with that when you're married? Or do you think maybe she'll let you can change your name?”

“Shut up Connor, or I'm going to tell your mom you never turned in the homework on Brazil.”

“Ok. Ok. Jeez, someone is a bit, touchy. Don't go all Hulk out on me.”

“Do I look like I am, moron?”

“Like I said touchy.”

And just like that they changed the topic of conversation

With the flow from the doors thinning and lines to the buses mostly filled, the aides gave signals to each other and students began boarding the vehicles, more slowly than could ever seem possible.

Seb and Connor finally hopped down and headed over.

“Hey, look,” Connor said, pointing to a girl in glasses and a jean jacket with sequins running past them. She headed alone across the asphalt, mostly perpendicular to the school, toward a car draped in the colors of a dirty bumblebee car near the far front of the lot.

From on top of a fairly nice-looking car that he clearly called his own, a teenage boy in squared black glasses and a solid dark tee cut in a shallow V down his chest flashed a grin to the girl and slid down from the hood.

Seb knew the girl as a classmate, and of course knew the face with a thin black mustache she was approaching. He

chuckled to himself as he thought about how all mustaches were inherently funny and how that that was their intention.

Almost at the same time as the trim teenager jumped off the car, he was slinging his phone into his pants, and landing and looked around with his shoulders held naturally high. Seb could almost hear the boy's voice, his middling nasally pitch, narrating his drop. And as he and Connor watched, the guy swung his head, and started talking inaudibly across the parking lot, before ducking into the driver's seat.

The short clip that they were left with in their memories was a fluid and rhythmic performance.

"Yup," Seb responded as she reached the car and got in. "Batzinger123."

"BZ."

"The man himself. Here for another sensational time."

"B Z, B Z..." Connor intoned.

"... 1 2 3," they chanted quietly together.

Seb couldn't help but laugh. He liked that they didn't take it too seriously. Clearly, it was something they did rather often, watching Batzinger's streams, but it wasn't like the cornerstone of their lives, like they felt some people got with some YouTubers.

The car appeared to start up and, and they could see the wipers flipped back and forth twice, before he turned them off, and then the body of the vehicle softly quivered with bass from some music that had some things in common with a march.

"I totally can't get over Lisa Powers being his cousin. Seriously. I think they live right near each other, more or less," Connor said.

"I know. I still think it's pretty cool."

"I mean, he's definitely the best. What does he have, maybe, two thousand-plus subscribers at this point?"

"Oh, definitely more. It's cool that he's from around here."

They kept making their way forward, approaching the stub of a line being slurped up by their bus, a pudgy shorthaired woman counting each child disappearing up the stairs.

“Right?” Connor asked, turning. “He will no doubt be the most famous person we know.”

“Do we know him?”

“Well, you know what I mean... I can’t wait to watch tonight.”

“Me neither, what’s he supposed to be doing?”

“CityRiddle mods, I think.”

“Didn’t he do them Sunday?”

“No, that was Disney Infinity, remember, he got the water slide. The water slide that was epic? The ‘Epic Water Slide of Destiny.’ ”

“Oh right,” Seb said, stepping forward. “Hey, remember with Surf Wars when he unlocked the ice board?”

“Totally,” Connor said, chuckling as they got on the bus. “Anyway,” he said, barreling past the driver and down the arms and legs sticking out of the soft rubbered row, “so, he’s doing City mods.”

“Oh right,” Seb said, glancing out of the windows. “Nice.”

The yellow car pulled gingerly out of its spot and crawled across other empty spaces. Even as it passed closer by, they could barely see shadows of the people inside; from their perspective, it was as good as if the car was being driven by some internal humanoid robot.

He pulled in front of the row of school vehicles, and took off free down the road, no bigger than a Hot Wheels toy to Seb and Connor from the distance before turning and disappeared.

As they sat, Connor changed the subject back to Holly. Seb realized he had been bracing for it; the simple mention of her name brought the picture of her crooked smile and pinkish brown cheeks framed by pure black hair.

“She really is cute, though. Like if America did its own version of anime. You know it’d be totally different, for our sensibilities.”

“I mean, I guess she’s cute but...” Seb offered.

“But what? Don’t tell me you don’t like her teeth, they’re visual character building.”

“No, it’s just, I don’t like talking about girls... I don’t know, don’t start talking about girls all the time.

“Why? I thought we cleared this up about the cooties: They don’t have them.”

“I just don’t think we’re supposed to like girls yet.”

“Seriously, what do you mean?”

“Connor... I looked it up on Wikipedia and it seemed like, depending on your country, obviously, we don’t even really start dating yet. Or whatever.”

“Whatever?”

“Courtship? Going out? I don’t know, it was kind of vague...”

“Ok, ok. I’m just kidding around; I know you don’t need to ask Holly out or anything. Or worry about her saying no, I guess more. Not that you should worry.”

Seb wasn’t sure if his friend understood; but he hoped was clear enough.

He just didn’t like talking about girls. He was finding it was getting harder to talk to them, along with about them, and that didn’t seem fair. And, he didn’t know how they had anything to do with hanging with your buddy.

A lot of them, even, were getting really pretty, sure, but that didn’t seem to have anything to do with what Seb wanted to spend his time on. At least not really, not yet.

Buying a Coke for a girl seemed a worse use of a few dollars than some DLC. Talking on the phone with one was unappealing when compared to talking over voice-chat in a clan game. Though he had, of course, had enjoyable raids with a few girls when he was briefly into those games.

Anything more intimate seemed more trouble than it was worth.

Connor was starting to think differently, Seb thought. But Seb wasn't going to let himself change where he spent his money or who he talked with. Seb wasn't going to forget that girls other than his mom were icky; he had enough other things going on. Well, not icky exactly... since only when it came to thinking about them in that way.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out his phone, but that didn't stop Connor from just changing the subject again and carrying on.

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Connor's basement that afternoon was heated to make the Fall feel like the Summer, explaining why he'd changed into his too-small Time River Bandits t-shirt while Seb had gone to look for pretzel rods. Then, they'd plopped onto the couch to game.

Seb's eyes squinted slightly as Connor used his blue clear-plastic controller to slash at Seb's elven character. Seb backed away, parrying successfully with the factory issued feel in his hands. The counter-attack included a few individual hits and then a middle-level combo.

The response was quick, fluid, harsh even, but insufficient as Seb's elf leaped and leaped, up and backward to the right, up and backward to the right. He swayed as he timed his taps.

Turing a little red, Connor leaned into his button-mashing, hoping for a hiccup in Seb's rhythm, and unable to find one.

In the corner, sitting at a cheap wooden computer desk, the back of the well-washed My Little Pony shirt worn by Connor's sister was taking gentle slaps as her ponytail flopped around on it. Crackling over and through her were the sounds of an exuberant teen explaining and explaining



and explaining, in wild shifts of pitches. Paige was watching one of her YouTube make-up videos.

She laughed, occasionally snorting in her own way that was barely a snort, as the girl's voice modulated across shriller and shriller outbursts, breaking occasionally for short spurts of music and amateur sound effects like a slide whistle and chicken clucks.

After one of the girl's long rambling rants ended with canned laughter, Connor finally yelled at his sister, "Thanks, Paige."

"What now, Connor?" she moaned back.

"That's literally sounds like the dumbest thing I've ever heard. I feel like I am now ready to be going back into fourth grade, like I'm doing a reverse Billy Madison."

"Shut up, Gamergate. She's funny."

"I don't know how you can consider that funny."

"How do you even know Billy Madison?"

From Connor, Seb knew it was that movie about some doofy rich guy who needs to go back and take school over again from the beginning.

"It was on cable."

"Well, people can."

"What?"

"Consider it funny."

"Can not."

"Can too."

"Can too or can nuuuuu...?"

"Blehh, like I even care what you think?" She brushed her hair off her shoulder. "I don't know how you guys think PeePeeDee or PooPooDooor, or whoever, is funny."

"That's not even who we watch Paige."

Seb turned between lives to watch her response. She wrinkled her slightly flat nose at her younger brother. Seb knew he should try to stay out of it. That they'd eventually tired themselves out.

“Well, whatever, Very Shari *is* really funny. I mean, she just called it Madagascar. While showing off some really awesome mascara, from SAC Cosmetics, Isaac Bugiardino’s company.”

“Is he from Africa?”

“No.”

“Honestly, I’m sorry, sis, that’s just not very funny.”

Seb felt Connor’s elbows in his ribs. He looked up at elf’s name at the top of the screen, followed by multiples of the points that sat beside Connor’s.

“Sorry, Paige, it’s really not.”

“Shut up, Gamergate 2.0. I don’t even care what you think. What do you guys even know, you’re not even old enough to go to the Mall by yourself.”

“Hey, we’re having a good time here. What do you even do at the Mall? When do you even go?”

“I don’t know? When I want to get something? The point is Mom and Dad let me go with my friends and not you, because you’re the baby. Dad basically even told me that.”

“Right, and I’m the one who’s got a friend around today, and not you. You’ve just got Scary Shari. Howard knows that and he’s just trying to make you feel better.”

“*Very* Shari. And no offense to you, Seb, but I do not really count you as a friend for Connor. Like, he’s more like a charity case for you.” She turned back in the chair to the computer, her finger reaching to rest on the mouse. “I was supposed to go out this afternoon with Marisa and Winnie, but I didn’t feel like it. Sorry to be ruining your date.”

They understood her comments as good-natured, or at least Seb did. Connor, he knew, sometimes got a bit bent out of shape by their bickering. Not much, though, since Connor dished it out with the same sincerity. They mostly knew to stay in their lanes.

“I bet I know someone who wouldn’t mind a date,” he tossed back.

“A charity case, Connor. You’re a charity case. Sorry, Seb.”

After a few more squints of low quality generic guitar rock, a singsong voice blasted at Paige and out from her corner, where in front of her, Seb imaged knew, a miniature version of an older teenage girl, dirty blond and cute as a button, would be waiving her shiny straight hair.

“So, hi... everyone... It’s me. Again. Thanks for coming. And so, what we’re going to be doing in this video is a no-make-up, make-up video. Some tips and tricks and pointers. And it’s just going to be really uplifting and really, uh, exciting, and I think you’re going to like it a lot... I mean, you all know what I mean, I mean I hope you’re going to like it a lot.”

Seb began to tune out what was going on in Paige’s corner and focusing on the sloppy but effective attacks of her brother.

“And so anyway, here we are and whether it’s your look or your style, you all know we need to see what our number one thing is, right, and so... ”

Seb’s elf began striking as he strung a few combos together.

As the boys sat for a fourth hour on the comfy couch in front of the big TV in Connor’s basement -- having been interrupted only by a dinner of syrup-smearred waffles with Paige and Connor’s parents, Howard and Margaret Tippet -- they sometimes talked or gossiped and sometimes spoke only of the game in front of them.

And other times, they just fell silent, letting the grunts and bleeps and explosions fill the room.

But mostly there were conversations and mostly, the conversation covered topics such as popular culture and school, things like the new Marvel Cinematic Universe movie and Samir’s awful haircut, though occasionally it drifted to deeper subjects, like Seb’s mom working all the time or his trouble with Lawrence Johnson.

Connor admitted that he never really knew what was going on in Pre-Algebra, and was scared he would fail. Seb explained it was just like when you knew how many shots you fired and how many goons you killed, you could figure out how many shots it took. Connor once confessed to liking a girl from a TV show, but when his sister wasn't around. Seb remembered not even liking the show.

But most often, they stuck with talk of games, celebrities and fantasy, while rotating through game titles at an irregular pace.

That's what they did.

Sometimes it felt like Connor was fooling Seb into coming over, into pretending it was a good time for him too. But it wasn't really the case, he wasn't hoping he just acting that way. Seb certainly didn't give anything up to be there. Every once in awhile, he would even talk about not having a father, which was helpful, they supposed.

He didn't really know what to say about it to Connor, he only rarely knew how to think about it. It's not like he knew his father, and saw him get sick or grow old. What did he know, anyway, about the man? What was he supposed to think that he wasn't good enough?

Connor understood, though; he didn't press, or really let it linger in the air. Seb felt bad when he did things like getting weird and quiet, or obsessing over some little small thing, like not even Lawrence Johnson, but something awkward he said to a girl, like that time he told her bet that she enjoyed something "all night long."

He didn't even mean it that way. She'd made a scrunched face, like she smelled sour milk; he couldn't even look in her eyes, felt warm and embarrassed. That was more his friend's type of blunder, verbal ones, Seb wasn't used to it. He kept bringing it up vaguely to Connor, but Connor didn't really see what the big deal was.

Paige sometimes sat in the corner, not really listening, like that day, but instead watching videos, or commenting

on random blogs appropriate for a 14-year-old, or checking her friend's pages across social media.

Lost in it for hours as they played their games, she sporadically emerged from her experiential trance to joke back and forth with them. Which they obviously enjoyed and prolonged, while keeping an eye on how their fingers were fighting or racing or building. It was a good time. They might not have much, but they had their little womb down the basement stairs.

So, they stayed sunk on the big couch cushions, not even getting into the games with building modes, like CityRiddle or the Sims, just another happy leisurely day, Seb thought, something he would remember.

Until they realized what time it was...

"Wow, it's eight oh seven," Seb said, abruptly after the end of a Mario Kart round where he'd finished eighth, undone by some lightning. He held up his phone to Connor.

"Batzinger, damn," Connor said, losing his enjoyment of his victory lap. "How'd it get so late?"

Paige normally might have kept them from the computer, just to mess with them, even though she was done anyway and just killing time until her TV show came on reading about celebrities. But she wasn't really in the mood, and willfully slid her sweatpants off the swivel chair and whipped her hair as she dropped onto the couch.

"Seb, you mind if I fool around with your phone for a bit while I wait for my show," she said, juggling remotes to the television, trying to get back to the regular channels.

"Sure," he said, tossing it from over the couch beside her. "Just log out of your apps when you're done, I don't want to be all in your business."

Connor started scrolling and clicking through the streaming site, GoVidGo; Seb never knew why he didn't just bookmark the page...

Instead it was first, GoVidGo's home page...

Then a page full of smaller pages and faces, in rectangles in colorful rows, tiny text...

Then, the mostly white page with a big rectangle with the frozen image of a blurry boy, overlaid with a pudgy white arrow, and in the corner, the GoVidGo logo and small photo of a boy whose glasses made him look logo-like at the reduced size.

Connor's right shoulder dipped as he tapped his left finger down.

A commercial played, the perspective flying through rows of skyscrapers and then across a bridge and high into sky, a teaser for CityRiddle 2 (out in December!) that was popping out fairly often, alternating between a couple of action movies and an Army recruitment ad.

When it stopped they were not greeted by the start of their stream but by another dark band, but this time darker.

It settled into focus to reveal, in letters a little less dark, a blocky announcement floated in a loop from right to left: "RUNNING 10 MINUTES LATE. WAIT HERE. SERIOUSLY"

A song the generic equivalent of stock photos played, part of the small GoVidGo rotation of wait music.

"Ha," said Seb toward Connor's neck.

"I guess he's running late. But at least we didn't miss him."

"Yeah, I know."

"I hope he's serious about getting on."

"He's pretty reliable. But you know, you never know."

"What about someone else?"

"Who?"

"FeeBird? MisssterMassster?"

"I guess..."

Out of the corner of their eyes they saw something shake or otherwise change on the screen.

Between the typical snowstorms of seemingly random words of every size, the slurry seen on most webpages, a Start Menu emerged and a flurry of movement behind it,

blurry scenes of everyday in a city, cars rushing and people walking, building tops and manhole covers.

There was a little white box pressed into the corner of the video-player.

And in the tiny box, the boy sat moving bobbing around the camera in a swivel chair; the long square panels of a door were over his right shoulder and, to his left, a nest of books, open toyboxes and mail resting atop a fake-wood dresser.

A few western-themed posters on the walls hung on the walls, supposed to be cool, and mostly succeeding. A bunch of game-guides sat on the foot of his bed.

The room felt like one that they had familiarity with, that anyone could kind of know, because how really different are teenager's rooms, whether 13 or 19? And yet also, it felt, truly, cooler.

The bespectacled boy in dark clothes returned to his chair after hurriedly closing the door and settled into the screen. It was the same dude from the parking lot they had seen before, Lisa Power's cousin, so much closer zoomed in, and yet just as small.

"Aaaaand ok-ay ok-ay ok-ay," Batzinger said slowly, swirling the words, and then catching his breath and then halting for another beat to catch it further. "And I'm so so so so sorry all you guys. So so so sorry. So so. What can I even say, I was here but then I needed to go do something for my mom. She thanks you," he said, bending forward and pressing his hands together. "But now I'm here. And you there," he let out a relieved sigh.

"Anyway, thank you, thank you, thank you, it's me, Batzinger123, you know, the B Z B Z 1 2 3," he mock-chanted, taking a pregnant pause, "here for another sensational time with CityRiddle, the game we've probably played maybe as much as any others."

"As you all know, we all call..." he continued, emphasizing the last two words with a certain flair, "or, I guess really, 'I'

... I call this here stream, on GoVidGo, 'City Twiddlers.' And we are now starting episode 22. And what we do on City Twiddlers, as you know, is twiddle around with mods, different ones and they're usually really good ones, maybe? I don't know, I feel like we've been having some good luck recently."

"Which is true," Seb let out.

"Totally true," Connor responded. "Like you said before."

"The other thing we're going to be doing today," Batzinger added, "is, of course, a joke, and if you're ready, we can do that and then move on to the game. And I'm sorry about showing up late."

He began entering the game on the screen, clicking through save menus and settings, large words, and a blinking "loading" or similar hieroglyphics.

"That was not my intention," he said.

Seb settled into a lean that he felt like for the moment would be conducive to viewing.

"Not at all. I'm glad somebody's here, in fact it looks we have 35, nope, 36, of you, and so that's a lot. Not the most we've ever seen for CityRiddlers, certainly, but I'm glad you're all here, and who knows who will show up. Whatever the expectation of their destination," he added, breaking several of the words into more syllables than they possessed.

"And so now, no joke it's time for the joke, which was submitted this week by that\_Jersey\_kid, so thank you, TJK. We're from Jersey too, of course, but anyone can help us out by submitting jokes at batzinger123 or at [batzinger123@bz123.com](mailto:batzinger123@bz123.com) ... And now for the joke...

"So, you know that feeling when you walk into a room and totally forget why you went in there?

"Right? It happens. No doubt, it's happened to me..."

"Well, turns out it's just G\*d playing Sims and he just cancelled your action..."



He mugged silently for the webcam, making four or five different faces.

“Ha? Right?”

He halfway apologized also for the joke as he talked about it, saying he hoped it wasn't offensive to the religious. And then he paused to lift his shoulders, before prattling on.

Connor asked Seb if he got the joke, after they both had just chuckled over it. Seb mumbled a few words that he wasn't sure were either fully planned or audible enough to hear. Connor let it pass.

“Whoa, ha, soo anyway, what we're doing today is really getting into the mechanics of subway mods, which I showed you last time, and I'm going to introduce you to the new pool mod, which is probably better than sending a whole episode on it, but I'll played with it installed later.

“Why do you need pools in a city, I don't know. Let me know now or leave a comment if you really always wanted one. I mean in the game.”

Connor looked at Seb.

“Right?” said Connor. “Who needs a pool?”

“Well, there are pools in cities. Like Brooklyn has pools.”

“For people's houses?”

“No, like, for everyone.”

Batzinger's game preparation paused on the macro screen of a CityRiddle game, an eagle's eye view of a city, up a little higher than a helicopter could get, clouds slowly drifting by.

“Now, if you look at the little box over on the right of the screen, we're going to use the 'gameplay setting' button. You know, over there with the other little boxes, ha, right? Anyway, where I'm clicking, below the health symbol, above the one with the two arrows, the agency-sector selector.

“As usual, that's where we're going to go to turn on expansion mods that we installed if we didn't when we started the game, just click in there and I'm going to check it out to make sure that we did...”

On the side of the screen there were words running down in a long gray box. Seb, who had pulled over Connor's brown folding chair, glanced over at the textual scroll.

***Welcome to the chat room!***

...floated alone above the flow. Just below came, the latest in a conversation,

***jazznutspanda3:*** *too funny, u are best of best BZ123*

***that\_Jersey\_kid\_:*** *expansion expansion*

***gjo187:*** *<---- up2it*

***farragogo:*** *bet he didn't know what hit hiim even*

***kimcando86:*** *Mushahahahaha*

***jazznutspanda3:*** *yea remember da sweeter da honey, da bigga da bees.*

***kimcando86:*** *were u bin anyway batzinger?*

***ashketchup:*** *good one*

Connor was logged in as onno11, the screen-name he used pretty much everyway, though sometimes if he could he dropped the numbers.

At the same time, he and Seb both noticed the cursor blinking at the bottom of the screen, just above his hands, invitingly.

The words popped to the top of the letterfall.

***onno11:*** *pooooool*

And, almost immediately, down the line moved, pushed lower by,

***playa8er:*** *such a funny joke if you think about it. hi Batzinger!!!!*

Seb felt a charge as Batzinger's eyes flitted over to the scroll as well as he clicked one small 'x' into existence after another.

"Hold on, ha, oh, yeah, hey, playa8er, glad to see you. Yeah, it was maybe a terrible joke but I actually liked it. And, hey, onno and jazznuts and kim. Again, so sorry I was late, and sorry "

A new line blipped into existence at the top,

***ashketchup:*** *what about me!!!?!*

“Oh, and hey Ash, thanks for coming,” Batzinger added.

The game screen itself, projected from across town into space and back again and to the computer in Connor’s basement, was now pivoting as Batzinger turned his attention back to it, bouncing around a tall street corner in the middle of four rows of concrete.

Batzinger had moved the game into street mode. Batzinger leaned away from the spin in his little square.

The red count of those logged into the livestream ticked higher in occasional flashes, while the chatter continued to the side.

“Oh, hey Seb,” Paige called, “your mom says she’s going to be here at 9:30 and you better have done your homework. Kissie emoji.”

“Thanks Paige,” he responded.

Batzinger floated the camera forward down the gully between the urban towers and clicked his arrow on a suited man walking stiffly down the sidewalk and, the perspective of view flew down and swinging around to take the professionals.

The old sets of words and numbers and symbols in the bars across the top and bottom of the screen disintegrated, getting replaced with new sets of words and numbers and symbols.

Connor and Seb sat watching silently as their host over-explained how he needed to find a character with a subway card, the type of inventory or attribute that the game made easier to find from citizen mode.

They jogged down the streets of a city midtown, the man’s grey appareled arms and legs jutting into their vision when Batzinger directed him to punch or jump.

He had them run for awhile, talking about the combination of regret and glee with which he had played one of the more violently mods in an earlier video, for his multiple-player stream with DevonshireDan, the Scottish gamer he’d met playing Destiny.

He was switching between characters occasionally as passed by them for the sake of novelty. He talked about how he barely ever played the full story mode anymore, where you try to be mayor and get characters and cut-scenes.

He explained how he liked how mods like the subway mod buried itself in the normal gameplay, randomly. How that could be even better for adding flavor to the game. Connor and Seb listened.

He found a nurse with a subway card and took her to a slightly pixelated subway entrance. When the pink map popped up, he clicked on his destination, but instead of popping up there, a station with a train with open doors materialized.

“And so there it is, full-on subway mod. It’s really just something cool, seeing a different part of the city, but also you can use it to get around.

“And see all of these guys down here are totally normal. All their stats are there, the items, you can jump into them, everything. The cars are just hallways modified to be a little wider, with wall-to-wall couches, and...

“Oh, hey, yo, don’t be disrespectful,”

Seb and Connor both looked over to the chat.

**farragogo:** *sorry*

**jazznutspanda3:** *Oke sry*

**ashketchup:** *sorry*

“Ha, no need to be sorry,” Batzinger said, moving into the train. “Just don’t be using curses at people especially. I mean, we know you’re just kidding. This is a family friendly place. But, really, don’t apologize, just keep it clean.”

**farragogo:** *sorry for saying sorry*

**farragogo:** *i'll just go back to my corner*

**gjo187:** *sooooo hows everyones morning*

**farragogo:** *DatFeelsMan*

**gjo187:** *uhhh so many sorrys*

**GoVidGoBot:** *\$ The stream has been live 24 minutes 57 seconds*

**farragogo:** *sorry for you making me say sorry and make me have to say sorry making ashketchup say sorry*

**jazznutspanda3:** *Is it to late now to say sorry again*

**that\_Jersey\_kid\_:** *Is it too late now to say sorry?*

**ashketchup:** *omg ha ha*

**xFluffy\_Unicornx:** *Indeed it is too late*

**jazznutspanda3:** *Beat you Jersey*

**jazznutspanda3:** *; )*

**kimcando86:** *wowsers, a subway*

onno11 didn't have anything to say because the boys were among the dozens who didn't really join in the discussion, not really chatting except for a few stray remarks (their two more that night were: "nice" and "he's gonna feel that later") and mostly ignored the inanity beside Batzinger.

The gamer played for another thirty minutes, getting in and out of subways and just talking about what was on his mind for awhile, and then toggling over to macro mode and installing pools and then adding other buildings and stores to a part of his city he'd been working on sprucing up.

It was hard to say what made Batzinger so good for doing this kind of thing. He just seemed to be so comfortable with it. There was a natural flow to his ramblings, so much so that kids like Seb and Connor mostly watched

The count of people following the stream reached as high as 73, briefly, before slowly tripping back down every few minutes as he ran over the top of the hour, when a lot of streamers with bigger names would come on GoVidGo. jazznuts, farragogo, almost all of the others eventually gone as he wrapped up the show, completing the promised task of

Seb and Connor were in no rush.

Because Paige's socialite show had ended and she wanted to get back on the computer, she joined them in watching.

“So anyway, all of you guys, as usual, it was great to have you and I know it’s late, but, as always, keep striving, and come back for some more with B Z B Z 1 2 3. I’m going to post this video later, so like it, spread it, and never regret it ... and leave any comments you want.

“And I’ll talk about those next time... on City Twiddlers... and be sure to check out my other channels for more fun videos on all sorts of stuff...”

And as the last words escaped the boy’s lips, the door behind him exploded open. Two huge beams of light advanced, flaring into rainbows on the camera mounted on top of his computer as they bumped along. He flailed wildly out of his chair, and rushed for a corner, seemingly alarmed.

There was loud and mean shouting, and arms waiving, and the room bouncing. And then the boy, his shirt stretched by a tightly gripped hand, was dragged across the room, before disappearing behind the bulbs of shattered light that bobbing over him.

“Holy shit,” they could hear Batzinger gasp. “What are you doing?”

Men shouted gruffly at him for a few more seconds, one gave strong orders. It could have been English or another language, it was impossible to tell, everything was too loud.

“No... what... please...”

And then, with a swipe of a dark fuzzy shape, the video fell into blackness. A barked directive clipped off a second or two later. Neither movement nor sound escaped from the suddenly inert screen in front of them.

“Holy sh....” Paige said, the whiteness of the rest of their screen lighting her face, which hung an open mouth and wide eyes. Glancing at the her and then Connor, who was as equally in shock, Seb thought they seemed unsure of what they’d seen. But sure that they’d seen something.

They sat without speaking for long enough to hear the heat in the basement grind on with several loud clanks.

Breaking the puzzled looks passing between them, Seb pointed to the static chat window, where a “ha” from playa8er rested. They didn’t know how long before it’d been typed. Connor noted the eight others still logged in.

Seb asked Connor what they had just saw, knowing what he thought he saw. Connor muttered a sound of confusion. Behind them, they could hear Paige breathing through her nose.

Before Seb could even begin to decide what they should do next, Paige reached over them and shut the window with the player, and then the browser, before they could say anything.

She said it gave her a freaky feeling, knowing that the others logged in could tell that they were too. But, as they tried to talk of it, she was also the most dismissive of them seeing anything sinister, and moved the conversation to the couches, where they began watching some terrible TV show.

Anything could have happened, she said.

\*\*\*

Seb paced his bedroom, waiting for Connor to log on. It was a boy’s room, flecked with stars and Legos and books everywhere.

He could hear his hallway’s floor groaning as his mother’s feet moved past, darkening his door just briefly, and continuing on.

Finally, he saw the dot next to his friend’s name turn green. He pulled up the chat window, and began typing.

*“That’s still weird right?”*

*“we all saw the lights, no? flashlights? they took him?”*

*“maybe was an ad?”*

*“u said that. Paige still thinks prob??? but if 4 ad 4 what?”*

*“don’t know. They do that sometimes. Or...”*

*"or..."*

*"or?"*

*"or no idea. why would someone grab bz123?"*

*"right?"*

*"probably another stupid joke. like with P2P with Skyright52?"*

*"we will c tomorrow"*

*"so weird"*

*"Ur weird."*

*"ok, gotta go to bed."*

*"say goodnight to paige for me"*

*"yeah, you and Paige, man..."*

*"wat?"*

*"What would Holly think"*

*"Shut up."*

*"hahaha"*

*"seriously I don't know why you can't get off the subject, shut up already"*

*"ok doing," Connor hit return. "u 2. gnight"*

*"night"*

Seb logged off and said back in his bed.

As lay flat breathing, he tried to distract his thoughts from what he'd thought he'd seen with visions of his favorite games, but had only succeeded in turning his mind to tension-causing replays of moments from school.

After he spent some time tossing in his bed, his mom walked in. She cut an angular site: a friendly-looking woman with big hair, wearing firm blue glasses.

She saw he was still awake and gave him a complaint about that. He apologized without saying much more. Her face wearing an expression of sensing, she decided to sit on the floor for a while, rubbing his back. He welcomed it. He never seemed to know how she figured out what he needed.

"Ok," she said, making circles over his shirt. "There, there. We aren't supposed to worry about it all every day, boy. Are we?"



“No mom,” he whispered.

“Because it did let you stay over at the Tippetts for a long time and I can only image how uneducational that was...”

“I know, mom.”

“So you’re we’re not going to worry?”

Smelling the soap from her washing off her flesh colored make-up from work and coffee on her breath, he grunted softly twice.

“Ok then, we’re somewhere then,” she said. “And everything else is fine too. We have our house and our family and our friends. And you’re doing fine in school - right? -- and that’s what school is really about.”

He grunted again, and instead of asking any more questions or leaving, she stay crouched on the floor rubbing his back.

He turned over images of Batzinger and then the lights and shouting in his head, but he was so tired, his mind began to float aimlessly through the moments, and then started decomposing words and even concepts into their component parts.

He did strange mental math with the number six, when he would need to wake up, trying to make it later. He realized perfectly in his head, for a minute, how no idea can ever be fully complete because just as we approach the right way of thinking about a thing, we start to think about it in a totally different way. He revisited an image from a dream about his father.

Seb didn’t know when his mother snuck off once she could tell he was asleep, voicing mild worry to herself about the boy but acknowledging it was really not too much because he seemed to at least keep himself entertained.

As she left his room, though, his breathing settled into an even deeper rhythm, the human equivalent of an unused computer’s hum.

# Chapter Three

## No Updates

With what remained of the next day's sun casting shadows behind him across the check-out aisles, Seb watched his mother looking up and down the breads stuffed plumply into the cap of a supermarket row.

Her fat tan pocketbook touched the floor as she bent over to pull out a plastic loaf, and the bright yellowed glow of the store shined off the back of her jacket. He wasn't sure why her hand had reached out to that particular twisted handle as her choice, but he stepped back to her as stood after she making her decision.

That whole day, from start to finish, Seb and Connor had wondered what had happened to Batzinger. Talked about it and dissected it, with not much to go on. He was glad that Connor was in agreement.

On the morning bus, Connor had relayed that Paige had awoken even more sure that it was some marketing Easter egg, and apologized for wiggling out. She teased him for the ridiculousness of it while he was brushing his teeth, he said. She said Connor was beyond saving from his gullibility, which Seb knew was an exaggerated truth. But Seb felt like she'd woken up on an island where all the people were little and didn't acknowledge that something was probably up.

Seb and Connor weren't so sure, even as they were pretty sure, they agreed. It was just the strangest thing - if he was really abducted, why hadn't anyone else said anything immediately in the chat? What kind of stupid joke was it, if it wasn't something like what they thought they saw?

They found their classes before lunch agonizing while they waited to discuss the episode with each further in more depth. And then they found their classes afterward even more agonizing as they realized only time would reveal how they might be getting punked.

Seb wanted to go with Connor after school to see whether Batzinger would come on, or what he said if he did. Or they could just look for anything on any of his other pages. But his mom had insisted he joined her shopping.

Now that they could only vaguely remember her pushing him around in the cart, he actually was a good helper for her.

“Seriously,” she said, finally grabbing the twist of one of the plastic bread bags, “you’re the one who wanted that noisy friend of yours to sleep over tomorrow. And if we don’t get the shopping done now, I’m just not going to get another chance this weekend. Now, go and get me a bottle of this shampoo,” she said, laying her painted nail on one of the photo-realistic images in the coupon. “The big size.”

She looked through the rest of her coupons like a card-player preparing a bid, and slipped out another one. “And look for this toilet paper while you’re over there. Unless you’re going to let your embarrassment stop us from wiping our butts.”

He shook his head, forced to grin. But it felt like it seemed like a dopey weird smirk, with his mind preoccupied and the day feeling peculiar, like a box of food stocked on the wrong shelf.

He returned a few minutes later, having executing the instruction and shoved the big fluffy rolls under shopping cart.

His mother – Mom, to him – with her hair done up wide, she was searching through seltzer bottles for a particular flavor. Her cadence of touching and turning the clear bubbling cylinders was robotic.

“So, anything else new at school I should know about?” she flung over her shoulder at him.

“Nah, I don’t think so,” Seb responded. “Just the normal stuff.”

“Yeah? You can tell your mom.”

“Yeah.” He had been bumped by Lawrence Johnson in the hallway and bumped into Holly while they were all exiting a class. But it wasn’t anything his mom needed to know.

“What about that Cordell kid, do you ever see him?”

“Nah, mom, c’mon, you know he never really got along with Connor.”

“You know, sometimes people are like that, though. Like milk and orange juice. But you can still enjoy both.”

“Yeah,” he hesitated. “It’s just that Cordell also has his soccer, and the guys on his team. He’s not really into the stuff that I’m into anymore? You know, you get new interests.”

“You mean like video games and all sorts of other nonsense like that Batzinger? I should be proud be of that?” she asked, in a mock-accented complaint. He saw she was smiling, and in the shopping cart saw she’d loaded in an invitingly blue bag of Cool Ranch chips and classy white box of chocolate donuts with stuff shells.

“Yeah, I know, I know. Anyway, it’s more that, we just grew apart.”

“Ok, well then,” she said, “I guess I have something else for you to fetch for me: Bananas, ok? I forgot them.”

“Sure mom,” he responded, walking away, “and I know, of course, not too green.”

“Right,” she called after him, “not too green. There’s no point ever, like I always tell you, and, anyway, I might make some banana bread for you two. But probably not, so don’t get your hopes up.”

As he strolled down the aisles stacked high with boxes and cans, he thought about what he’d learned in history class about the banana companies.

About how in the 1800s, the United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company had begun to export bananas from all over Central America, in countries like Honduras and Guatemala, and, became these two dominant global banana companies, that feed brutality and suffered through banana blights together.

About how the people called one of them *El Pulpo* ("The Octopus"), because of how it controlled all the infrastructure and politics.

He rested his hands on the kiwis for a moment after emerging in the produce section. Feeling their hairy roughness as he swiveled his head across the explosion of colors and shine, Seb's phone rang. He felt the buzzing in his pants, rather than the ringtone, a snippet of an upbeat song by the The 99s, that he'd set for the ring for the number of Connor's house.

"Is he there?"

"No. Or, not yet?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't see it?"

"No, I'm not by a computer."

"He put up a message. It says 'BUSY FOR JUST A BIT. WILL BE BACK. SERIOUSLY.'"

"Oh."

"Oh, no? Right?"

"So he's there? Did he say when he would be on?"

"I just told you. That's what he said, that's all there is. I don't know what to think. Man, I don't even know."

Seb grabbed a bag of bananas from the latex-smelling array before him. He eyed it and decided it would work.

"Is Paige there? Would does she think?"

"No, she's not here. She went to her friend Marissa's. But she didn't even think anything about it, remember?"

"I know... but... "

"Where are you anyway?"

"Supermarket. With my mom."

“Why?”

“You wanted to sleep over?”

“So...”

“There’s nothing in our fridge. It’s like the emptiest thing.”

“Oh... but, hey, yeah... I didn’t even tell you about the real thing. I thought you were going to call me.”

“The what thing?”

“The thing I was going to talk to you about when you called, if you called before I needed to call you about that other thing. Anyway, he uploaded the video from last night to his Twiddler channel without the last whatever minutes, like even during the stream part when he was signing off.”

“Whatever minutes?”

“You know, two, three, whatever... The part that was crazy at the end.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. It just ends where he’s doing his ‘like it, spread it, and never regret it’ stuff. ‘Keep striving’ and all that, and then it just cuts off.”

“That’s just weird.”

“Well, when you get home you can check this announcement out if he’s not on yet. I mean, he’s back, I guess.”

Seb stopped at the far end of the aisle his mother was down. She was crouched looking at one of the bottom shelves, surrounded by the warm glow of all the brands and batches of colors, spread out in places like giant Morse code.

“Just let me know if anything else strange happens before I get home.”

“Like Batzinger getting kidnapped? Like that?”

“I meant anything new, now. Anyway, I gotta go, my mom needs bananas. And other stuff. And I want to get home.”

“Ok, hit me up on chat later.”

Seb returned to his mother, who was almost finished with their shopping. She liked to go to the deli counter last, because that's when she felt like talking to the men behind the counter. While waiting in the check-out line, Seb played Appliances Versus Werewolves on his phone, and unlocked a new level.

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Batzinger never showed up that night. Never took down the notice and emerged to launch into banter in his little room in the corner, never floated amid sharp blobs of computer-generated imagery.

Seb and Connor sat across town from each other, playing separate games and chatting, waiting for Batzinger to return with his usual weird self, before finally giving up around 10 p.m., when Connor's mom found him down in the basement, still on the computer. She sent him to bed.

Alone in his own room, enveloped in a sickly light, Seb played a bit more - clearing a level in The Jamestown Chronicles, a first-person stealth game, set in the colony -- before yawning and deciding he needed the sleep. His own mother found him shortly afterward lying heavily in his bed, with his school pants still on.

Morning came like any other one, but was tinged with a cool strangeness. The air carried a light dankness, and small patches of leaves tumbled into each other across the lawn. Seb checked GoVidGo at home, and, then, after getting dressed, they both did around the same time. And then they checked once again, together, on Seb's phone on the bus.

Nothing new, except that Batzinger's posting had been taken down sometime over the night. The channel just listed his upcoming schedule for his MarioSpeedRunFails videos, his least popular now, but second-oldest.

After arriving from the shrieking roar of the schoolyard, Seb and Connor checked again while standing at Connor's

locker. Down the hall, Seb noticed one of Lawrence Johnson's boys.

He slid behind Connor, blocking himself from view, until peaking back around and seeing that he was in the clear.

And then they finished checking again on GoVidGo, just before parting for their separate classes. Of course, still there were no updates.

The early parts of the days at the Steven A. Krauza Middle School in Middleville contained students who were reset by nights of sleep, their brains cleared of computery stuff, the bluster of reality shows and testosterone of sports. It revealed new sides of their personalities, generally more subdued.

Almost all of them found some way to access that stimuli by fifth period, though. Computers in classes, phones, and other surrogates in real life like the kids in the group who knew the stats from all the games or latest fights between reality wives. After that, the halls grew louder, and the teachers felt even less in control.

Seb had noticed that when his teachers felt in charge, they were often interesting. He liked the facts and schemes of thinking about things that they sometimes offer, some better than others.

When the teachers felt like their students were out of the control, climbing the walls or with their heads in the clouds? They failed to deliver even tiny scraps of knowledge in enjoyable ways, how you'd want to hear about it. Instead, they dumped what they had to offer out like garbage from a broken bag that's leaking all over, a repugnant unloading that turned their teachers' noses.

Things were sometimes better on Fridays, and sometimes worse.

Even as the anxiousness of the children to get to the powerup boost of the weekend left them rowdier than usual, quicker to blurt out jokes and opinions, the glee of their educators for the time off helped settled down the mood.



But, occasionally – for example, if a three-day weekend was coming up – it could also get more wild, certainly.

Just a couple of periods after the start of the day, as Seb spread his undersized body across the firm plastic chair, resting on the shiny sliver pole on the side, a door opened a few feet from him without a sound.

It succeeded in not interrupting the somewhat-but-not-terribly-interesting class that he had been playing his way through. He was barely engaged, really, but it counted being there and not too distracted in his notebook.

“Hey...” came the sound from the face peaking in from a few feet off the ground. “Seb,” Connor said almost inaudibly, his lips smacking out the sound of the b.

At first Seb didn’t see him, but Connor made a slight noise, and he heard. Before he’d finished turning with a deliberate slowness, Connor shot a paper ball about the size of gumball at him, and it bounced off to disappear in the freckled pattern of the Yoda-tinted linoleum floor.

He responded from his seat with a delicate hiss aimed his friend’s way, more nervous that he’d hear his name from the front of the room than surprised or annoyed by his friend.

Connor thrust his eyebrows up, earnestly.

“C’mon,” he huffed.

“Shh...” Seb shooed back, noting heads at the three other desks closest to the door turning each way.

“No, really. Say you gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Say you shut up so Weisman doesn’t hear you.”

He stole a glance toward the teacher who, having reached one side of the room, was wandering toward the other as he talked. He stroked his beard as paced, pulling back a finger or two for each point he made. Or most of them at least, it felt like to Seb. He noticed Holly on the far side of the room, staring primly ahead, just behind her friend, Christine or Kristin or Krista or something like that.

“Tell him you have to go. I gotta talk to you.”

“Can’t this wait until class is over.”

“Seriously, c’mon.”

“Ok, ok. Shut up,” Seb relented, feeling those classmates’ eyes on him. He stuck a hand in the air, and then made the request as meekly as possible.

Outside the room, Connor continued to talk in a whisper as pulled his friend down the hall by his ill-fitting shirt.

Seb wasn’t sure what kind of frame of mind his friend was in. It seemed a strange type of intense excitement for Connor, and yet he didn’t seem to be wearing the redder, slightly damp face that he would wear during boss fights. Still, he was flush and obviously in state of heightened alertness.

“We gotta talk Batzinger,” Connor said as they put the door’s Seb class further behind them.

“Ok...?”

“I don’t mean, like what else do we do now about talk about him...”

“Well,” Seb replied, truthfully, “now I actually need to go piss too, because you made think about it.”

“Ok, yeah, but we need to talk.”

“All right, I get it. Just come with me anyway. By the way, aren’t you supposed to be in music?” Seb said, not offering Connor any impression he had been kidding about needing to use the bathroom.

“I ducked out. You know, it’s such a big class, I didn’t even ask. Anyway,” he continued. “I saw Lisa.”

“In music?”

“No, before.”

“You saw her?”

“Yeah, in the hallway with the sciences class upstairs.”

“So, what? Was she acting weird, or say anything weird?”

“No. I mean, yes, but not weird like mysterious. She basically told me everything she knows. Or I think so, I really can’t see how she was lying.”

“What’d she say?”

“She said Batzinger’s parents told her there was something going on with him, but they didn’t really tell her what. She was annoyed because she was supposed to get a ride from him yesterday to her Hip Hop class. You know, dance. And she called him Mike.”

“Right...”

“But anyway, they said he said he wasn’t going to be around, that her aunt needed to see a doctor. And her own parents have been working late all this week so that’s why they couldn’t even bring her already. So she was pissed off he didn’t pick her up. She ended up getting a ride, though, from Laney, I think.”

“So Batzinger just didn’t show up?”

“No, they told her before. She hasn’t seen him since either, or I guess since like last night, and today. Oh, and she wasn’t sure whether she’d see him today to drive her to dance class again because he maybe needs to sign up for something for some college tests.”

“College tests?”

“I don’t know, SATs or something? Or not that, something else, like early admission. She probably was going to get a ride again from someone’s mom.”

“Well, that’s her story, I guess?”

“Why would she lie?”

“Maybe it wasn’t her lie, or maybe it was even.”

Seb thought of the chatty girl with a boxy haircut, who acted fairly properly in their shared classes and once even apologize when her tray knocked over his chocolate-milk carton. He imagined Connor tapping on one of her stiff shoulders and Lisa Powers spilling out all the things on her mind.

“She doesn’t really seem like the type to lie or leave anything out or anything like that.”

“I’m telling you. She was just saying it, like she was just sending out a couple of tweets on this thing that annoyed

her. I didn't saying anything to her about Wednesday night or anything either."

"Ok, so where does that leave us? Basically we still know that something funky is going on? Why would he suddenly not be around?"

"I think that's what I'm going with..."

"On the other hand, we may just be going a little nuts."

"You definitely may be."

"No, really. He obviously wasn't around yesterday, he didn't do the MarioSpeedRunFails stream."

"I don't think he likes doing it so much either. And barely anyone watches that anymore, though."

"I know, he more prefers mods or 100%-ing or straight walkthroughs, but he usually shows up."

"He does. And those guys grabbed him, right? You saw that."

"I don't know, Connor, I wish he posted the video with that. It happened so quick..."

"But we saw it, right?"

They arrived outside the bathroom, pausing together in front the image of a filled circle floating above a limp body. Seb tilted his head toward it.

"So really, you making me say that to Mr. Weisman in the middle of class was like the equivalent of me sitting and listening to a faucet run for twenty minutes. I need to go. Bad. In terms of what we saw, I think we saw that, yeah. But let's just see if we did."

As Seb on the heavy door, Connor turned to get back to class. Inside the spacious tiled bathroom, Seb wondered whether it was just them being weird or if this whole situation was just getting fishier and fishier. Usually, when things got strange, it was just them being weirdos.

After making sure he was alone in the cracked whiteness (to protect against getting caught again by Lawrence Johnson and facing more ridicule and the threat of toilet water), he chose the urinal farthest from the door. While he

went, he thought about what Connor had said about Lisa's ride to dance, and watched the unpredictable splashes he made.

When he was done, he felt relieved physically but, after a moment, he felt mentally unsure again. He noticed the long mirror reflecting back a somewhat dour countenance.

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Later, as Seb watched his friend sitting across from his mom and eating the nice dinner that she'd made them, she remarked on the difference between his frown-y face and Connor's wide grin. Scooping her mac and cheese into his mouth, he took it as she meant it, a reminder rather than intending as a hurtful observation.

She let them retreat up to Seb's room after eating quickly, and Seb appreciated the space she gave them. For maybe the thousandth time, he pondered how much tougher she would be if his dad were alive, but, as he usually did, he concluded it would be impossible to know. He guessed that Connor also sometimes had similar questions, but he rarely let on when he was considering them.

After making a racket clapping up the stairs, they could only do more waiting in Seb's room, like they had done for the rest of the day. Nothing else had come up Batzinger's Twitter or Facebook accounts, or on YouTube or GoVidGo.

They hadn't seen Lisa during recess or after school to try to get her to tell them anything else, but they doubted she had anything more to reveal. Connor had made Seb email Paige about what Lisa had said from his phone. Her response was a noncommittal "*hmmmmmm*."

So, they waited some more, Connor sitting on Seb's bed and Seb trying to distract them by clicking across game blogs at his desk. He read out info about Endeavoright Games planning for the next generation consoles, and

something about the new Star Wars, and Justin Beiber had gotten into some fight with some other celebrity.

They watched a few music videos from cheesy female artists that Seb secretly found moving. They scrolled through a message board about Surf Wars, even contributed some comments.

And, then, after a bit, Seb's phone began purring a tingly song and they knew the time had come.

Seb flicked the window with Batzinger's busy GoVidGo page, and the image in the middle flickered in jerky movement.

A scene of an alien planet's horizon, with stars twinkling and occasionally shooting in the purple sky, comes into focus. Two bulky figures with visible polygons dropped down and then moved toward each other from each side of the screen, until striking at each other.

"Aaaaand ok-ay ok-ay ok-ay," comes the voice, riding high out of the screen. "I'm here. It's me, Batzinger123, you know, the B Z B Z. Uh, and, hey, here we are for a sensational time with Master Smash. And so, you know, you, uh, thanks for coming, you there."

"He's there," Connor said.

"I know," Seb replied, blocking out anything but the guy who was talking. "Shhhhhhh..."

It was hard to see the teenager in his little box, so darkened against the vivid hues of the space-themed fighting game. But they could see him; no doubt about it, it was Batzinger.

And yet, almost everything behind him looked at least a little different. There were the same long square panels of a door were over his right shoulder but his wall appeared more of a color of a medium darkness, like a web-browser grey.

Seb noticed the dresser-top was clean except for a few stacked books beneath two browned posters on his wall, and the bed was neatly made with what looked like a

different duvet, probably. And with each small off-beat twitch of the boy's head, Seb noticed an uncomfortable stutter to his cadence.

"And, you know, I call this stream, Master Smash Class, right?"

"And what we look to do is to get it on with some other great players and they show me how to really kick butt in the masterpiece of mayhem known as Master Smash. Uh, as you know..."

Just like he normally would, Batzinger loaded up "multi-player online," but instead of jabbering, he waited silently for an awkward amount of time for the load bar to move across the screen.

"Ok. Now, if you want to do this too, of course, it's totally easy, just click the 'multi-player online,' " he said, heavily, "and come here and flick through the usernames or type one in or go through some of the other options. As usual, we're typing in who we want to synch up with, and we'll hear him when we're live."

It was all so normal, but his room was so strange, and his aura just slightly off, Seb thought.

Connor asked him to email Paige again, to tell her to watch Batzinger. He did. She was over Marisa's, Connor noted, so he wasn't sure when she'd see it. Seb hoped she would, too.

With each letter pushing the blinking bar forward, Batzinger typed out the name of MisssterMassster, an expert player with his own channel that Seb and Connor also watched every once in awhile. He was a German with long hair and guttural sarcasm, but he only talked from off-stage on Batzinger's channel. "Yah, hey, Batzinger123, thank you so much for having me," his low formless voice said.

Seb glanced over at the textual scroll.

***Welcome to the chat room!***

...floated alone above an empty rectangle. Just below came,

**gjo187:** *play MisssterMassster yes*

**SmAshE:** *whoop!*

**playa8er:** *hiii bz123!*

**ashketchup:** *Who's it going to be? Glad you're back!*

As Connor hand reached over toward the keyboard beneath his nose, Seb grabbed it. He squeezed lightly.

"What?"

"What do you think you're doing? You can't..."

"Why?"

"Because what if he thinks we are the only ones who know and they find out we know?"

"Who?"

"How do I know? What if right now we're the only ones who let them know that we know, by asking? I mean whoever took Batzinger?"

"But what are you talking about he's there, right there," Connor said, pointing at the screen, as the sounds of Batzinger responding to his viewers with greetings that filled Seb's bedroom.

He could tell Connor wasn't serious.

He certainly was there, in his little box. And, yet, they both agreed that it wasn't right. That something was off with him, that everything seemed forced.

A new game of Master Smash started, blasting their eyes with movement, as Batzinger greeted MisssterMassster some more, finding a surer tone, and MisssterMassster acknowledged him with nonchalance again.

Seb watched them picking among the rotating faces floating in squares arranged in a bigger square. They chose the blue ghost and muscular horned donkey, respectively, after trash-talking lightly as the black-and-white drawings turned vivid as they jumped from character choice to character choice.



They fell quiet when the scene shifted to a cratered planet and the characters' heads floated in, broken by flashes of big white numbers:

3....

2...

1...

They whooped with their first attacks at each other.

"Yeehaw," Batzinger's voice sparkled with his normal energy, speed up as it could get during action, as he rocked in his chair. "Ohhh... kay... Let's see what the great MisssterMasster has got. Another pretender? We give him a chance to prove himself in battle."

"My honor, BZ."

The blue ghost drifted into the sky and floated down as the donkey's boxing glove rose to meet him. Batzinger laughed unevenly as they both fell back, yellow negative numbers floating from them like smells and signaling they both had been wounded.

They crashed into each other again, flashing with attacks.

"You know what, Mister?"

"What Senor Batzinger?"

"I was thinking about it, and I really wanted to let everyone know that they should really check out Master Smash, right? Play with me even -- I'm always around in the lobby. Play with you, maybe, right? It's completely free to sign up, and you can download it, the game, using the link below. And what's so expensive about free?"

"You are not so easy to beat," MisssterMasster said, his accent biting down as he gritted his teeth, "you worthy adversary, you. You would not be easy or free at all."

"Uh, yeah, it's like a challenge, no doubt, but they should join the action today. That's the fun, right?"

"I show you a challenge..."

MisssterMasster advanced the donkey with red fists.

Batzinger ducked his body with his character, but still took a blow; his ghost's body billowed slightly and drifted

back, emitting a puff of yellow. Almost immediately, he zoomed ahead, knocking back the ass.

Clearly over-acting, the other boy shouted out, probably leaning back and feigning physical injury, before launching a vicious counterattack.

“You ok there, man? You know this is just a game, right? I mean, just a game, right? But... anyone watching right now who has some free time later should totally take a digital voyage to the world of Master Smash, where I’ll be licking my wounds. You may not end up kicking my butt like this guy, but, again, it’s totally free to try.”

“You’re going to wish you were too poor for this,” MisssterMasster said invisibly as Batzinger nodded his head in the corner of their screen.

“Well, right,” he responded, looking over his shoulder, “well, we’ll see about that.”

He pushed his apparition back toward MisssterMasster’s side of the screen, wildly swinging the sheet-body’s limbs. His opponent landed a combo and ended it with a throw.

As Batzinger’s character bounced across the floor, his red power slider ran down like a slide whistle, letting out of low moan of defeat. Seb thought he saw him sneak in another quick look at the door as he contorted with a wince.

“We should go to his place,” Seb finally said. “The cake is fake.”

Connor looked back at him in near-shock, rocking his head. Seb could tell he was out of his league.

“What?”

“We should go over there, and see if he’s even there. His house.”

“Seriously? Where? His house?”

“It seems the next place he’ll either be or not be.”

“I guess. I mean, it’s just over by Raghuram’s basically, no?”

“Right. Not that far. We’ll tell my mom that we want to play a PS4 game that’s only at your place and that we’ll just

sleep over there. We'll say Paige is leaving from by here anyway and can pick us up."

"I mean, she will be but I don't know... maybe she'd pick us up..."

"Exactly, except when she picks us up, she'll take us there."

"You're crazy. This is very much not like you."

"Don't you need to know what's up? I'll ask for a favor."

"She'd probably more likely do it for you."

"But, she knows," Seb said, thinking of how she'd gotten the willies. "She's gotta wonder, too, even if she didn't log in? We're not actually crazy. Seriously. Right? Honestly, what is this?"

"I don't think you're crazy crazy, Seb."

"Thank you," he responded, feeling out of breath. "So you call her and I'll pop down and ask my mom if we can go. Don't mention anything about going to Batzinger's, just find out when she's going home, and tell her to stop here. And watch it, too," Seb added, waiving at the screen, "and tell me if he does anything else weird, I'll be right back."

"If you ask me, we can just go with her home if you change your mind," Connor replied, looking down at his friend's phone. "Howard and Margaret Tippet are cool. They're probably asleep by now anyway."

And so Seb popped down, and Connor somehow convinced his sister, and they watched the rest of the episode without really speaking again. Gabbing voices pumped out of the screen, and no matter what Batzinger said, it seemed not quite right.

Presently, the numbers on the side of the screen counted past 30:00 and Batzinger began wrapping up the conversation. The German boy, pictured only by his equine avatar, thanked him for the visit, respectfully. There was warmth in his tone. They toiled both in the same trade, mutually learning the craft of vlogging, of building

audiences, of creating a character and making him beloved, or as close to that as possible.

“So anyway, all you guys,” Seb rattled off, quicker than normal, “as usual, it was great, great, great to have you. And, as always, keep striving, come back for some more with the B Z, B Z 1 2 3. I’ll post this video, so like it, spread it, and never regret it ... and leave any comments you want.

“I’ll talk about those next time... on Master Smash Class... and be sure to check out my other channels for more fun videos on all sorts of stuff...”

As Seb and Connor passed the living room again as quickly as possible, calling out goodbyes and thanks to Seb’s mom. Mumbling something about CityRiddle with his wave, Seb realized he was trying to do his best impression of a teenager lost in loud conversation, like about normal topics.

After grabbing their coats from the brass handle of the closet, Seb pushed Connor forward out the door and pulled it closed in the same motion, slowing time as the knob neared the threshold. He tossed Connor his jacket, a New York Giants pattern.

They saw the black car parked down the road. They slunk down the driveway toward it. Seb felt his neighbor’s cat watching them. The slinking tabby cat dodged behind a telephone pole, and then looked out from behind the splintered wood and tar. The hair on the back of his own neck fluffed up.

Looking back at their two-story colonial-style house, Seb was relieved that his mother’s face wasn’t beside the yellow frills astride her bedroom window, or the tall glass of the front door.

As they opened the car door and slid in across the seats - - Connor first -- Seb noticed a smell, a minty plastic whiff and felt no doubt that Connor inhaled it as well. And sure enough when they looked to the front, they saw an air freshener in the shape of a sedan hanging off of the rear-

view mirror. A floppy haired Asian man with light crow's feet smiled at them, resting his hands loosely on the wheel.

"How you guys doing tonight?" he asked, in a clipped, sincere voice. "Good, good?"

"Good. Very. Thank you," Seb responded distractedly.

"Good, I'm John," said the man. "Pleased to meet you."

"Thanks. I'm Seb, and this is Connor." Who then waived. "Can you hold on for a minute John please?"

Seb leaned forward and turned across the seat

"You could thank me for picking your butts up," Paige moaned at him before he even got a chance to open his mouth.

"Paige, listen, I'm sorry, we need to do something."

"Do something what?"

"We need you to help us to do something. It'll take like an hour, tops."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"But, seriously, this is me talking, not your brother."

"At least you got that going for you."

"Hey," Connor interrupted, through the hot air they'd exhaled across his face.

"Will you do something easy for you? Please...?"

"How crazy?"

"Not exactly sure. But yes. Anyway, we need you to let this nice guy to take us to Batzinger123's house."

"Have you two started doing drugs or something?"

"No."

"Are you sure? Some of that stupid synthetic herbal stuff?"

"No really, Paige," Connor said. "Honestly, the other night, you saw what we did, how it went down. And then his room tonight, it wasn't even his room. It was like if your life was recreated as a sound-stage. And he wasn't around last night."

"That can't be ignored," added Seb.

“All right, well, you want me to get John,” she said and her turned again hearing his name, “to drive to some make-believe place where your vlogger lives, in a computer, or whenever it is that we don’t even know.”

“He lives in Middleville, Paige,” Seb said. “His cousin is in our class. His parents live just over in Rustic Acres, just past where they go to our school. They didn’t count on that.”

“Did you even watch the stream?”

“What stream?”

“We sent you the link.”

“He made up some excuses about painting his room but it didn’t really seem true. Like really, really. You could tell, the whole room was different, everything was hinky.”

“And you know where he lives and you want me, your sister, to take you on my BoopBoop account, which Mom and Dad expect me to pay?”

“It’s not like they look at it. See, and you know that.”

“They could.”

“We’ll pay you back. With interest. It’s just across town.”

“C’mon sis. I mean if John will take us... John?”

The man had been sitting quietly with his head titled slightly back and to the right. They all fell silent for a minute, and then Seb watched it nod. He felt like he was a friendly man and noticed the picture of two adorable little girls in white dresses on the man’s phone.

“You want me to take you across town?” He paused. Closed his eyes for a think. Opened them, and making a smacking sound with his lips. “Okay. Just put it in again in the app, I take you there.”

Connor grinned and Paige whimpered, ironically. Seb realized he could feel his friend’s elbow sticking into his own belt loop.

Another idea appeared to Seb, outside the BoopBoop app. He decided to pursue it.

“Look, I actually brought some money,” he offered, “and we have some more back at the Tippetts’ home. Why don’t

you both suspend the trip here, and we'll give you the cash for this one quick additional stop?"

Seb leaned away from Paige. Seb made a noise and looked like she was going to speak, but also like she was unable to collect her thoughts on how she'd let it get to this negotiation.

"Yeah," said Connor, putting on his charming voice. "Help us out John. It's only over at Willow Lane, also in Middleville. Put it in your phone. You'll see it. It's not far. You'll need someone to take around tonight anyway."

John looked back at them, and studied their faces, half-parentally and half-cashier.

"We turn off the app, I take you there, we turn it back on, I come back?"

"Right."

"You pay the money tonight? How much?"

"We go to where you're going now after," Seb said, sensing his own small home just up the hill behind him. "See how much Willow Lane is from here, and we'll pay you that in real money. Plus a good tip."

"Seb has forty dollars," Connor added.

"Forty-eight, in my pocket. I can't image that's not close to enough."

"Wait a minute," Paige finally burst in. "You really want to go there, right now?"

"Yeah," Seb said, looking to his friend.

"It makes sense," said Connor. "He's either there or not."

"He's probably not there," Seb insisted, "I'm almost sure of it. We just need to see so we can figure out what to do next."

"Ok I do it, forty-eight dollars," John called back, as he tossed the car into drive. "Very fair."

"Honestly," Paige said, "you're going to owe me big time kid. This is not even a favor, this is a gigantic favor."

As the car pulled away from the curb, the point in the space in the universe where they'd been fleetingly, and they

sunk back in their seats, Seb felt a brief sense of triumph, only to realize he wasn't sure what would happen next.

He looked from Paige pulling up her hair and Connor trying to spread his knees and wondered whether he wasn't too young to come up with any more plans.

They exited his development like it had a gate, passing the last white house of a certain type that he'd really recognize as belonging to where he was from. Taking out his phone and looking at it, Seb realized it wasn't the time to pop fruit. Or take on Clans or AvW, since he saw them and wondered, since they were there in the folder. He convinced himself it wasn't time for them either.

Just sitting there with his phone in his hand, Seb decided to pretend that he was checking the time. He was actually surprised it wasn't later. He looked at Connor and appreciated the boy in the bunched up jacket was willing to let him make decisions.



# Chapter Four

## In Whatever Way

Despite its rows and rows of homes snaking around and running perpendicular into each other, over and over again, Middleville at night was as quiet as a farm road out in the middle of nowhere.

Inside, families sat tucked in their rooms or sprawled on their couches, happy or bickering. Or sunk into screens separately around their houses, or rehashing past times, and no matter what far away from neighbors so near.

A person could run naked along the curbs of the shingled boxes set off from the streets, and even at the points where the cones of light from the streetlamps hummed, not worry about being seen. It was just about as quiet as quiet can be.

Every so often, the peering eyes of a pair of headlights might pull by any given stretch of curb or mailbox, with an incandescent whoosh and trailing rustle. But someone who happened to be sitting there would expect that then the silence would fall again. Really expect it.

On each road, street, path or lane, maybe once an hour or so, loud voices echoed in the dark. And then, the sudden slamming of a door. And yet, stillness was the natural state of the suburban after the day ended. And it wasn't even late.

Borne along above the asphalt, Seb knew the familiar way over to Rustic Acres, as the neighborhood was called.

It sat past the shopping center anchored by the third-best supermarket in town, one of three pizza places, and the ice-cream shop, McNulty's. And, then you drove over the hill,

past the church and graveyard, and undeveloped land. And then the new string of houses.

He used to live over there, by the ratty park with bouncy tin animals covered in peeling paint, and by the smelly deli with the two lonely gas pumps.

That was before his mom moved them to a somewhat bigger house where they lived now. But Seb didn't even think about giving directions, it had been so long ago, he thought he'd probably screw it up. John relied instead on the smooth woman's voice and the swooping lines on the middle of his dashboard to navigate.

Seb and the two siblings looked out the windows from the backseat and soaked up the nighttime scene as the car picked up speed through the neighborhood.

Swinging right as the road dipped, they pulled into a section lined with trees that felt to Seb like the size of small apartment buildings. It was quieter still.

They rolled all the way down what felt like one of the longest of blocks, until the house numbers reached the eighties. There, the street gave way to the mouth of a cul de sac. John slowed into it, while they all leaned to the right as he circled, and then he came to a stop. Seb noticed a rocking chair on the porch. Connor said something about the plastic number hanging over the garage.

Half of the four properties hugging each other around the circle had soggy yellow lights shinning, and they sat in front of one. Even though houses arranged at the end of a road always felt both more and less lonely, no house they'd past coming into the community seemed less alive to Seb than the single-storied one beyond the lawn.

Maybe any house that they stopped in front of, anywhere along the way, would have felt the same. But there was something about the way the upper windows sat apart that made them feel like spectacles, and the door was pursed lip begging a chance to listen.

“How do guys even know where he lives?” Paige asked to either of them as they all sat looking over each other and out the frame of the car.

“We looked it up,” said Connor.

“He was listed.”

“You just looked it up?”

“Yeah. I mean, that’s what you do.”

“Like, what, Google?”

“You know that, google it, or whatever, some sites... You can basically find anyone these days. Like we found you, when we were trying to figure out how long you’d be to get over to Seb’s. How was your night, by the way?”

“Fine. Marisa was being Marisa. So, now what?”

“I don’t know, sis, we came all the way here. At this point, it seems stupid not to go and check it out.”

“Yeah,” she said, looking defeated, “but it seems pretty stupid to check it out, too. It doesn’t even look like anyone is home.”

“You don’t have to come,” Seb finally said.

“I mean, yeah sure, you say that. But think about it: I can’t just let you guys walk up there and make a fool out of yourselves. First off, I’ll never live it down if you get taken and put into a pit or something. I’m the oldest. And even if you don’t, what is a mom or dad going to say if a couple stupid kids like you two rang their bell.”

“Stupid kids, huh?”

“So, you’re coming?”

“I guess,” she answered. “But let’s get it over with already. I really don’t like just sitting here, like a couple of sketchy strangers in a sketchy car. We’re probably making everyone out there wonder what kind of nuts are casing the joint.”

“Do people really even say that anyway?” Connor asked. “I thought that was just an expression from like grandma’s youth.”

“It’s an expression,” she responded. “It means you’re being shady.”

“Definitely no one says that anymore”

“Listen, John,” Seb said, leaning in the front of the car, “give us twenty minutes. We’ll be back.”

John nodded, and they got out, with Connor scooting himself out of the seat before emerging. They strode together up the stones sitting in a row on the lawn, Seb feeling the dampness in the air that he connected with the grass under their faces. It was always hard to remember until you stepped on it that it was living, breathing.

Orange and blurred, the particular glow of a doorbell called out to them. They followed the path toward it. Once there, in front of it, they looked at one another. Paige seemed again as annoyed and intrigued again she’d been the most of the way over. Rocking on his feet, Connor looked ready to barge. Into a home or a room or a party or a conversation.

Seb looked between them. He decided she had to be the one speak first.

“Paige, you’re the oldest, like you said,” Seb said. “Go ahead. Ring the bell.”

Incredulousness passed into a shake of her head.

“What? Seriously? I said I’d be here...”

Once again, Seb felt small in front of her, but it didn’t even matter. He knew she’d be the most presentable of all of them to whomever opened the door. Probably Batzinger’s parents? Batzinger? She’d said it herself, they were kids. What the heck?

“Really...”

“Well, look: I know I can do it but why exactly do you think I’m interested in that?”

“I don’t know?”

“Really, honestly... What kind of mixed-up world is it if I let some middle schooler and my brother drag me into their

nutty hijacks and then let them make me do the talking for them.”

“If you just introduce us,” Seb said, “and I’ll just ask about Batzinger. I’ll say it was a dare.”

“You know what? I should just go wait in the car... Your plans never sound better.”

“Seriously, just make it like you’re doing us a favor because we’re fans. We’re eleven.”

And just as Seb was about to start really begging her to ask the questions that they needed answered, Connor reached over and rang the doorbell. He turned and, his loose sleeves flapping, waved widely to John, who they couldn’t see inside the car, nor tell if he was watching, but knew was there.

Muffled tones rang out in a four-note pattern, in a deep warm string of notes. Low lower higher low. Seb felt a pulling in chest. His mother’s image flashed in his mind, and then the face of Mr. D, the gym teacher. He wasn’t sure why. He wasn’t in the mood to get yelled at.

Nothing happened...

So, the trio waited...

And still nothing happened.

At last Connor said, “I’m going to try again,”

Seb saw Paige looking at him and tightened his lips, not sure whether he wanted to bother if they weren’t going to answer without having to be woken up. Jeeez... what if they woke them up? What were they going to say anyway?”

Running her hand through her hair, Paige glanced at the shaded windows reflecting the streetlight. “Well? So try again. We’re here anyway.”

So, Connor did, and then turned back to the street, just looking. The same cascade of melody escaped dimly, and all the exhaled.

And still, even then, nothing happened.

And, finally, still nothing more.

Seb stepped back and looked behind him as the others mumbled.

On a lawn opposite from them across the circle of homes, a squirrel hunted through a pile of leaves, and then ran up a tree. At the end of a driveway, a mailbox that looked a black-and-white New England house sat, as mute and inert as the rest of the curving row behind it. Their black car, shaking slightly and ejecting a thin exhaust, was the only thing that appeared alive.

He turned, and without even really knowing what he was doing, leaned out and grabbed the knob on the door and twisted it. His shoulders joined his hands in acting without him.

He felt the brass ball get abruptly tight, and then continue, with a tougher rotation. It just happened. The thicker turn came to a hard stop, leaving the door falling open.

Seb stepped forward and as head crossed the threshold and his eyes adjusted, shadows emerged from the void, walls and light-switches. There was no sign of anyone being there, and somehow they decided to enter, like he felt he should.

Connor hesitated, throwing out questioning syllables, but Paige pushed in behind them, holding up her phone

Darkness indeed greeted them, and as they joined him inside, Seb could tell it was darker than it should have been.

Nevertheless, the only obvious thing out of place was the darkness. And the silence, even more mute than the empty streets outside, so quiet it was almost ringing. The quiet hung there like a glitched game. But the sneakers on the floor and undisturbed stand for holding keys sat where they probably should have been.

Huddling for a minute, they called out their presence. No one responded.

“C’mon,” Seb finally said.

He traveled out of the normal entryway and into what they could tell to be a front hallway. Seb's own entryway -- even when he'd come alone after school to wait alone for his mother, knowing sometimes it would be hours, or not before he was asleep -- had never been as quiet.

Clustered closely together they moved slowly on, down the stubby alley between painted sheetrock. Seb peaked over as it led past a room with large unclaimed couches and a gigantic blackened TV hung on the wall. They stopped after a few steps.

He could feel the others looking at the room behind him.

"Seriously, anyone home?" Connor shouted half-heartedly again. "We'll totally leave if you're here. Like totally and forever and right now."

"Like, we're just in the wrong house if anyone is here!" Paige added, louder. "Our bad. Or rather, these two boys here. Their bad."

Seb noticed the kitchen brightened by the weak moonlight glinting off the sink, and tilted his ear toward it.

No one made a sound or showed themselves. No one stepped from out of the shadows. His eyes jumped to the lighted hall casting the only other weak illumination reaching anywhere in the house, and his feet carried him in the direction.

Gentle pumps of movement played in the kitchen from the trees and clouds blowing by. But the hall sat empty and still, a bit more than the rest of the emptiness and stillness they'd already encountered since entering. Even the light-blub barely flicked inside its milky glassed home.

Seb walked ahead of the listening siblings he'd come with. He noticed the pictures on the walls. The whole family was in some, in short-sleeves and big smiles, somewhere near a beach. Others were school portraits, Batzinger much younger, with his hair fluffed and combed straight across.

He passed a wedding portrait with more of their extended family. It looked like Batzinger in the front in a grey suit, but

Lisa would have been too young to be there among the flower girls.

Reaching the end of the hallway Seb saw the felt back of a picture frame, face up on the ground. The truth was, as he looked back it seemed a bit like some of the other frames were also tiled. But he couldn't be sure it wasn't an optical illusion. Eying the three open doors, he waited for the other two to appear at his side.

"Ok, hello again, last time, just tell us if you're here!" Connor yelled as he approached.

Seb raised his hand to cover the boy's mouth.

"What?" Connor said. "I mean, they could still be here, sleeping or whatever, doing something."

Paige slapped him.

"I have no idea what you guys want me to tell them if they are," Paige said. " 'Oh, hey, don't mind us, we're just going to check on your boy's well-being.' " She slapped him again. "I should have never let you talk me into this."

"I'd bet ten dollars that that's his room, right there," Connor replied, pointing at the door a few feet from them. "Let's just go check it out, and get out of here. Supposing John is even out there still."

"We haven't been long and he wants his money."

"Yeah, Seb, my money."

"You ain't need to worry about it, Connor. It's my account," Paige said.

"Well, he also isn't going to leave a couple of elven year olds at a strange house when they said they'd be back."

They nodded, so he proceeded. He tried to pre-hear any squeaks his feet would make as stepped lightly through the last yards of the hallway, and was fairly successful. He tapped the door. It bounced, hovering, opening further.

It was a parents' room, with a wide bed and oaken posts, a huge mirror atop a shiny dresser. Of course, the only occupant she encountered then was solitude, hanging in the air. Seb could see by the light of a half-bathroom.



Turning and tiptoeing back, he stopped and looked between the other doors. He pushed on each and found a small guest room with small pillows on the blanketed bed and a small office whose floor was almost entirely covered with a plastic mat.

Checking back in the parents' room, and flicking the light on, Seb noticed for the first time that a lamp was knocked over and leaning against the wall. The bed also wasn't made, but he wasn't sure whether they were the type to usually bother with the chore.

Paige moved past him to the bathroom, and he pointed the lamp out to her, and then Connor as he came in behind them. But there was nothing much to say about it.

They crossed back down the hallway, and entered the kitchen, making it a hurtful white with the flip of a switch. Seb noticed the others squinting their eyes too. He wondered for a moment which of them was in charge, and if it was him, how he could justify that. Just the lamp being out of place across the house was disorienting.

The kitchen looked like any kitchen, maybe more wooden than some, but pretty much like a normal kitchen, with the sink and a window and counters and a fridge. It was abandoned except for a single glass of water back up the counter by the faucet.

Seb was surprised when Paige pointed to the door first, the one hung with a calendar that they all before assumed to be a closet. Upon opening it, they found the back hung with sneakers -- and before them a sloping ceiling and stairs, leading presumably down to a basement.

With each footstep smacking down on the unvarnished boards, Seb felt like they were making clunks loud enough to fill a gymnasium.

At the bottom of the steps, he saw a small bathroom, a toilet in front of its open door and flowered lights on above its mirror; a washer and dryer and sturdy shelf above them;

and two other mostly closed doors, hanging loosely against the jams.

Seb wondered what was behind the cracks. Looking down at his phone, he realized they needed to get back to the car, or at least one of them, to let John know not to take off without them.

“Well, not much left to check out,” Connor said, and then he pointed out their options for next steps were limited.

They all chose the door to the right, and found inside the stuffed closet they’d hoped would be there, or at least that was Paige said with a forced laugh.

Nothing but blankets and board games and some machine with its cord twisted about. The equally stuffed air escaping from the closet smelled of cardboard. It cut through the residual odor of dampness and fresh blast of dryer sheets, which Seb hadn’t even absorbed earlier.

As they got closer to the other door, Seb realized it was resting slightly unevenly. Behind it, they found Batzinger’s room. Seb felt his neck hairs tickle, and heard Connor draw in his breath.

The room looked like it should as Seb spun around. Even Paige had to say as much, turning and seeing it. Seb tried to place himself in it, but he felt shrunk down. It was hard to even figure out how he was supposed to feel being in the little square; he looked over his shoulder and up at a corner of the ceiling, before swiveling back and looking at what was in front of him.

Someone had toppled over the desk chair, unless it had toppled itself, and a mug sat overturned on the dresser, on top of some books. Connor bent down and picked up a mouse. It made clicking sounds in his hand as he passed it to Seb.

There was a wheezy whirring, and the computer screen on the desk slowly glowed. Connor kicked a large strategy guide, for *Skyward Sword*, as he drew in to see. Seb

recognized the guide as unofficial as Connor picked it up and threw it onto the bed with a heavy spin.

Paige looked at them, almost impressed.

“Ok, nice job, you two,” she said. “He’s definitely not here.”

“No, definitely not,” Connor responded.

“Nowhere to be found,” added Seb, giddy with the tension that had built to that point.

“So, there. You happy? You were right. What else do you want? ”

“Well, I think first we, or more precisely, you should be offering Seb an apology for doubting him,” he insisted. “Because this definitely was not where he was playing MisssterMasster from tonight.”

“Who?”

“Batzinger.”

“No, I meant who was he playing, who’s MissMaster? I know who Batzinger is already. I mean, Christ, I know way more about Batzinger than any fifteen-year old girl should. Duh?”

“I’ve never seen his computer before,” Seb said, sitting down at the keyboard. He turned over the mouse and cupped it in his hand, then navigated around Batzinger’s screen, pointing his arrow at the open window.

He’d been logged off GoVidGo, which sat open asking for BZ123’s password in angry red letters. Other browsers were open to articles on Kotaku, ThumbLords and Rock, Paper, Shotgun, YouTube videos of fails of an assorted nature, and gmail.

Seb didn’t know what he was looking for, as he flipped and scrolled through the pages and started on the apps, building to a staccato blinking of colors on his face.

“It’s his Twitter account,” Seb said aloud, while leaving it open and continuing to hunt. “Why would he be logged in here if he was somewhere else?”

Neither of the other two, peaking over his shoulder, had a good answer. He stopped waiting for one and went back to flicking through windows and menus, dropping down more menus and punching the button and flicking through windows.

At last, Seb stood up.

Paige asked what he'd found, and they all acknowledged he'd found absolutely nothing really to speak of at all. Seb didn't know what to say. There was no tutorial to Batzinger's hard-drive. Or even any clue that it held something. He walked over to the dresser and picked up a guidebook.

"You know, he had this book in a painted room an hour ago."

"Look, Sherlock, we know that," Connor responded.

"So where is he now? And why is this not there?"

Seb slapped at the laminated cover of the tome in his grasp, but felt silly for doing so midway in, and so his hand made a weak pitter.

"Those certainly are questions I was hoping you'd answer little buddy."

"And that," Seb said, pointing to the game-guide stacked on his bed. "And those," he added waiving across what he finally noticed to be faux western themed posters of The Killers and the Kryptic Bagels. "All of it is where is. Like Wednesday. So that we definitely know at least."

"Hey, Seb," Paige said from where she'd sat down in the chair, calling his attention back to the screen. "He has a discover-your-device app."

"He lost his phone?" Connor asked.

"No, it tracks where you go, if he has his phone, we can see where he is," Seb said. "You know, your dad was telling us about how he used with his phone and found out our mailman had picked it up?"

"Right," Paige said. "But only if his password is stor... oh nice. It worked."

As she re-aimed the titled black arrow up the screen, their heads craned with it. She clicked down.

The little clock shape filled so slowly Seb felt he was going to grab the screen and knock it over, roughly. And yet, it really wasn't such a long time for a phone anywhere on the whole planet of earth to be found.

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His window down, Seb watched the black unfurling wings take flight from the reflective green street sign as they rode past. Delaney St. What was it about seeing something you weren't really sure was there? The opposite of uncanny, the wondering about what's real.

He was sure he could see the sign, but he thought he might have imagined the bird. And yet, it was too late to ask the others, and rare would they have ever observed it from their side of their little pod.

In the almost black-and-white scene outside the car, Seb wasn't sure what any of them could see. The moonlight fell like water from fingers, everything glowed without hue.

"Not Delaney Street, not East Marwood, not Finch Drive," John called from the front, in a broken singsong. "You guys seriously picked a place all the way out here. You better be serious "

Seb continue looking out. Connor pointed out when they passed where Lawrence Johnson, the bully, lived, over where one of the furthest bus paths went.

Where he lived -- the fact was just one of those common facts that kids in their grade knew. It was the edge of it all, their hometown. Paige knew of a couple of high schoolers in the area, she'd been to a party at one of their houses. Connor and Seb didn't even know before she'd done that.

Technically, they were still in Middleville but toward its outer rim. Out past the orchard and bike paths, past where that one cluster of small houses was planted. It was the

development that kept expanding until met it something else and became part of everything else that connected.

Seb asked himself what they were doing there. How did he ever end up someplace? How does anyone end up someplace, really? It was one of those things that never made sense.

How does one person end up that person, and not someone else? Why did his dad die, and not somebody else's? Why did he even live where he did and act the way he acted? What would he have been like if he grew up in another country, in different language, with different family and friends?

The world to him seemed like a place he drifted through, borne in whatever way he was meant to be sent, passively. But he liked it. He didn't think about it much, but as crabby and klutzy as he got, he liked it.

And this stuff, being out late and poking around? It was pure excitement. Even just reading about it would be. How lucky was he? And so what if he lost his keys, or just found a party lame? If it wasn't going to work smoothly for him, what could he do?

He'd enjoyed doing things that were weird, enjoyed going out of the safety of his own zone, appreciated being with his friend. Connor got a bit over-eager sometimes, sure, but other times Seb needed to be the one to take a step so someone else could take a second.

As they rolled down a deep dip in the road, Connor turned to him and said, "Hey Seb...."

"Yeah, Connor?"

"Do you how to jump out of a plane without a parachute? And, like, survive?"

"Don't know, buddy. How?"

"Make sure it's still on the runway."

"Oh right," he responded, feeling joyfully taken -- and then the weight of gravity as John accelerated up the other side of the hill.

Once Paige proved willing to include some of her own money, it was pretty easily to convince John to take them. She'd been mostly saving up her allowance for a couple of years, ever since she kicked the habit of collecting little childish things, like everyone seems to have for a bit.

John indeed had planned on working all night and, even with their stop at Batzinger's, it was early still. They all checked on their phones, and no one could disagree that it was hours until the lateness of midnight. The rushing wind in their ears as they pulled out of the cul de sac ensured them he was serious.

As soon they'd gotten rolling, though, Paige had gotten quiet.

As had Connor, who seemed to have given up on knowing what would come next. He secretly hoped for his sister to have a better idea and was following her lead, Seb thought. But Seb was glad Connor had come around when she had. He watching his friend's head leaned all the way back against the seat in the middle next to them.

Night air floated in as they drove and Seb felt his hair moving with the wind, leaving it sticky in the slightest of ways. If aside from small jokes and grunted observations of landmarks, they were going to be silent, he wasn't going to talk if they didn't feel like it. What else was there to say? They were a mass of tired, achy feelings.

But once they'd seen the discover-your-device map blink on, they knew they had to go on. And so there they were.

The map took them back a week earlier. Their perspective zoomed in from the planet to a grayscale-themed map of their town, a red dot zipping and stopping, tracing thin lines as a timer ticked down.

The dot darted around as time spun, a super-fast tattooing, a loom, spiral-art. The pulsing ball would stall for a few beats near a small box off the street and then bounce about like a jumpy bug, never crossing the solid white lines.

As days passed, the string red being laid out crossed itself with a speedy rhythm of fits and starts.

Seb's head bobbed and his eyes danced to keep up, while beside him Connor was gripping his sister's back.

And then, a couple days before that night they were there then watching in the time of the map, the drawing stopped. In the corner, the numbers kept counting down and flipping up, flickering.

Paige rewound with the back arrow, and eventually the line started running backwards, at a fast speed, untangling. And then she ran it forward again, turning down the speed, but not quickly enough. The red dot ran through town and then off in a blur, and then disappeared.

Trying again, they watched the dot flow about town before coming to a stop where they were on the map, as Connor had said. And then it speed off in a line that zigged and turned, fell static and after just a few moments, disappeared.

Paige rewound it and she watched it again, the mess of red noodles growing just a little longer and then getting clipped off.

Seb took down the cross streets in his head, Duncan and Hamstead, and without talking, headed toward the door and up the creaky stairs. Connor and Paige hurried after him.

Feeling the brisk air on his face, he hadn't thought it would be mystery weather out when they reached the outside. But it had gotten cooler. A few clouds were rolling past the ball of light in the sky, and the mostly leafless branches against the flint sky formed stylized box cover art.

Connor signaled to the car, unnecessarily, as they'd stumbled back down the lawn. John was listening to news radio, a clacking of news stories from the world. He turned it down to listen to them like they weren't even kids when they got in. They didn't share much but he negotiated good-naturedly again.



Black birds in the night, how cliché, Seb thought. And the dark glow of passing through the night, he'd never really even thought of it like this before, he realized. He pondered that for just a moment, as the car pulled off into a winding road next to a large unfinished dirt parking lot.

More uncompleted structures passed on the left, as they rolled up to the shadowy hull of an office building. Or maybe a gym, Connor had suggested, like for gymnastics or indoor soccer. Paige wasn't sure, it was all dimly lit.

Seb directed the car to slow as they pulled past the two or three story building, noticing its windows were empty. Looking ahead, the lack of light except for small pinpricks in the distance hinted that nothing much lay ahead in that direction.

Finally, perhaps sensing the same thing as he looked out the same windshield, John stopped the car completely.

Both doors opened at roughly the same time.

"Whoa," Connor said, slumping out of the car behind Seb, who was already surveying the construction site tucked in the little grove in what was once forest. He considered the situation as Connor, coming up at his shoulder, said, "It's really dark here."

And it was, basically because the trees were just that tall.

"Hold on," Seb responded, pulling out his cellphone. A weak cone of light shone for a few feet in front of them. "It can do this."

"Ok," said Paige, joining them from around the side of the car. "I think we should split up."

"Are you ki...." Connor said, catching her smile.

"Yeah, right. You kiddies would have gotten lost in that modest suburban home without me."

"Well," Seb said, "where are we even? I mean, what is this place."

"They were building a couple of these. A few years back. Don't you remember, there's the one over on 529?"

“Where that drunk driving shrine used to be, right?” Connor responded.

“Right past that...”

“That’s what I meant, right past that.”

“Yeah, that one. Anyway,” Paige continued, “they started building and ripped everything up and then just stopped when the economy got bad, dad said. Completely. Some of the guys in my grade go over there sometimes.”

“Why?” Seb asked.

“To be naughty or whatever. I mean, they’re pretty stupid kids. They said at first they were hearing voices and then realized that some migrants were living there, from Ecuador, I think. I don’t know if they’re ever going to finish it, the unfinished office park area on 529. It’s like a shrine to whatever went wrong in the economy, or whatever that was.”

Noticing the sound of air rustling leaves from all directions, they stepped forward gingerly. Seb thought of the part with the ruins of church in Jamestown Chronicles.

With each step, the roughly laid rocks crunched under their sneakers. And so, watching where they were going and that’s why they were looking down as they walked across the dirt patch where the parking lot should be, and saw the glint of a rectangular glare reflecting the half-moon in the sky.

“Check it out,” Connor said even as Seb was already reaching down.

Scooped up from a bed of rocks, it felt light in his hands. As he turned it over, he saw the glass had cracked. A dusty grittiness clung to it. Seb exhaled on it and almost immediately regretted not blowing more softly, his eyes stung by the miniature cloud that drifted back.

“Well, it’s someone’s,” Seb said, passing it to his other hand, and rubbing the fingers that’d been holding it.

“I’m going to guess it’s your buddy’s,” Paige said.

“Looks like a 6S. No?”

“Who just leaves a phone?” Connor asked.

“Someone who’s in a hurry maybe?” Paige said. “Or, clumsy or sleepy?”

“Happy, doc...?”

“What?”

“You know like...”

“Oh shut up, already.”

“But seriously you guys,” Connor offered. “I think it’s his phone. Why would it be here like this?”

“No, duh, Connor, we get that it’s his phone.”

“So why’d he leave it here?”

Seb looked not at the phone in front of him, but over it at the building ahead of them. He reached into his glowing pocket and pulled his own phone back out.

“So what, you wanna come back to our place, and we can try to figure out what’s going in there?” Connor asked him. “Let’s just be careful because if we can’t get the password in ten tries, the whole thing just shuts down.”

“I’m sure someone on Reddit or whatever knows how to crack a phone, not that whatever is in there is something that’s going to end up telling us anything,” Paige said.

“What about in there?” Seb said, knowing they’d followed his eyes. “Let’s check it out. We’re here already. He could be tied up in there.”

He felt Connor’s glance return to him. “I don’t think he’s tied up in there. He was on GoVidGo earlier and that didn’t look like this place. What’s with the grinding, man? Haven’t we done enough?”

Seb looked back to Paige.

“It’s getting late. How late do you think I even get back from Marisa’s when I get back late?”

“About this late?”

“Not this late.”

Seb lifted his phone. “It’s not even eleven. That’s not so bad.”

He turned away from them and looked at the big empty building. He remembered the time a few years ago when he'd found the folder on their computer with his father's pictures, the ones from his phone.

A few of them had been taken at some of the building sites where he'd done plans as an architect. There was a proud composition to the shots of the lot, like they were taken to be shown. He remembered seeing the ones of his father, the start of a little gut sticking out over his pants and a goofy smile on his face.

"I don't know..." Connor finally said.

As the other two wrestled with whether to extend their activity, Seb thought about how his father died. It'd been awhile since he last thought of it.

He'd once told a boy who asked, when he was younger, between Cordell and Connor as friends, that his dad had died on a hunting trip with his buddies where one of them shot him on accident. And that none of them ever would say whom it was.

Really, however, the hunting trip was supposed to happen, but he never even made it. Right as he got on the highway, another car smashed into his, with a couple of his friends next to him and behind. And his father and someone else died; it turned out the other driver was drunk.

Seb's dad and his friends had gotten up super early to go out for the day, like he did every few years at that point, and not since Seb had been born. The other guy was out super late, which he'd done fairly often. Another car full of his dad's friends was following behind him and saw the whole thing.

Or at least that's what his mother told him.

After waiting on the others for a few moments more, Seb found himself adding, "We followed the phone here, right? And I think the phone is pointing us to at least check it out. I'm sure you realize that we've done good so far, right? Let's just get this done."

And then Paige and Connor argued with Seb about sneaking back into their place later. It was already late enough they could get into trouble with all of them arriving together, but Seb pointed out that Paige had her phone and they hadn't called.

Connor suggested they just not go home at all that night, because both his parents and Seb's mom thought the two of them were under the watch of the other. Paige pointed out she couldn't just pretend to sleep at Marissa's without letting them know, and if she called now, they might get suspicious. Connor suggested a text would work if they were asleep but she reminded him the Tippet parents never silenced their phones and were the type to respond immediately with every single text.

Nevertheless, even as they debated, Seb decided to stop idling and began moving slowly toward the brick frame as he debated his case for not worrying about getting home. Connor and Paige stayed with him. As they got closer, they lowered their voices.

They passed through the unfilled entranceway, where a door with thick metal handles should be.

Inside, a vast empty space greeted them, huge exposed metal beams and dark corners. Uneven boards of plywood sat across sections of the rough stone floor. Looking up, it was like the ironwork of bridges, crossing. Seb swung his phone up and the huge shadows cast toward the ceiling melted into the blackness.

Seb silently braced for a colony of bats to shoot into their faces but that didn't happen.

"So that's what's inside of this."

"Yeah, Connor, so now you know," Paige spit out down toward him.

"I'm just saying... you don't need to be a jerk."

Seb could tell they were getting on each other's nerves.

"Let's just walk to the back," Seb insisted. "I mean, it doesn't look like there's anyone here."

And so they did, with Connor calling out Batzinger's name, and they found just a big empty unbuilt building. It didn't take long to cross its length.

As they returned to the front of the chamber of nothingness, Connor gave one more shout.

"Ok, seriously Batzinger! We've got your phone!"

Paige pulled Seb ahead as they passed back out the missing door. "You know, Seb," she said, "I really wish you guys were a few years older."

He blushed. "Why?"

"So you could have done this yourself. But, no.... You know long I've known you and Connor are troublemakers? Many years. And, yet, here I am, and now we have this stupid phone and it's not like we can even figure out what to do with it."

"Remember when you guys took me camping?"

"Yeah, up in the mountains."

"Well, I distinctly remember you not really enjoying a lot of that either."

"Um, hello? There wasn't any toilet."

Seb recalled. It wasn't something he really liked either. He could still feel himself wiping furiously and then running through the woods.

"Yeah, but we had good time, right?"

He could see the memory of the campfire flares on her face, her brother and mother and father singing the song from Teen Titans Go! and cracking up. Paige, frowning the pout of a twelve-year old, then smiling.

"Some of it was fun, I guess," she replied, cocking her head and inhaling the fresher air passing by them. "But weren't you mopping around the whole time. Come to think of it, weren't you sick even? Didn't you say your were sick?"

He had been mopping but he wasn't sick. He still wasn't sure why he'd had trouble even speaking on that trip, a third grader, like there was a lump in his throat the entire time. It had been a year, at least, since he'd met them.

They'd been so welcoming, it made him want to cry sometimes. But that trip, he'd just been off, quiet, sullen. But that wasn't the point.

"Yeah, but that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying we had fun, right? You always say that."

"Ok, ok, whatever you think, Seb. I'm just glad weren't heading back home because I sorta need to pee."

They saw John's car sitting along the side of the building, and started to cut across the sea of dirt that should have been grass. Seb trailed after Paige and she half-stomped across the lot before the rumble started, and then Connor caught up to them just in time to also be almost grabbed by the white fingers of light that suddenly shone down the road.

The sound also grew more audible.

"Crap," Connor said as they all stumbled to the ground and peered into the distance. "Who's that?"

As a vehicle formed behind the sharp glare, Seb could tell it was some sort of van. It was boxy and thick, and getting larger and larger, until it pulled to a stop finally in front of the building's gaping mouth.

A door opened and a big white man got out on each side nearly simultaneously.

They walked a bit aimlessly, working their legs and looking around in a scouting way. Seb realized, from where they were, the men probably wouldn't be able to see the three of them pressed into the dirt there, nor or the long black car behind them. It was tucked around the corner, from their perspective; a diagram with dotted lines would run into the building.

Looking over Paige's calves, Seb was glad to see that all the lights were out in the car, but he could still see the silhouette of a head, drifting slightly, in the front seat. He hoped John would stay put. Not accidentally lean on the horn or something.

Breathing heavily, Seb felt the second phone in his pants digging painfully into his thigh. Adjusting, he heard a soft chewy crack. The sharp pain in his muscle subsided.

“Who is that?” Paige whispered, lifting one of her fingers at the pair. “Did one of you order a pizza or something?”

One of the men, an oval shaped balding dude in a dark jumpsuit, decided to head in their direction, but only for a few steps, and then paced back. The beams from their van bouncing against the abandoned structure threw a bubble of brightness around their patch of night. And, Seb imagined, probably turning the inside of the building into a shadow dinosaur exhibit.

The other man banged on the side of the vehicle a few times. He moved distinctly like a gorilla, or in a gorilla-like way. He even waived his arms above his head in a stretch as he stepped back from the van. Seb didn't feel threatened by him, so much as thrilled, but then also -- he had to admit - a bit terrified? The man moved angrily. Even the first guy seemed less harsh in comparison.

As for the three of them, they didn't have much choice but to stay planted wide in the ground.

Then, one of the thugs, the gorilla, pulled out what looked like a gun. He held it pointing down at the dirt with his short arm, and just stood there. He was packing.

He felt like it'd be an impressive scene to tell Holly about. A real life movie scene. Then, he wondered why he would ever think such a thing, about telling her. He barely even knew her.

“Why do you think they're here?” Seb asked. “Waiting for someone?”

“I don't know? Why are we here?”

“I don't know.”

“Why are any of us anywhere?”

“Seriously, Connor?”

Paige flicked her leg roughly behind her. Connor stifled a cry.



“What do you think they’re doing?”?”

“Ok, I think they’re waiting for someone,” Paige said.

“For who, though?”

“Probably for them?”

Another set of headlights rolled down the road, bright enough for them all to see. The car that emerged was large, stately, shiny black. It was not just an SUV, but a long boxy thing.

Seb ducked his head even lower as it grew, drawing past the van and parking even nearer to them. He pressed his cheek to the ground, feeling the light touch of light spreading and breaking up over their prone bodies.

He could hear the others breathing on his sides, and imagined it must have been what it was like to be in a nursery as an infant. There was something of the same feeling of things being unknowable.

Slowly, Seb tilted his head up, and swiveled on his chin to see Paige already watching. Her eyelids flexed, shirking the size of her pupils beneath her lashes.

Even before he nudged Connor, he let him know, “Hey, seriously, check it out.”

Two more men stepped out from each side of the car, but this time, from opposite corners of each other.

The driver yelled out something, a burst of four deep staccato noises, across it, but the sound didn’t carry far enough to meaning anything to them. A large man, too, though thinner than the others, stepped from the other side. He towered next to over breaking lights and bumper. He paused and rested his hand against the back of the car, seemingly because he lacked anything else to do.

Paige was muttering under her breath. “Dee-dee-nine, ex for, dee-dee-nine, ex for, dee-dee-nine, ex for, dee-dee-nine, ex for.”

“What?” Connor half-hissed. “Are you losing your mind?”

“No, license plate,” Seb huffed. “Or most of one,” he said, lifting his voice slightly. “But how can you see that? I can

only see the ex.”

“I’ve got really good vision, actually.”

“Twenty-fifteen,” Connor submitted in another whisper. “Like, better than twenty-twenty. You didn’t know that?”

“No, she’s not my sister.”

“Twenty-fifteen. It’s the one impressive thing about her, how good she sees.”

“Well, are any of them wearing a nametag?”

“She’s like a cat.”

“Shh... I can’t see them really; the one’s just a plastic egg-looking guy in a jumpsuit.”

“Yeah, that’s what I see? How about the other guys?”

“Stop, I’m trying to find the last digit, anyway.... Dee-dee-nine, ex em mmmm.”

“What about the other guys?”

“They just look like guys. He, uh, has black hair. Two hands. He’s probably Italian. Or Irish. Or Eastern European. Maybe. I can’t really even see the other dude. He’s big too, probably has a lot of muscles.”

“And what about the van?”

“It’s white? No markings, except some stickers on the back. Small looking things...”

“So just what I see...”

“Cut it out, Connor,” Seb interjected.

“I don’t know,” Paige resumed. “It just looks like a van.”

“Dee-dee-nine, ex for...”

“I still can’t see it. Oh, wait...”

Seb watched as the oval-y guy and the black-haired man finished walking to the back of the van, and then as they jerked the handles. The doors swung wide open.

Out stepped a slender black girl, a teenager, probably, with long hair, led by a stocky man covered in combat gear, hauling a long gun at his side. Hopping down behind them came... a middle-aged couple? A black man and Asian woman? It was hard to tell, as they were shuffled quickly through the spotlight.

The last man out, another stocky man in combat gear with a gun, hustled after he jumped down to close one of the doors behind him. He then joined the others in walking toward the waiting car. Its dark sheen sat stretched out like a loaded gun in front of the short line of waddling people.

The thug in the lead arrived a moment later, but, as he realized he was holding his breath, it felt like a truly extended period to Seb. He watched the beefy fourth man stepped to them and offered some inaudible council, then opened the door to the back seat of the car and waved his arm.

The girl got in, followed by the hunched man and then the shivering woman. The driver of the car shut the door behind them. The muscled man who'd returned to the other side emerged again in the front of the car to raise his hand in a point and call out something over the hood. It was too far and also too quick to hear. Seb could see Connor poking his sister but she just shook her head a bit against the dirt.

That man waited in place for the others to walk back and climb into the van, two in front and two in the back, stepping up in wide steps and getting sealed in by the gorilla's slam of the door. Then, that final man opened the passenger's side door and ducked into the car. In barely a moment, it started rolling forward, looping around in a way that swept a blinding brightness over the kids.

As it finished its semi-circle and pulled away, the van started backing up. Its wide body arched one way in reverse, and then pointing generally away from where it started, lurched forward, leaning hard in the other direction and stumbling like a drunk out the door.

In this case, they each vanished down the long dark road they'd come from, the unfinished trail to an unfinished place. Which led to Duncan and Hamstead, and the way back to everything, to Middletown, to School and his mom... to their computers.

All of them breathed freely for the first time in twenty minutes or so.

“Holy crap, can we go now?” Paige said as the white box hit the end of the never-laid parking lot.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course,” Seb said, bouncing up.

“Oh, wow, oh wow,” Connor replied, looking around, as they crept, ducking down, to the car. “Let's make like a taco truck, and get the shell out of here,” he pleaded.

“I am not even bothered by that, I am just glad to be getting out of here,” Paige said, and Seb agreed.

“You know, if this was CityRiddle, I'd have finished building that freaking building already,” Connor added as he quickened his advance.

Between long strides, Seb's other pocket buzzed. He reached in and pulled out his phone, before the second buzz that he knew would be coming. It was a notification of a text, from his mom:

*Go to sleep instead of staying up too late luv u good night*

to which she appended an emoticon with a long row of Zzzzzzzs, a fine one, to be sure.

*“will do,”* he shot back with his thumbs. *“just finished a level. sleep now. luv u”*

At the point that they returned, John was completely befuddled.

He hadn't seen a thing at first, but when the second car had come, the light caught his attention. He'd been distracted and thought the van's lights were just a streetlamp coming on. He got out and looked and, seeing the group of men, decided to wait to in his car until he saw his fares coming up.

Once they got back in, John threw the car on, and they felt it come alive. He didn't wait for the story, and they were propelled backward with a jerk. He just drove away, letting them know he'd had enough and reminding them of the total for their trip, the forty-eight plus the other seventy-five

plus the twenty-eight that was on the BoopBoop app meter when Paige had picked them up.

Paige asked him to turn off his lights when he pulled upon to the Tippetts street. John was happy to do so.

Even in the darkness, Seb saw all those things that he knew should be there. The barn-shaped mailbox and white-shuttered windows, the fire hydrant marked off with white spray paint in the road. As they got nearer to the drop off spot, they passed under the big tree that hung over everything.

As the kids crept up the rolling hill, each bump showing up where it should be, and around the dark house to the walkout basement, John sat idling across the street. He was once again blending into the environment, listening, now, to a radio talk show about saving money, but the sound was still sealed in.

After a few minutes, Connor ran back with Seb, tripping down the hill, and with some of the money that he and his sister had saved up between them. They were fairly sure that John didn't know what to do with the wad of loose twenties, but appreciated the payment.

When they'd tried to give him a special golden dollar coin that Connor had gotten from his grandfather, something called a "godless dollar" because it lacked the inscription about the "in... we trust," he gave them a wink and told them to call him anytime.

# Part II

## A Girl of the World

# Chapter Five

## Wrangle With the Cord

Her cramping right hand worked hard to finish pawing its way up the staircase, helping Betty Van Buren ascend the last few flights to her apartment. And yet, despite stewing on it the whole way up, she still couldn't help but be befuddled by the weird urgent email she had gotten while out.

She just had no idea what she thought about it. Still didn't know what to make of the communication. Which wasn't like her, she normally was quick to have some guess to take.

As she trudged upward, her clumping sounds echoed crisply through the dim stairwell. The higher she got, the heavier her laptop bag felt.

Her eyes squinted to pull in enough illumination. Having recently entered the building, Betty knew that outside the city streets were enjoying a many-fingered brightness, a last gasp of full daylight.

Inside, it was lit with floppy shadows. Out there, the dying bustling of the streets on a weekend day had not yet become the overly boisterous bustling. On the streets out there, at night, in the city.

So she'd received this email earlier. She'd stopped between flights of the stairs to check it out again. It was asking for help.... as wacky as fifty she'd get every month.

But not quite, not just the ramblings of a crank. There was something about it.

Still, she didn't think she could help these guys, that was clear. Their request was just so thin, at least as far as she could tell.

But maybe she *could* help, though, what did she know anyway? And, at the very least, it might be an interesting tale.

Clearly, the email was a potential scoop, and she was always looking for those. She did so professionally, as a writer (or blogger or whatever.)

Or it'd at least be something that would bring a laugh? Most wacky things bring a laugh if you look closely enough, but you never knew.

Either way, she wasn't quite sure why the puzzle they'd laid out struck her as promising. Like either a scoop or enjoyable ridiculousness. But it did.

She certainly didn't know why the dude that they cared about should mean anything to them. And, yet, she probably could add it to her list of leads to pursue.

With a swing on the decorative knob capping the staircase, Betty finished her ascent with a long stretching step. Her boxy frame extended over the last two steps, as much as it could, with a little hop. Her cushioned bag banged against her rear.

Once atop the landing and looking down, Betty felt her traditional pride of each day in scaling of the five floors below her own. Her body might be short and imperfect, but she could do things. That included get herself up to her own home everyday, or even more.

The stairwell's customary tinny smell of peeling shiny paint lingered on the landing there with her as she caught her breath with a labored slowness. The air itself felt neither hot nor cold on its own. Maybe a little stuffy, but just a little, and much more of a welcoming stillness.



Suddenly, she thought, sensing her doorstep around as she quickly checked her phone, she was right back there. For a second, she barely had any memory of leaving now that she'd returned again. She exhaled.

As much as going out and dealing with everything in New York City was exciting, getting home always would be getting home.

At least for her, she thought. To her, getting home meant everything switching from one set of concerns, from dodging pedestrians to confronting conversations, to whole other parts of your brain.

She looked down again at her phone. So she'd reply when she logged in later? Why not? It couldn't hurt, could it? She wished she that more as a motto, but then realized how daffy that would be.

Her light-headedness lifting, Betty bobbed her shoulders a few more times, throwing her jean jacket up and down. To some extent, she was attempting to shake the glimmer of uncanny feeling that'd been dogging her. And to some extent, she was trying to reset her body and shake off the aches.

Succeeding somewhat, she let out a whistling sound, unlocked the heavy door with a loud clank. Before the sound even faded completely, she shoved it open with her hip.

Touching the doorframe lightly on her way across the threshold, she figuratively fell into her dark apartment and flicked at the light-switch inside the door.

Like a first-person player, cautious because they are low on health, Betty surveyed the cramped room slowly, from the stove in the corner to coffee table in front of the couch, cluttered with empty glasses, seltzer bottles and debris.

Her living room, her safe place, her hub zone.

It was about the size of the back of a medium-large rental truck for moving your things, she felt sometimes. But it was really more like a small shipping container pulled by an eighteen-wheeler or on a train.

Apartments in the city were always small but it was even more on the small end. It certainly wasn't as big as the homes of the reality show stars in California, the vapid and beautiful. The whole thing almost could fit in ton of their closets.

On the low long table taking up a good chunk of the little room, she noticed crumpled candy wrappers. And ripped bits of wrappers, with some stuck inside and some sitting loose. They were strewn around four buoys: overturned plastic water, juice and soda bottles.

Their labels announced gummy or sour things.

She shouldn't have, since the mess was mostly her doing, but more than embarrassed or compelled to clean up, she felt hungry in a specific way. Her mouth watered just a bit and her cheeks pulled in. She couldn't help but thinking of a nice bit of candy that was sour or gummy or even both.

Her mom, she knew, would be beside herself. Neither of the two roommates was able to pick up after him or her self completely, let alone each other. It was not a thing that made Betty proud. She didn't really mind since it wasn't like friends came over so much that it was actually a problem.

Still, she could almost hear the high pitch of her mother's lectures start up. And she could picture the tight hair on top of her face twisting and shaking with her round head.

Betty's parents had only visited the one time so far, which was a good thing. Not that it was really so hard to straighten up such a small space. If it were actually hard, she'd probably have done it already. Betty just kept figuring she would do it when she felt like it, if she needed.

Stepping back toward the door, she threw off her running shoes - which were never used for running -- between it and the couch.

Covering a patch of wooden floor there, she saw several pairs of sneakers with laces of varying lengths and stages of greying, four tall boots and two styles of high heels. The

footwear could be considered somewhat ordered; it was pushed tightly together and mostly going two by two.

Betty stepped to the sink in the bathroom and ran the water in the sink. She pulled back her fluffy hair and squeezed a dollop of face wash into her hands. The warm water transformed the thick liquid into a den of bubbles.

Looking at her pasty face in the mirror, more tired than she'd realized, Betty stared deeply into her own green eyes, transfixed by how deeply they seemed to go.

Pulling back from the mirror, she looked again at her dripping visage and started to identify the parts of her cheeks and nose that she'd be better without. Coolly choosing, not with torment. She briefly leaned in to study a scar on her cheek where she'd had a terrible zit that she distinctly remembered picking at in the mirror of some stranger's house

She prodded to her right with her hand to pick up a towel, and turned her face into it, surprised again at how overuse of a hand-towel eventually left it unable to function really effectively, unable to absorb much.

Betty stepped back out of the bathroom still slightly damp. In the middle of the wall -- splitting the measly common area from two small bedrooms facing the street -- an invisible tower of milk crates was draped with a starry bed sheet. The stars hung there in a childish soft yellow.

A flat TV about the size of a pizza box on a stand sat on top of it, spilling wires out behind. A pair of compact but powerful speakers stood on each side of it.

These electronics lagged behind what they needed in terms of quality because they were too broke to do anything about it.

Still, on the ground sat four different game systems, a gaggle of small squared black mammals, and if you knew to look closely, controllers for two more. She smiled at them. They seemed pleased to be there. She was sure they would smile back if they could.

Jimmy, her roommate, wouldn't be home for a while. Jimmy was meant to be at rehearsals for another few hours at least. And, clearly, she hadn't lazyboned that day away, considering how she'd gotten some stuff done...

Betty should have known it was going to be a full day for Jimmy, but he still texted her to warn her that in the morning.

He was usually pretty good with letting her know his schedule and plans, reflecting the type of guy that Jimmy was.

She wasn't always that good with him; she didn't always give him a heads up with her plans, when she had some. Betty felt bad about that. Not that her plans were ever anything so dangerous or exciting.

Betty casually double-checked his room for him, poking in her head, but no one rested on his green sheets, reading in his sweatpants and a "The Over Yonders" t-shirt.

Working on one type of job for months - as a temp at different companies doing menial tasks or at one of his relative's dentist offices, at the front desk -- and then constantly practicing and performing all the time for a few weeks or months?

She didn't know how he could do it. The crazy hours all of a sudden. Hundred hour weeks. But that was theater, off-Broadway, she guessed.

She understood it for Jimmy, just knowing him at that point as well as she did: Entertainment, it was his passion.

Still, she wondered -- and not with desire -- how much longer he could keep doing it. Each new part seemed no bigger than the last, and the schedule irregularly grueling. Jimmy had worked a couple of weekends already in a row, she'd lost count of how many.

Like most people, Betty thought, she really really really appreciated not having to go in to the office on the weekends. To have weekends as her own time. A time when she could just chill out.

It didn't matter how much she couldn't help but think of her own curious choice in professions as leading to one long weekend; it was a perversion of that in some ways, doing what she loved. She still needed the seven days of the week to each be about something different, and for the last two to be their own thing.

Of course Betty enjoyed her job, gaming and writing and writing about gaming. And she clearly brought work home – ha, obviously -- and probably never stopped somehow being “on duty.” But it was nice to not see anyone she worked with in person, she thought. So what if she needed to check in on Twitter or maybe actually send some emails to people.

Who didn't sometimes not feel like dealing with the kind of conversations you had with a co-worker, endlessly answering questions?

It wasn't, like, the biggest of things to Betty, but that day was a good example of how she also didn't feel like always being at risk of being judged. Pf becoming abruptly conscious of how she'd dressed, or how she talked, or whether she'd shaved where she needed to shave, the part of her legs below the longish dark skirt that she wore draped over her knees.

She liked the people she worked with, but she was also quite perceptive when it came to things like people judging her, or each other.

Forget that, she thought. She didn't need that every day. The “going into work” feeling. Even confident in herself, it still was an effort. Maybe it'd been different at her last job, mostly, she guessed. Never ever quite so draining. Not that it had gotten so bad, still fairly welcoming, the vibe was just a bit more serious, professional.

In contrast, earlier that day, she'd been enthusiastic to step out to the coffee shop in unstylish jeans and a Lion King sweatshirt she'd borrowed from Jimmy, as he'd headed out an hour before.

Out there in her city, she needed to look only *presentable enough* in front of the crowds and mostly strangers. A huge chunk of them, she'd never see again. Sure, a few she recognized, and they waved at each other.

They were just people. She liked people when there were many of them, when they weren't acting needy or bitchy to each other.

On the other hand, she was in no mood to go a bit uptown to the Marshmallow offices. Was it so wrong to need the break from the pressure of socializing with colleagues, and the people she called on the phone?

Sometimes work stuff was strategic and sometimes it was uninhibited and even fun. Most often, it was rife with risk. Never was it uncomplicated from start to finish. It was a job, she knew that was how it was with some jobs.

Fixing herself a tall glass of ice with a splash of tap water, Betty ticked through commitments she'd met to herself for chores that day. She'd be killing it. She felt even more fully accomplished, when she thought of:

dry-cleaning, picked up and dropped off;

hair-cut, a plain longish cut that looked good against her dull

skin, tips a little crazy;

a few trips rolling down several tiny grocery aisles with a tiny shopping cart, filling the high metal bin near her chest with a few items that could be shoved in her backpack;

called a few people while walking around town to stay in touch;

did a lot of work on her next piece;

and the bills got paid, which was how she started her day;

Oh, and she'd dealt with some birthdays on Facebook, and Twitter mentions and Instagrammed something also while walking around, a manhole cover leaking steam.

Why was Sunday always the busiest day of her week? But that was just what you needed to do being a grown up, in

the city, at that time. She knew that. And no matter how much you got done, another app would pop up and draw your thumb.

Sure, that email from those guys probably needed to be dealt with, she knew, along with her shoes needing to be brought into the cobbler. Nevertheless, she'd gotten a lot done.

The night before she'd been planning for several weeks to meet up with a friend from college, a pretty girl who'd been quirkiest back then. They'd seen each other every few months for the last couple of years, with maybe a few more months passing between visits recently.

And she did meet with Betty, at Club Lounge, for a while, in tall white heels and a maroon dress. A few of the girl's other friends, a couple of lawyers and a marketing manager, joined them as well. It was loud and hot. After about an hour, her college friend needed to meet a date, a bond salesman with tattoo sleeves up his arms.

The girl's friends invited her to stay, but she declined and instead wandered outside through Times Square, which was overflowing with Elmos and Captain Americas and Elsas in saggy, ratty costumes, to the subway. She pushed her way through the crowd on the train platform and downtown.

Betty preferred the idea of going to see a movie on her own that was playing at the Independent Cinema House, "The Manana Men," an independently produced documentary about a Mexican drug syndicate and their associates in the United States. It turned out to be just ok.

Even without Jimmy there, their apartment rarely ever really seemed empty. It was too small for that, and stuffed with junk strewn about, which always made a place feel like home. Betty appreciated its coziness. Still, she felt a need to pop back in his room, and did with a few steps.

She moved to the window and looked out. Three cars staggered down the street and slowing moving toward her building. And then past it.

Lonely groups of people walking in twos and threes ambled down the sidewalks, repeating NPCs, too far below to hear anyone but the loudest personalities making noise. Tourists, Betty thought, mostly because she now considered anyone not from the neighborhood to be tourists.

Then, she chuckled at herself. At least, she was certainly as embedded there as any.

So many people out there... Any of them, she supposed, could be interesting. Any of them could be criminals or celebrities. Every single one could be a friend, your best friend. So weird.

And then Betty again thought about the email, subject line: *"Plz help! Big mystery..."*

It did matter that they came across in it like they were being completely honest. It also mattered that they sounded a bit deranged but you couldn't tell if they even really knew that. It was masterful trolling if so. Betty'd seen worse.

And yet it certainly would not have surprised her if they were setting her up in some meme. People were also like that, even she liked them as a group, there were always some rotten apples.

She remembered what an older girl on her camp bus had told her about trolls when she was just a kid: A troll is someone who when you're talking to him in person would say they could prove your phone can't get viruses, takes it, sneezes on it and hand it back before you finished your answer, guaranteeing that the phone won't get sick. The type that beat on kids like her and Jimmy.

Presently, Betty drifted back out of his room, trailing a faint smell of sharp stinky cologne with her. She plopped down on the couch, feet up on the table. She looked toward the milk-cartoon sheet tower holding a screen.

Pushing heavily on the rubbery keys, Betty turned the TV on and advanced it two HDMI's. Her wall thumped as someone slammed a door across the hall, or a floor above, or the one below, or one below that.



Leaning back into the lumpy cushions, she felt the pull on her temple of scabbing from a broken blemish. Another thumping came from the same vague place, a double slam, she realized. Probably one of her neighbors had been just picking something up.

Exhaling again with whistle, Betty leaned forward and reached under the couch, her hand finding a PS4 controller, and wrapping her hand around it comfortably. It was solid but not heavy, ready to be handled but light-weight.

She used it to launch the system, with a whir and a thin blue strip of illumination. When the loading stopped loading, she started a game, CityRiddle, the watered down PS4 version. A tinkling synth theme introduced the launch screen, then a quick clip of children's voices and car horns.

She called up a titled and dated list of previously saved cities, selected one. With a flash of the screen she was dropping down into it, falling from the sky all the way down, an exhilarated feeling wheeling her chest as she realized that she had no more commitments that night.

She began running through streets, looking through the people for ones to convert into new occupations.

No one did enough of it, she thought. She was good at it. Soon she had an entire district of her city working as scientists, keeping what they had from degrading, and tolling away on better technology and pharmaceuticals.

The reality of it was that she'd been planning to play the game and wanted to play the game. She barely took any screenshots, certainly with no immediate expectation to share any of it anywhere in particular.

Thinking of such sharing, Betty thought of the email. I didn't matter what they said, she wasn't sure on some higher level that she didn't know how they'd decided to share their story with her.

Betty had first seen the email on her phone while walking down the thin sidewalk by the fence of the bushy gray little park, on the way back from the GamerPerch store.

She skimmed the first two lines of text before turning onto the main strip in the neighborhood. The storefronts there were dotted with little restaurants with swirly signs, fancy boutiques and bars with wide windows and long loops of fluorescent bulbs. People were ducking in and out of the rectangular holes appearing regularly down the strip at irregular intervals.

And it was fairly empty between brunch and dinner, but not completely at all. People not coming and going to the shops. People who were milling about. People were lazy; in a way it was like the courtyard of a jail.

Betty still found herself needing to dodge through too many of them as they took up space on her sidewalk.

The email on her phone, she could tell with the start of a scroll, was too whacky to really read while in motion. She wanted to reply afterward.

And she knew, in a minute, she'd be sitting down to drink a nice iced coffee and to crack open her laptop to work on her latest article. Maybe she'd even finish it off so she could loaf around on Monday at least pre-morning editors meeting.

Carrying the warm peppery smell of a Mexican place with her, she passed a bookstore, and looking in the glass, saw a bunch of books about Brooklyn propped up on thin tin frames, including *The Great Bridge*, which she'd enjoyed. She'd also bought a biography of Stan Lee there. And a coding book when she'd tried to do that.

An overcast sky spread out between the rows of buildings about her head. The sidewalk passed beneath her feet.

Betty's shoulders felt the weight of the different books she'd brought along with the computer in her backpack. It was only the start of a throbbing sharpish pain in her shoulder blades that made her pause and adjust the burden.

She stood back up, her destination in sight, the corner of its green awning, just after the glaring red dots in a hand

shape that were shinning out from their box on the other side of street from her.

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Entering the familiar wooden embrace of the establishment, a dank roasted smell hit Betty. Her eyes opened slightly wider, and she looked around in a chocolate-y buzz, scanning the place for a seat.

Silencing her phone out of politeness, she saw a couple of familiar faces in a few of the tiny chipped-black wood chairs, but no one she really knew. Nevertheless, the woman at the counter greeted her by name, to which Betty always blushed, appreciative, and tried her best to match with a chipper order and hearty “Cool. Thank you.”

While waiting, she checked in on GaggglePlus, the location-tracking site where you could claim prizes for being “lord” or “wizard” of a location, on her phone, earning some coins.

She sat and opened her computer, feeling greeted by its fan’s whir. You signed into the WiFi at the coffee shop called *TheArcade* with the user name *TheArcade*, password, *BlackT2*, but sometimes they changed.

Betty dutifully tapped that out on the flat squares on her laptop’s keyboard, waited, and saw. She massaged a few more keys, and entered her work server via VPN.

She saw her desktop from work, awash in random files, hiding unclosed windows, shrunken down, in need of a cleaning-up. She wiped the mouse over to group of strange workflow programs in her publisher’s colors: white, a subdued orange and friendly light blue. She went to launch one but noticed a blink in her connection and went to log off and log on again.

Taking a sip of her cold coffee, she noticed something slightly wrong, wateriness tinged with a burnt undertone. She swilled it around, sipped again. As she stood to return to

the milk station and add some more of the half-and-half to her cup, she stretched out her arm and locked her computer with a secret key combination, which would then need to be followed by her actual password that she very regularly changed.

As she approached the milk bar, a couple standing there loosened their grips on each other's arms, but continued talking. She tipped her head knowingly to them, and they smiled back.

Returning to her small round table with a milkier drink, she double-clicked that work program, CopyRight. After the screen hung for a number of seconds, there emerged from the pause in time a document sitting within a boxing ring crowded by check-mark boxes and drop down menus.

She stared at the words typed into her title box. "*The Home-Field Advantage, in Games??????*"

Man, she remembered why she hadn't gotten very far.

For what it was worth, the topic was not very inspiring to her creative juices. Another freaking nonsense Marshmallow.com story.

She knew she just needed to finish the video anyway. The script would just write itself, she was sure, and the article would just be a scaled down snip of whatever was in the script, with a few more plays on words in the headline.

Or at least... it would write itself in the way she imagined Elan Gouber's idea of wanting the piece to be -- punchy, upbeat, vaguely educational -- with the plays on words her only paid donation.

Elan laid it out pretty simply. He wanted her to turn in something tying the recent and incredibly popular self-help book "*The HomeField Advantage*" to the world of video games, which she covered for him, among some other stuff. But she was brought on because she knew about games.

Elan saw it filling out the site's "book" page, which always needed something, as well as offering a way for two different types of people in America to see what the other

type looked like. It was very Marshmallow. She saw it as a throwaway.

Too many of her stories were like that now. Stupid numbered lists and aggregation. With wacky videos that she made, or reposts of videos from other sites with links back that were rarely used. Not that they all were stupid; Marshmallow did put out some good stuff, she knew that there was no doubt about that.

Elan wasn't evil or anything, he let her file posts that were whimsical or emotional. But under pressure from above, he also kept her busy with all sorts of grunt-work.

The problem with the short attention span of her reader was that she had no choice but to trim almost all of the good ideas for long thoughtful pieces about how the world worked into content that could be consumed in under a minute.

With each sip of her coffee, however, she tried to remember she was just paying his dues. She hadn't been doing it long, writing online at a real professional web organization in the city, only about a year. Plugging away at Marshmallow meant pumping out what Elan wanted. *She* wanted to be doing all that whimsical and emotional stuff a lot more, but that's what paying a due is about.

Thus, she dove into her CopyRight file. In it, Betty had pasted all nine lessons from "*The Homefield Advantage.*" She began looking through them to find three or four to call out.

She paused to check out its Wikipedia page, to see if it really was best-selling. And it was, as high as eighth on nonfiction and within the top twenty for sixteen weeks. A small photo of the author shone with his pearly white teeth and glinting hair. He seemed sincere in pitching his pseudo-philosophy of mining the secrets of why home teams just do it better when it comes to winning.

For "*Home cooking always tastes better,*" Betty looked up YouTube videos of baseball rookies performing feats in MLB:

The Show. She clipped them with a program, short enough to count as part of a work of criticism.

She decided she would talk about the use of developing rookies and drafted players in franchise modes.

For "*Bring the right players,*" she found quick clips of select screens across that game, Madden, NBA 2K, NHL and Fifa, not to mention an early WWE title she went hunting for across the Internet's archives.

She'd say something about the need to select the right team for your circumstances.

For "*Being well-rested,*" she searched for substitution scenes across different games, cut scenes and gameplay.

She thought about how she'd reorder them.

She landed upon a video of Madden 2004. She remembered playing with her neighbor, one of her only friends. And she was one of his only friends, Oliver Randolph. She'd go over to Oliver's big red house, with musty brown carpet, past his drooling schnauzer, and into his den.

He only had a few games... Madden, Final Fantasy X, SimCity Something, Ratchet & Clank. They'd pick one out of the heavy wooden drawer, and load it up and play for hours, never switching in a single session. They'd get unbelievably good at them. And, when they were done with playing one for the day, they'd just go off and ride their bikes or play chess. But that could be, remember, hours later.

The video ended. Once she realized once she got started with her work, even drudgery and grunt-work, she focused in and made solid progress.

That was why she needed to get out, to sit in a little crowd she could ignore, like she'd needed to go to the library while at college.

She'd say it was because sometimes trying to work at home offered too many distractions, but everywhere she went she brought distractions with her. Who didn't these days?

Operating efficiently at the finger-sized keys, she'd dragged and snipped and sketched what she needed together.

She'd gotten pretty much where she wanted to be for something so unnecessary, a minute-and-a-half of cuts between colorful sporting images hitting on certain beats. How much longer or better, she thought, should something like this be, really?

When she finally took a break and looked down at her drink's watery remains, Betty was well into putting together the video and her laptop's battery was flashing eleven percent. It seemed pretty good? It was basically there?

She plugged in, wincing at the need to wrangle with the cord. If she stayed much longer, she'd have to stay plugged in. She stood and hugged each arm across her chest to stretch, turning over her hips to look from wall to wall. She knew she wouldn't really draw stares.

Sitting back down to save and log out, she remembered the emails that she'd put off, the one from her mother, and the one labeled: *Plz help! Big mystery...*

Betty suddenly realized she hadn't Skyped with her parents and that the weekend was almost over. She could call them when she got back but she got back, but she didn't feel like it.

She felt bad. Her mother, the successful black lawyer back in the Minnesota, would be ready to quiz her on her career and love life... or ongoing lack thereof. She'd want to know that Betty was getting exercise.

Squeezing her soft arm beneath her sleeve, Betty knew that wasn't true. It didn't bother her too much.

Betty's father, Fred, was a history teacher -- or historian, as he liked to claim -- at the high school two towns over from where Betty grew up. He would be less intense about those things but he'd be sure to be frowning through the screen at her tardiness in getting in touch with them.

She opened the email from Donna Van Buren and firmly hit the “reply all” button, which was just as flat as the rest of her screen but stood out because of some fine shadowing.

***RE: Catching up?***

*Yes! Sorry, I've been super-busy, and I will be around more soon once*

*I get some projects done at work. I'm actually doing something right now at a coffee shop. I'll try calling tomorrow after work if you're free. Sorry I'm so busy. But you'd both be proud. Love you both... Remember when you thought 'lol' meant love you lots dad? Hahaha, talk soon, promise!*

*-- BVB*

She it felt insincere only so far as she felt bad that she didn't intend to try to call them the next day.

Her mother, known as Donna Brown Van Buren at work, was the tall older partner, with fine short hair and shapely legs in pantyhose. She probably wouldn't even be free to pick up, Betty figured.

She did love them both, though, and even if it didn't matter because she knew they'd be supported and loved by them, she promised to herself that she'd make sure to get in touch.

Your parents are your parents, even when you move a thousand miles away, and shut off a whole part of yourself to them, because they'd never understand why you loved to play video games as much as you did.

The other email was the only one aside from obvious spam sitting unopened in her inbox.

She scrolled the window up and down a few times, and then circled it with the flicking little hand that pointed away and finally leapt into action when she tapped once.



*Plz help! Big mystery...*

*Hi Betty...*

*We are just two regular guys thrust into a strange situation. We are contacting you because of the disappearance of a sort of almost popular YouTuber and GoVidGo streamer, who does game walkthroughs and stuff like that. (He's no Dan TDM or Pewdiepie.) We think you might be able to help because of something we saw connected to something that you wrote. We do not currently have much more information than that but we have plenty of questions.*

*To be more specific: In the comment section to one of your articles, a commenter, going by Player 44451, posted in a comment an ending that consisted of the letters DD9 X. These letters are potentially helpful to us in our investigation. A potential clue even. Link to the comment is:*

*(<http://www.marshmallow.com/play/bvanbur/whe...> )*

*Maybe you can help because maybe you can? The real truth is we don't know how this particular comment has anything to do with our situation. But we would like to communicate more about it to see if you know of anything unusual about it or the author. We don't have much else to go on. Considering your interests, we would at least like to share what we know. Please reach out for more information and please don't communicate with anybody about this, we are not sure how safe he is, which is why we are not revealing his name. No Joke. We are really really serious about that.*

*Anyway, on your website, we noticed you're a good writer. You might find this interesting. Email us here or even call us at the number 732-555-8309. Or we can set up account(s) and communicate on Twitter or Facebook or Snapchat if you prefer.*

*Thank you.*

Betty looked at an expand version of the "from:" line in her inbox: *onno11* at *gmail dot com*. If it really was two guys? She couldn't tell, but she thought maybe they were college kids.

She supposed they certainly sounded normal enough. No lewd references in their handle, no suggestive language in addressing her. They didn't seem like trolls? Perhaps a bit too polite. But when is that the worst thing you can say about someone?

She read it again to digest it a bit more, to sink the exact phrasing into her memory, like she started needing to do sometimes as she got older, deeper into her twenties.

It included: the disappearance of a sorta popular YouTube and GoVidGo personality, letters and a phone number.

Who just gives out their phone number?

She clicked on the link and it did indeed send her flying across time and the Internet into one of her old articles. It was from about six months or so back, "*When Nature Calls...*"

It was about techniques for taking potty breaks during gameplay, from a couple of real vloggers, and their own stories of needing to press pause during a stream or while recording a video.

Seeing his name, she realized that Player44451 was a regular commentator on Marshmallow, one of two dozen or

so that would frequent her stories and others at various times.

Or had been, for at least for a while, from definitely even before she'd started at the site. But she hadn't seen him recently, she remembered? Probably for months and months?

What she did had become really rote, as it all blended together, making it hard to think about the timeline precisely.

A full twelve months ago she began doing it, working there, almost to the week. And it was like that now... work there was becoming something of a blur, making it hard to tell the days apart.

She moved on to the computer's solutions. She looked over his history of comments, which was available by clicking through the public site.

They indeed ended more than four months earlier. Upon some study, they seemed mostly just banal, like the type of comments you'd expect to see posted to the light-hearted section of a website geared toward a more sophisticated taste in the titillating and high pop culture:

puns in response to puns,

**+1s,**

**commonsense views like**

*definitely should have never hit him with the boat but she should never go back to him*

or

*wish they cld find someone to be a decent president, just  
like one person somewhere in*

or

*omg!!! the flute theme from the original Zelda!!*

If there was any genre of commenter Player44451 fell into, it was the mild and positive affirmer. Not the poster of questions that lead to controversial threads, nor the over-sharing and over-caring saps, nor the angry man, really still angry from something else.

Some guys were really hateful, and posted vile, threatening things, about her looks, or even just hating on rival game systems, Xboners vs. PS faithful. Some were, ultimately, trolls, getting a kick out of causing ill feelings and confusion.

She knew what she had to do and made like Taylor Swift, making happy noises. *Shake it off, shake it off*. She knew she needed to stop caring about hate spilled into her life. And it made her stronger.

Not that she had it that bad. Trolls are just trolls, after all.

At the end of the day, she knew the kind of chaotic hate that writers at more mainstream publications got. Both in their comment sections and then with snippets of their stories dropped into random places on the Internet to be hated with pure hate, or to somehow fuel hatred.

Let alone the YouTubers. Ugh, YouTube comments. Some of them were just unbelievably rude.

In regards to the comment from Player44451 that onno11 found so bafflingly interesting as part of their mystery, she also didn't know what to make of it in connection to anything. Following the link back, she stared confused at the screen.

She felt like it was just maybe too early for her to attempt to solve the riddle. And yet, at the same time, she realized it maybe would never be a riddle to solve. Just like the atmospheric graffiti of a Call of Duty clone or the jabbering of real random AM radio when you got in the cars in CityRiddle.

Below the final graf of her story, which read...

*But it's not something to be embarrassed of. When you need to go, you got to go. It's happening everyday to everybody. So when nature calls, take a break.*

there sat the little icons of APIs to other social media sites, waiting to share the story and then...

a slew of names - including not just Player 4451 but also twenty or so others like JeffersonJeff and ladyhydrangea who expressed their opinions on their stories from time to time. Marshmallow writers knew a lot of the names.

Squinting at random comments that were impossible to understand with just a glance made her eyes hurt. But she didn't wanted to miss what she was looking for in the jumbled threads taking detours that led them much astray.

And then Betty found it, and it read:

***Player4451***

*Yup, next time ask a speedrunner what he wud do. Worst thing ever! Imagine doing a run like that? Ah!*

*DD9 X :)*

Her breathing slowed down, and Betty was certainly stumped.

The comment seemed narrowly focused. In response to being regularly trapped without a bathroom break, a speedrunner probably would have someone interesting things to say, to say the least.

Thinking about that made Player44451 feel the same way, imaging the bladder pain and how there'd be great downside to it. He included !s probably in response to feeling the severity of the situation would be dramatic.

The general theme of the comment matched those around it, and flowed from her story.

After that thought, the seemingly random letters and number just fell below. It'd be hard to say it they were just

some errant smash of a keyboard with the smiley face that followed them.

Betty turned her head and tried to see if they were meant to be faces too. But if they were emoticons she didn't know, she couldn't see it, no matter how she craned her neck.

She wished she had something to offer the guys but nothing about that comment jumped out at her.

And Player44451 didn't seem to have anything particularly unusual about his posting history, apart from its slow and then sudden demise. On the other hand, she didn't really see all of the facts that they possessed. Of course, they did, and they didn't see anything about the comment history that was out of the ordinary in terms of their purposes.

She was stuck at that point for only a minute when a bearded man with rolled sleeves brushed the back of her chair with his jeans, and then knocked against her chair again with his carrier bag as he tried to adjust his path. He slid another chair into its table behind him when he'd swiveled next. Coming from outside, he's misjudged the dimensions.

"Oh, hey so sorry," he said, trying to look sheepish.

He had the squared face of a dating show contestant. He wouldn't be Betty's type, if she really even had a type. But he was certainly handsome, in a downtown kind of way.

"Oh," she said, with a wry dryness that landed more harshly than she intended, "Just be careful with that thing."

He became ever more flustered and apologized again with a stutter. He was apparently the type of handsome that felt self-conscious.

She looked down aimlessly, before finally locking on her computer screen, and mumbling something about how tight The Arcade could be, especially on a Sunday.

After her slow appreciation of the brush, she'd been shaken by the bump, almost lost her balance. For that split

second, she'd felt like she was floating off her chair and toward the ceiling in the corner of the room.

Really now, though, it was just a bump, she thought.

But when she looked up again, the guy had moved on. She spied him settling into a table far away from hers, rubbing his chin as he studied his phone.

Which was fine with her, totally fine. She just felt bad she'd potentially left him with negative energy from the interaction. She didn't like when people felt that way. She'd made an error on her own field.

She looked at the man again, opening his laptop and turning his head to check out the line to order. He seemed content enough, she figured.

Shrugging, Betty followed through with her previous feint at packing up.

Standing, she headed toward the exit and back home. In order to play some games or something. She'd respond to that email sooner or later, she thought. At least tell them that she'd looked and found nothing.



# Chapter Six

## Without Telling It What

By the time that Jimmy had finally got back from rehearsal that night, it was hours later, many hours later. How many? Betty couldn't immediately say. Things had gotten very dreamy in the apartment, with time becoming a weird thing. But she knew that Jimmy was indeed getting home quite late.

On the coffee table, a mostly empty wonton soup container (the shorter plastic type) with a few pork strips floating on the bottom sat next to an open waxy cardboard carton with a soft metal handle. A fortune cookie bag flutter with each mild breeze; its fortune sat unread, face-side down beside a scallion ring that had landed on the wood.

And behind all that, Betty was laid back on the couch, playing CityRiddle again, after a brief-ish break to level her character in KDO. She'd over-leveled up the character with strength, at the expense of other attributes. It wasn't a game she was playing a lot at that point, but she just felt like evening out the warrior, pushing him ahead a little bit in case she wanted to join any quests again. She knew some of the usernames lately in KDO, but not really as friends or anything like that, just fellow travellers.

This was what she did.

What could she say?

She'd gotten into games a long time ago, when she'd been stuck indoors on the couch except for school for

almost twelve months. She used the crutches all through the summer even. It was the worst; she should have never have gone ice-skating, and never did or would again, obviously.

And so, as Jimmy entered the apartment, she didn't unlock her gaze from her screen, where her army of scientists had discovered antidepressants. The development was revealed through an achievement box, cheering sounds and a waiving of Cityzen arms.

"Didn't you already write about this one?"

Jimmy spoke in an exaggerated breathlessness, reflecting his long day and trek up the stairs. He was slipping off his slick shoes with a shuffle. "Because I definitely recognize this one. CityRiddle isn't it?" he offered sarcastically. "You really think there's anyone left that needs a review?"

"Oh hey, yeah, I just... you know... Just staying in shape?" she offered. "I don't know. What do you want me to say? I'm just chilling for a bit now. I totally got ahead for the week by doing some work at The Arcade."

"Oh, well, you know, I'm ok with that Betty. I'm ok with whatever you need. I see you ate?"

"Something like that. How was practice?"

"Nine-tenths stagnation, one-tenth inspiration," Jimmy said, unbuttoning his shirt as he ducked into his room. "What are you doing anyway?" he called. "Really just playing that? And, child, what's the deal with how dark it is out there? Are we unable to pay the electricity bill? Because you know that I got a good-paying job now. I think this one is going to be really good, this play."

She could imagine him popping his hips out as he waved his arms in triumph.

"Yeah, you know, it's my day off?" Betty replied when re-entered the room wearing slick pajamas pants and a sweat-shirt with a front pocket that he could stuff his hands into.

"You play videogames on your day off when you play videogames for a living. Now I just do not get that. It'd be

like a house-painter painting his own living room every night.”

“I play different ones, dummy. And like you also do your acting in here, the apartment, when you talk to me sometimes. Like you’re acting like an idiot now. Very nice acting by the way.”

“Hey,” Jimmy said, jumping down on the couch on top of Betty’s legs, and cracking up. “You got a haircut, didn’t you? It looks nice. You going to wrap this up and play something with me?”

“Yeah,” Betty said, completely happy to do so. Her brain felt like a certain type of non-verbal mush of bad thinking. “Hold on while I save and boot whatever up. You want to play Mario Kart or something? You like the haircut?”

“It’s nice, you better do the ends like that, on the regular. Anyway, give me something where I can beat you up,” he laughed, jogging over to the kitchen.

“Master Smash then... You want any beef lo mein? I got Chinese and have some leftovers.”

“Sure,” he said. He grabbed a seltzer can out of the fridge, and slid open a drawer for a fork. She watched him, instead of the load screen. Sometimes Betty just loved watching him; he hopped up and down almost when he was excited.

“Hold on, though, you have got to check this out first,” Jimmy said coming back, his left hand holding the utensil straight up and a can of seltzer, away from his body.

His other hand dug into his pants, and withdrew his sleek glass phone.

“It’s like a group of six junior high schools doing silly videos. Like mysteries or fantastical stuff,” she said, walking over, “or lip-synching and whatever. It’s adorable. They are just too sweet and dumb,” he added noticing her eyes on him. “Don’t ask me how I found this.”

She reached out to take the phone from him so he wouldn’t drop the aluminum can. But he switched his

outstretched arm, and handed her the seltzer. He pulled up the video that he said he'd gotten playing, and it expanded from a small box to fill the screen from edge to edge.

He turned his device, presenting it back for her hands.

A white-on-black title was evaporating, giving way to a scene of rail-thin tween girls wearing faces awkward with growth and braces. They were play-acting in the wooden area near a playground, taking turns talking loudly and throwing out their limbs.

As they mostly took turns delivering lines, with sharp cuts, some of the voices modulated up and down suddenly.

Their giggles oozed being clean-cut. They were having good clean fun. Whatever, they were so dorky it was cute, she had to admit.

They did their best impression of skits on a late-night show, but hosted and run by tween girls. One tripped walking across a lawn and they all laughed, and Betty had to laugh at herself for thinking it was at least a little funny. Or at least self-referential enough to make her laugh.

But still...

"This is what you do all day at work when you're waiting for your parts, Jimmy? It doesn't sound very glamorous."

"It doesn't work like that, Betty. Sure, I do consult on things like the sets because the guys and gals that do that, they're nice and we all like each other, and they value my opinion. You also help out carrying stuff and holding stuff; you know I've told you about it. We're not a huge cast and crew. But really then, you get twenty minutes here and there, and you click around."

A mock screaming escaped out of Jimmy's phone, and Betty caught one of them walking with her thin arms held out like a zombie.

"They call themselves the Slumber Party Six," he said.

"They seem very nice."

"Ok. I'll turn it off, I know it's terribly embarrassing but it's just endearing to me. Just 100% endearing. It's just a

thing that's out there, if you need a thing to laugh at."

Betty passed the phone back to Jimmy, as he sat down beside her. And then, as she weaved her way through the menus on the screen, out of the corner of her eye, she watched him grab a fork-full of noodles. And then he chewed on it for a good amount of time, it looked like because it was a big bite for his small mouth.

Finally, his other hand reached down between bites to take up a dark controller.

"How was practice?" she asked, the words escaping her lips at the same moment as she pressed down digitally and visually on the start button on the screen.

"Long," he responded. "We also almost got the sets figured out, but then I spilled, I mean I totally spilled, my guts, about how much it wasn't working for me. Like the Oval Office was too Ikea. But they totally agreed. The director even. They just didn't want to say anything. It was funny."

Ah Jimmy, there was always something about Jimmy, so that something like that was happening.

Betty slid her flashing decider across the familiar route to the unicorn with the bloodshot eyes. Jimmy picked the pink bunny.

They fell quiet when the scene shifted to a leafy jungle and the characters' heads floated in, broken by flashes of big white numbers:

3....

2...

1...

It always seemed like the unicorn should be overpowering (OP) because of the way her preferred character could whip its hind legs around, landing hard blows with its body.

But the move could be blocked. Or at least most of the time by halfway decent players, and the unicorn tired

quickly. Against really good opponents, she often needed to endlessly retreat, jabbing forth its horn as she backed up.

Jimmy was nowhere near as good, clearly, and his bunny man paid the price. So she ended up with plenty of opportunities to toy with him in all sorts of ways. Including by tossing him straight up and bouncing him on the sharp point protruding out of her character's mane.

"You know, Betty, seriously, you really do need to think about maybe not playing so much all the time. I hope you weren't doing this since I left."

"I went out. And got a lot done actually. While you were apparently stalking fourteen-year olds."

"Do not talk about SPsix that way. And I was working again because I'm the hardest working kid in show business. You've been going full-on vampire mode recently, you know that?"

"Honestly, when I was kid, I had a lot of books scattered across my floor, comics and stuff, and my mom always was nagging at me to clean it up. Like she'd say it looked like a library threw up in there."

"So?"

"So, I got my schoolwork done. Like I got my homework done today. So don't nag me mom." "Whatever, Betty. Roommates are supposed to look out for each? What if I was sitting home and drinking all the time?"

"You'd be drunk?"

"Yeah, and you'd certainly sober me up."

"Sure, because you'd be too annoying otherwise. Oh nice one."

Betty's last life bar blinked out, as her horse legs dipped down until her body began blinking away. And then she popped up again on the other side of the screen, good as new, and they played on, unicorn versus pink bunny, another round. Betty concentrated on keeping the bunny's hindquarters off of her with defensive parrying.

"You want to hear something weird?" Jimmy asked.

“Sure,” Betty said.

“So, there’s this guy in the show, kind of a part like mine but in different scenes, Rodrigo Cruz, and he’s dating this girl, and she’s like some kind of Vine star.”

“What’s a Vine star?”

“Like with hundreds of thousands of people following her. That’s like being big in Japan.”

“That popular, huh? Is he cute? I guess that means he’s off the table for you? She must be pretty cute.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a friend and he is,” Jimmy responded, “but I told him it’s sort of crazy. And he insisted, it’s like nothing. She makes like six minutes of silly videos a day, tops, and the rest of the day is just being on the account, being silly, which she’d probably do anyway. Oh, and Rodrigo’s in some of her Vines. Remind me to show you later. She’s a drama type, so she’s always making them wacky faces...”

The fighting on the screen, between animal kingdoms, ultimately, occurred with them barely focused on the action. Their fingers moved with reflex. Betty could even listen to footsteps outside their door come and go, and still play the game and engage in conversation.

“Why would people do that, I don’t really get it.”

“What?”

“Show their boyfriends to their ‘fans.’ Just let everyone see what’s going with everything in their lives.”

“Did you just put your fingers up to put quotes around fans?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought so, because that’s why I hit you so good. I’m mean she has fans, I’m sure. People get crazy obsessed with their favorite vloggers.”

“That’s kind of what I meant. It goes past just even fans. I bet there’s someone plotting against Rodrigo right this minute. Did you read the comments? I wonder how many

death threats from dudes there were. Or actually worse is probably the females...”

“Well, he actually showed me that. Most of the death threats *were* from women actually, but we only saw four or five and she gets like 500-plus comments on a lot of her stuff...”

“That’s great. Anyway, it’s not like I don’t get some stalkers, but it’s totally different when you’re just one of those YouTube personalities. They really need to put their entire lives out there. I just can’t even...”

“I’ve seen you do some silly things.”

“Whatever.” Betty couldn’t disagree. “And so have you, that I’ve seen. And I can say it’s a good thing we don’t have all of that much scandalous going on in our lives, as compared to some of these people, to spill.”

“Talk for yourself. I could say something scandalous on Twitter at any moment.”

“Should I tweet about kicking your butt?” she said.

He said he didn’t want that, but she definitely did kick his butt, embarrassing the poor bunny. But Jimmy enjoyed it and the conversation, she could tell. He was a good roommate that way.

He eventually rose and walked a few times across the room as she checked her phone, finally exiting the bathroom with a wet face and minty smelling mouth.

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Politeness can only last so long.

Her lungs beginning to ache, Betty finally blew out lightly through her upper lip and into the back of the stranger in a grey suit sharing the shiny elevator with her. His face was turned up at a little television screen embedded high up on the narrow wall.



Little snippets of news and advertisements/greetings from their landlord flashed at them. Two other people were at his side, and at hers was another, a business-serious woman with her hair in a bun. As the silver door began to close, a hand reached in and opened it.

Betty felt her shoulder blades touch the back wall as more people entered the tall box, she couldn't tell how many.

It was usual during the morning rush for a gaggle of people to crowd the tiny moving room. That was definitely a thing about the real world, people showed up to the work on time, more or less. With relief, Betty stepped out from the back and off with the second stop.

With the glare of sharp elevator light and metal framing still in her eyes and her balance thrown off by the captivity, Betty stumbled forward, glad to be alone for a minute after her decently long and densely populated commute.

Stepping through the glass wall unlocked with a touch of her stiff plastic badge, she had imagined an inky smell greeting her enough times that she often did smell it.

She blinked the Marshmallow offices clear in her vision, seeing a sight more school-quality than high-tech. The offices were far from shiny. Instead, as she advanced through the maze-like room of pens, Betty found a series of tall wobbly cubicles, covered with thumbtacked photos, and piles of pages sticking out every which way.

Betty passed a few of the desks next to where the graphics people sat that were piled so high, with the crusty white of crinkly papers and light tan of folders, that they seemed ransacked. The desks of the graphics people, in contrast, were among the cleanest of the floor.

Spying her desk occupied, Betty stopped to say hello to the administrative assistance, Verona.

Verona, a mother of three and grandmother twice over, had been slowly shifting over the past few months to part-time in the role. She was switching days with a plump doe-

eyed young girl named Caroline, who'd barely made an impression yet but seemed enthusiastic.

Verona asked on after Caroline every time, and Betty knew by trading her stories about the girl, she was getting chips to cash with the wry women who held control over a lot. Betty wished Verona luck with her pie competitions, giving Verona an opportunity to ramble about her recipes.

Her computer flickered to life before Betty even sat down at her desk, throwing her jacket over her chair. When she opened her browser next, the home page was set to Marshallow.com.

Out of habit, she clicked another icon on her start menu to check that no more emails had come in since she'd checked on her phone on the way in. And then, she returned to the browser, Chrome.

The lead story, with the wide photo of dancing seniors, was "*Why It's Easier to Get Older.*" It carried a sub-heading of "*More and more people are living longer... how did it get that way?*" It seemed interesting?

Other stories teased with photos or graphics included "*There Are Better Versions of Your Favorite Characters in Superhero Movies*" and "*This Foreign Country Has 50% Inflation.*" The title of another was "*Another Sports League Is Protesting in North Carolina.*" Still another promised "*Supreme Court to Hear Cases on Privacy, Sentencing Guidelines in Next Term.*"

One link even lured with an interactive graphic of "*The Market Share of Coke and Pepsi in Different States Over Time*" being offered up via an array of shiny blues and reds.

But then, if you stopped and took a breath, exhausting all of those options of articles, there were all the different sections across the top of the page, rotating like panels on swivels in the wind. At least a dozen stories a day from the different writers and groups.

Her own last article had been "*Should You Spend Money On: The Zombie Chronicles.*" Which was fun actually, she

liked just writing about games. The answer was “yes,” of course, as most of her reviews were, but only because she really only picked fun games to review.

Marshallow... what was it anyway? In her understanding, it was meant to be a hip young site, without any particular focus or demographic, a brand of its own, a light lifestyle approach. Not gossip or media or politics, even if it touched on those things. Intelligent but not snooty and kind of ditzzy sometimes too. Not overly contrarian but not utterly basic. Mostly a bit sarcastic, but not mean.

Marshallow meant jobs for relatable columnists -- and a few oddballs and cranks in the role over the years who helped bring traffic -- and for young writers able to churn out steady coverage of interesting things. Whatever those might be at any particular time, whether message boards or hover boards.

The site launched more than a decade and a half ago, at the initiative of a cosmetics company of all things. It shortly thereafter ended up the home of a fashionable introvert, Niles Hermit, a blond with milky skin who had so much flair that he fascinated half of Brooklyn over the course of two years.

All the way across the country, little girl Betty only read anything from the site maybe on accident once or twice while he was still there. She'd been only a child and then a fairly immature young adult.

And Marshallow was squarely aimed at over-achievers of a certain age, those reaching an age of engagement with the world, a few years older at least. The closest that she ever got to looking outward around that age was immediately after her broken leg had healed. After being shut inside, when the world re-opened to her, and she flitted about talking with different people. That didn't last long, of course, before games again began dominating her time.

For his part, Hermit succeeded in those years in starting a site that matched his quirky sarcastic, and sometimes even

sardonic, curiosity and yet became a ranked destination.

He eventually led it through its spin-off from that makeup company, with initial backing from a New York family office that invested money for rich families. He'd moved it to the last offices.

And then Hermit moved on -- to an unsuccessful career as an author, as it turned out, and then he popped up as a senior editor at a new "explainer" site backed by a bundle of private funding for awhile -- once he felt sure that the staff and freelancers would be able to continue counting on the site to be there.

Several executive editors later, under Elan, Marshmallow continued on, reflecting its early days but part of a much bigger empire, a division of a unit of a subsidiary.

Of course, only Marshmallow and its parent's parent corporation, Near Media, were real operating businesses, meaning entities that employed anyone that did anything. MMC LLC, the unit's parent was a shell company for tax and legal reasons that only existed on paper.

Near Media, then ultimately owned by a private investment fund through another shell company, mainly ran trade news titles, both online and in print, for bankers and supermarkets, architects and air-conditioner techs, as well as fashion, furniture, YouTube producers, and restaurant owners.

When Marshmallow first joined Near Media, it also produced phone books, which for a long time still kept getting used, in one part of the company before luckily parting ways with that business ahead of its ultimate demise at the hands of progress.

And Marshmallow did what it did, stood for what it stood for, weirdly. Whatever that brand was, informed by its long-ago stand against Iraq; its outing of corruption in publishing or beefs with Justin July, the singer, or the author Thomas Robert Reeves.

Until finally Betty was, then, at long last – hahaha -- in that moment of time, part of its history, or another cog in its machinery.

She wasn't sure if that made her feel proud or angry that they were hanging onto something from a long time ago. She always tried to say to herself that she didn't believe in caring too much about its history, since really Elan was his own creature and was taking the publication in his own direction. Albeit in a way that reflected the tough times in the industry.

Rubbing her forearm where it'd been pressed into her desk, Betty leaned back and swiveled in her chair.

Thanks to her work-end, before the day's first meeting or loud curse and without much effort, Betty finished up her script. She then polished the cutting on her video, to the point of feeling like it held together. She read it over once more to try to catch any typos. She just knew she'd end up with a few, it always happened.

Contented, she attached the video and Word file, typed and then erased a long-ish message, replaced it with,

*As requested, a draft of that piece. It's also available in the system. Any specific changes big or small in the language you'd like?*

and finally clicked send with a snap.

She figured Suzy would be happy it was done early.

Betty next began checking her calendar to see what types of AAA game reviews, or previews at least, might be possible for the rest of the month.

She knew she needed one of those to get her click count up. She decided she wouldn't bother jumping at the next available story theme, the next thing that Elan wanted, like if he wanted a whole bunch of reporters to "flood the box" on the same topic.

Next time Elan wanted story after story from different people on the same issues, she wouldn't volunteer. She'd

instead wait for something good to come along. He'd give her grief eventually but not the first few times.

After cracking her knuckles individually and then all together, Betty created a new email. She typed in the "to:" bar the address of her contact in the Endeavorright PR department, a nice Korean girl from San Diego originally. Her name was Lucy Kim and they had a good give and take. She'd been helpful when Betty needed to see if there was any truth about some gossip a couple of times, too.

In the email, Betty asked about the timing of CityRiddle 2 and the next KDO DLC (the game had lost a lot of users and she was hoping they'd pull out something compelling from their hat). She wished Lucy luck with her business school exams, and left open an invitation for coffee when she was next in town.

Warmed up, Betty decided to send a few hellos to Lucy's counterparts at other game studios, keeping each casually brief. Picking up her hard plastic phone, she dialed another, Luther from Wilmington Studios. But Luther wasn't there and she didn't feel like leaving a message.

A text distracted her.

It was a Vine from Jimmy, him engaged in a thrilling dance off with one of his co-workers, arms waiving wildly for five seconds. Jimmy -- or someone who'd borrowed his phone or sent him the video -- had added ironically hard and loud dance music.

Betty hadn't forgotten about the email from onno11, so much as kept thinking about it and deciding there wasn't much else to do. She'd sent them an invitation to meet her at a bar in Manhattan. If they accepted, great, she was looking forward to finding out what was up.

Noised spilled out over the dividers between desks across the floor between writers and their work neighbors. More cloyingly sweet questioning and bemused barks broken by coughs interrupted Betty's concentration.

Her team's editor, Suzy, with the white hair, walked by. Betty looked up to follow her long grey skirt across the room.

The woman entered into in a meeting room essentially in the middle of the whole newsroom, as Betty watched from outside the glass and across the floor. Men and other women joined her in there, in ones and small flocks, until there was about a dozen. They each twiddled around on their phones, while a few gestured out instructions to members of their factions.

A few minutes later, as the brief morning editors meeting started, Suzy hunched over and started bobbing and turning, in order to -- it became clear, probably -- slide two pieces of paper held together a small staple to each person. The strap to her reading glasses wrinkled and tugged on the back of her neck as she swiveled around.

When at least she was done, the Sports editor Tornissism stood up on the other side of the table that stretched across most of the modest glass bowl. From there, Tornissism did the same bend and bounce and turn. Betty caught a glimpse across the floor of one of the writers looking up at the chesty man drawing the eyes of the room from the far end of the rows of cubicle pens.

Other senior editors were there, too. Chung, McCoughlin, and Denproff. They were, respectively, interested in 1) Music and Movie 2) Politics/Government and 3) Pop Culture/Celebrity & Vice, respectively.

Suzy edited the reporters who covered 4) Business, Conspiracy and Games, of course, because she also launched Publishing, like in books, as a topic, since she had a reporter interested in and had been convinced that it was an unfilled niche to a large degree.

The managers were a nicely put together bunch in the glass tank, fittingly posturing with rolled sleeves, crinkly shirts and bright looks on their faces as they talked casually in turn. A few scribbled on the flat pads in front of them,

some creatively and one with the expression of a light bulb over her head.

Another editor, Denproff, was completely zoned out, possibly on something maybe even, like drugs, Betty started to figure. Or maybe he was just still tipsy from the night before. Once he sat down at the table, his body had lost all firmness. And he began leaning a ridiculous amount back in his chair, massaging his forehead, while the others cast questions and answers about.

At last, Elan entered last, stepping into the little box, empty handed and wide shouldered. He called things to order loudly enough to be heard from across the room as he greeted them.

He began almost immediately pacing and talking, slowly at first and then more animatedly, almost like a badly drawn Fox show. His collar jutted stiffly up his neck and his hair formed a messy wave from front to back, small and not exaggerated.

As the bigwigs talked about that evening's home page and highlights behind the glass, Betty plugged in her headphones and turned back to her screen.

She was bored but if she started on anything else at this point, she wouldn't have time, or be in the mood, to deal with any suggestions on the "*Home-Field*" piece. It didn't appeal to her, trying to do stories that way, all at once, divided in her head.

She launched Tunes and doubled-clicked to life an album, *The Day Out*, by The Rocksters. As the first guitar was joined by a second, she asked Google to search without telling it what for, three times in a row.

She nevertheless started surfing in search of what she should be doing next, and looking around, through dedicated gamer sites but also entertainment and news sources, looking for anything that might fit her needs. Like the mention of "*What we know about the new 'Ghostbusters'*" on CNN, or "*Watch Mega Man producer Keiji*



*Inafune make a Mario Maker stage," or "Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!! still has secrets to share, 29 years later" on Polygon.*

And then on one site, there was a link to a story on another, and it was ThumbLords, and Betty knew it. Reluctantly, she eventually clicked it. Once on the website, she poked her arrow into its mast, and was taken to its homepage.

She recognized a few of the bylines on stories like, *"Fifteen Mistakes You Never Noticed About Mirror's Edge"* and *"We Hate This Game But We Don't Tell You Why - Because You Have to See It to Believe It."*

She missed working there, to be honest. No regrets about it. Her mother needed her growing up a little somehow. But she missed it.

At ThumbLords, their desks were more or less open across the floor, dividers only about big enough to keep pens and pencils from rolling to the next workspace.

She remembered a constant stream of stale smelling smokers walking by from the ad, art and tech departments. Which were a total of six people, combined. The heavy-set yet gentle JRPG guy, Louis, who sat in the corner, occasionally joined them.

She'd really gotten to do some fun stuff there. The big boss, Herman, was just too nice. A pinkish rounded-headed guy with a couple of ticks in his mannerisms, but clear enthusiasm for their enterprise. The place was kept afloat by paying the writers nothing, but he didn't control the purse-strings, and never asked them to pay for beers. He let them complain about the pay whenever they wanted.

It worked, too. They stayed hungry, desperate to make a mark so that they could actually earn a living. She felt like she hoped the Internet would never erase a few of her better pieces for ThumbLords.

The site was nothing but its niche: video games, and the very occasional tabletop coverage. There were a few crumbs of ad dollars in doing that, since there were so many

others but also always demand. It kept the lights on and the computers powered up.

For Betty, being lost in the minutiae of games for gamers was perfect in so many ways. She loved sitting there surrounded by desks stacked high with game cases, all blacks and whites and rainbows of colors, and pouring out her thoughts - about games! -- onto the blank document in front of her.

Soooo many reviews of so many Steam and phone games, most of it dreck. But she could be still ok about pointing out its flaws because she knew there would be someone who'd like it, and eventually started littering her pieces with callbacks and inside jokes about them.

All sorts of awful titles with fans: *Hunt Fishing*, *Super Retro Bowl*, *Star Cruiser: Bone of Contention*, *Quiddiddlediddle*. There'd always be someone to defend the games in the comment section.

She hoped her ThumbLords stuff would survive from the constant doubling of knowledge over shorter and shorter time frames that left everything in the past.

She'd even done a few confessional pieces on her relationship with games. About hiding her habit for Pokeman and Smash Smash Party from her parents. About her friends back home in Minnesota when she was young, including the one who talked like a gentleman. Even one about her college days in Media Studies, upstate in New York, gaming too much to maximize her education.

People wanted to hear about your awkward moments, she realized. As you grow up, you try to forget your worst losing games - the really stressful ones were you could have won -- even as you try to remember them, because you love life. Despite everything, everyone erases zeroes. Nodding until teaching secrets.

Before ThumbLords, Betty contributed game content to a ton of places. She started clunky and over-dramatic with her

writing, later settling into a more concise approach to entertaining.

She'd gotten into it, writing about games in high school, at her school's paper of all places. They saw any interest in writing to be a benefit, as they attempted to produce pupils ready to pass tests.

And then she translated that into something to do after college when she'd really learned nothing that could help her find a job. And there really weren't any jobs, even for people who learned a lot. Or people who learned nothing, but could work with her hands.

Still, she'd make a hundred dollars here and a few hundred there, submitting stories, building up her clips, figuring out how to joke but also convey information.

The challenging part was that she was stuck with her parents, living at home. Some of her friends were still in town, but just a few.

She met up at chain restaurants with people from her grade in high school that she'd never spent time with before along with a few of her old friends, chatting about young middle-class stuff like Twitter and reality television, occasionally tossing out the names of random teachers. It was many weird months.

Then, one day out of the blue, she got called by someone who worked at the local paper, the Northmore Press. It was tall and hand-delivered, and she remembered it from even when she was a child. The stories read small but informed, and not without humanity.

Turned out that Betty grew up with his youngest sister, and she had always been nice enough to her. She was among those that Betty had seen on Facebook a lot for awhile. And so all those years later, when they were talking about people who wrote from their school, Betty Van Buren's name came up in a conversation between them.

The older brother, a reddish man who preferred suspenders, greeted her warmly when she went in to ask for

the job that he was offering. He needed someone immediately.

So, she worked there for awhile, at the Press. She made almost nothing in salary, writing little items about the animal shelter's fundraiser and the zoning board and school board votes. The Northmore Press had a little office on top of a laundry mat, where she'd return to fire off short summaries, in the dark, with everyone else already gone.

Eventually, she got more serious at the job. One day, she was know by everyone, and started really cracking open some small scandals, like planned development at the peach tree farm, or the school superintendent's undisclosed past professional ties.

It was then really, that she got even more into gaming, as an adult with tons of spare time. And she kept writing about games on the side, once or twice a month, submitting them to blogs and a few web magazines.

Slowly over time, more of Betty's small group of real friends moved away. Like a blown dandelion, just a few clinging to the soft graying base.

They did a pretty good job of keeping in touch for a while, with Facebook and SnapChat and other virtual acquaintancizing, but it wasn't the same. It became more of a chore, and they barely ever talked on the phone, as the months rolled on.

The next New Year's Eve, she'd gone to a party and Jimmy, a little jitter bug in red glasses, was there. He was visiting a friend who Betty also sort of knew. It turned out Jimmy was his cousin, and he'd come along for something fun to do.

Stuck in the only single hallway that wasn't overflowing with humanity amid the house party -- and uninterested in braving the freezing air and snow outside -- the two started talking and found their banter to match perfectly. At the end of the night, they exchanged usernames.

And, then they stayed in touch online, with Betty commenting on his posts and tweets and comments to her, playfully at first and then with mock surprise or offense. He would welcome her updates across platforms, in turn, with a flurry of emojis.

Until one day, which she remembered as a very cold day, she saw Jimmy post a couple of places about needing a good roommate in New York...

Betty talked her parents into letting her go by leaning on their pride, of having raised her well enough to go. In hindsight, she didn't think it helped to have him Skype them. He was such a goofball. It might have, though, since her father, at least, had laughed.

Blinking her eyes with a blinking on her screen, Betty noticed the timestamp on another email notification that had popped up. The morning was ending almost as soon as it had started, it felt like.

Yawning, Betty leaned back in her chair and stretched her arm out down under her desk.

From her bag, she took out her lunch: a banana, yogurt, cheese sandwich made of a single slice of bread and a two-dollar package of gummy cherries. She'd save those for later but could already feel her molars squishing down on the red and green balls of rubberyness.

Looking around the office, Betty regularly acknowledged that she appreciated the cleanliness. It also wasn't terrible to hear the chesty and full-throated barks from her colleagues on their phones, recognizing fun, offering anecdotes, weaving in questions, cajoling answers, little by little.

All the writers making calls made for a horse and chipper melody.

It was really so random that she'd ended up there, Betty thought. As she licked her yogurt spoon strongly enough to separate the last patches hanging on, she knew that.

In a lot of ways, the place didn't even match her wardrobe. She was the type to often chose to keep things looser than needed on casual Fridays, that stood out as over-causal, also known as under-dressed.

Still, she had to smile a bit when she looked over at the wiry bald white man sitting next to her in smooth slacks and a purple-buttoned shirt. Renaldo, from Portugal. Upon the second time of ever meeting him, she realized that he rolled his head around his neck to crack it more often than most people.

Renaldo certainly knew how to write. Betty appreciated that quickly, seeing his stories on the web. They overflowed with detail, but never included too many in any one place. He felt comfortable in his everyday, you could tell. His warm nature trumped any sense of the macho with him, even with the males in the office.

He certainly didn't cause her too much distraction, sitting there, when he was behaving.

In terms of direct interference in Betty's day: He wasn't a naturally loud talker, he didn't smell of smoke and he never ate at his desk, like she did. Which was all good.

On the other hand, he was a pretty smooth talker as well as a clever writer. In fact, she noticed that was true especially when you didn't know him. Observing him when she could, she'd often catch him flattering the lower half of his phone with such seemingly sincere personalized compliments.

Even if you were prepared for his charm, he'd be a trap when you were busy with work. You'd lose way too much time if he caught your ear, especially if you were female. He had a girlfriend, she thought, or at least he did at one point, but at didn't stop him from flirting, at least implicitly.

Past Renaldo's desk sat Teresa, a dark-skinned Indian woman, who dealt in friendliness of the most sugary sort, even as she maneuvered past others in her job and delivered really hard-hitting stories about the people she

met. Her smiles weren't fake but they didn't come without a certain skill; it was innate, but took gumption.

She dressed maybe a bit sloppy most days, jeans and low shoes, but on other days, she could dress up. It was quite a thing to listen to her work a phone on an assignment, giggling, falsely admitting her ignorance and winding her conversation into topics and quotes for her stories.

Betty couldn't complain about her either. Every so often they grabbed lunch together, and they tried to retweet each other, which was better for Betty because of Teresa's sizably larger account. They never really hung out after work, but they liked each other.

Beyond Teresa's desk, huge printers sat on flat desks along an open row. One came alive every few minutes. A melting pot of the office, in content and temperament and family history, arrived and shuffled through the papers. Looking for what they'd sent however long ago.

Every so often, Betty saw a woman, slender and good-haired, who had some trouble with her since shortly after she'd started. She wasn't sure why, though she knew it had something to do with a story that she'd beaten the girl at getting, without even knowing.

Betty had given up on trying to move past glares with her, and instead decided to return them dutifully, even as they now barely registered. It was a big office, and they mostly avoided each other.

Betty pulled out her phone to play a video from a channel that dissected Easter eggs in movie trailers. It was run by a guy who was obviously cute and wacky, StevenEven3. He was a shouter, but earnest with it.

She clicked on the box with "*Trailers With No Spoilers: Fantastic Four III: 4/3*" laid in plump white letters over a still from scene where an indistinguishable form was jumping away from a fiery explosion.

The swelling music of the movie played over flashes of characters and soaring shots. The logo of the production

company filled the screen. Then, the pace of the music quickened.

“Hi-o guys and gals, this is StevenEven. So happy you could join us. Because today we’ll be talking about ‘Fantastic Four III: 4/3.’ And if you haven’t noticed Four Thirds looks pretty good... ”

With bright red arrows and the monotone staccato of a Hollywood business voice, rounded and cheery, he pointed out basically everything crammed into the trailer -- the nod to the original, the sly reference to She-Thing, the amazing cameos...

For Betty, just watching the actors in their costumes again and hearing the theme music was pretty cool. The riff cut fairly quickly to other music too, two songs from Katrina Canella’s new album, *Epithalamium*, which StevenEven mentioned as totally worth listening to when pointing it out.

When the video was over, Betty started another one from him.

Electronic dance music spilled out of the bottom of her phone. The camera panned up over a sea of people on stationary bikes, legs churning. The name of the movie, “*Spinning*,” emerged from the shadows, and then a title card for “*Jessa Productions*” flashed up.

Glancing up at her computer screen, Betty saw she had a message.

Elan must have sent it just a moment ago.

She craned her neck in his direction but too many people stood chatting in-between to catch more than a peak of him.

Suzy was copied on the message, too, and so Betty knew she’d read it. So she knew that Suzy, as soft as she was, would now know that Elan wanted to see Betty in his office.

It was the only office on the floor, but it was not necessarily an intimidating place, since he brought people in there all the time. He let Suzy and the other managers use it for private meetings when he wasn’t around.



When he invited people in there himself, in fact, it was usually to give them a bit of praise, or a funny pep talk in his eccentrically focused way, or to set their direction or tone, or something positive along those lines.

She stepped half-way in past the door, and hesitated.

He waved her to enter. She closed the door behind her, with hair bouncing above and around her.

Elan was sitting at his extra-long desk, organizing some papers and humming. He stopped and gestured for her to sit down in one of the squared wooden chairs on the visitor's side of his desk.

His face was famous for its welcoming doe eyes, brown and inviting, and his excessive use of face-twisting expressions, for different emotions or stories. She knew he had a lot of his plate, trying to steer all of Marshmallow.

"So, Betty, do you know what my problem often is?" he said, lifting one of his cheeks. He made a point of letting her know that he was examining her with a stare.

"No," she replied, unsure. "Um, what?"

"It's just that only a very limited amount of people are acceptable targets these days. Like maybe blonds and redheads and bald guys. And fat people, I guess?" Elan continued, in his husky voice. "But you definitely need to be careful with that. Trust me. Also with accents, and height -- aside from dwarves, which are just off limits always -- and gamers."

"Gamers?"

"Yeah, sure, gamers, too. Neckbeards, nerds, whatever. But people are stupid. We had one girl here, from the Midwest who liked dropping in references to Gypsies and that's just not okay somewhere I'm in charge of, Betty."

"Right, like, totally not."

"She pretty much thought it was like the same thing as hippies."

"Something happen today?"

“And, if you want to work for me, Betty, please try not to casually insult cops and frat guys. Like, if you want to insult them, then: fine, be my guest. Just don’t do it a subtle way were you insult someone of a certain sort enough that they get all worked up and go to the ad guys and complain. Because then what do I say?”

“I don’t know?” she volunteered lightly, expecting he would tell her either way.

“I don’t know either. I can’t easily defend meanness for no sake but meanness. Not that I want to, of course. It’s just so much more awkward when you need to do it. Need to push back against the desperate and hungry ad guy with a problem, because someone decided to be a meanie.”

“Sure.”

“And you don’t normally do that, Betty,” he said. “Put me in that position.”

Betty, taken aback, leaned forward in her chair. Hmmm... She tried to think back through what she’d written to come up with something that might offend someone.

“Like I said,” he continued. “I appreciate your sensitivity and decorum, coming from a fine young woman who doesn’t mind being with boys on servers that talk like fourth tour sailors. No, you curse even less than you could and keep it clean. Instead, you sometimes turn in really ugly dogs of articles. Not enough for a kennel yet, but you’re getting there. What is this...”

Elan turned his computer screen. Her writing was blown up real big, like the signs overhead at a McDonald’s. It certainly seemed ominous.

“Seriously, Betty, what is this crap?”

“I don’t know?”

“What you’re turning in for your story, this garbage. Suzy hasn’t passed it to me yet, but I found it in the CopyRight tracker. And really, it’s junk. I should just throw it away, delete it forever.”

“What? Wait, why?” Betty taken aback.

“It’s all sports games. Nothing but sports games. Even wrestling, which is a fake sport, but a real sports game. I don’t even need to Did you even read the book?”

“I read the Wikipedia,” she offered. “And some reviews?” She noticed he didn’t look amused. “No really, I read a couple of chapters. Most of the chapter. In addition, the other stuff. I looked into it.”

“But I guess you didn’t get the part where it’s about taking the techniques of sports, of the *Homefield Advantage* in sports, the things that make teams win more at home in sports, and teasing that out to *other stuff?*”

He seemed befuddled. Betty didn’t know what to say.

As Elan turned his computer screen away, she tried to catch a glimpse of the letters that she could grab and at least try to defend.

“I read the book, Betty, and it wasn’t very good but, c’mon... it was a Times bestseller? You’re doing a story on it?”

“Playing video game sports isn’t real sports, so I figured that it could apply?”

He shoed her away from his desk, and she dropped back on her foot.

Betty felt deflated but she tried to temper her frustration with thoughts of how silly and stuck up the whole place seemed sometimes. It wasn’t that Elan was dumb or phony or anything like that; it was just that he was stuck doing the best he could with a crummy situation.

“I mean, you probably didn’t need to read the book but I’m disappointed. Again. The whole vibe of the *Homefield Advantage* is Zen, not Bro? Sports games don’t work with it. Get back to me with something different by the start of day tomorrow. I won’t run any ‘Play’ today, just get something else from the ‘Sports’ or ‘Work’ guys.”

“Ok.”

“I won’t tell Suzy anything more about how I feel about your draft. Except that I asked for you to proceed to writing

about things that deserve to be written about again. And maybe to reach out across the aisle with some of your partners and rivals? Manage to manage some content?"

"I'm sorry?" Betty's brain hurt. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean just... listen, you know what... I'm talking gobbledygook on purpose," he pointed at her with two fingers. "I just want you to do well. Like I want for all my writers."

His brown eyes caught hers. She remembered her first interview with him, in the same office, where he'd asked her about her least favorite sport, and tried to get her to explain downloadable content in a way that he could understand.

"Elan," she said, "I appreciate it."

"All right, listen: I know you don't like writing stupid obvious stories that are just meant to get clicks. Trust me, I was there, a long time ago. But you know why we do so much of them these days?"

She shook her head.

"So we can get ads, and then we can get paid for those ads, and then we can use that money to pay for all of us and all of them," he said, waiving toward the glass, "and all of everyone that I could get on the phone."

Betty could hear a more than a bit of exasperation in his voice.

She certainly understood all about how sites like Marshmallow were losing readers to Facebook and GoVidGo and Snapchat, along with Cable television and Netflix and YouTube and everything else On Demand. Print had almost run out of ink. But Marshmallow was still around, sorta, but really it faced a lot of competition.

Elan had last shrunken the staff two years ago, shortly after he'd come on, about a year before she would. It didn't suit him, especially at such a young age. And he'd been looking tired again in recent weeks,

He was an interesting type, really if you thought about it.

Only 42, but firmly in charge, and sure enough of himself to take on whatever was needed with a refreshing frankness. Except for the occasional moments where he tried to let them handle their own affairs, he was constantly second-guessing his staff or taking on people as projects to train.

Probably because he felt he knew what he wanted -- his career path to lead successful places -- and, as much as he'd run a tight ship to make his publication great, she assumed also hoped to burnish his reputation with the rest of Near Media.

She wasn't quite sure why she seemed so clearly to be in his good favor. At the same time, it was only natural considering how much he'd seemed to like her when he first met her. He'd hired her directly, after grilling her performatively in that interview.

There were some things she'd liked about him then, too. Even beyond his open brown eyes and funny faces.

For instance, his challenging verbal sparring. From questions about what she'd been doing and what'd she like to be doing in five years from then, he dove into asking her personal things like would she ever live somewhere completely different overseas or try to get real job?

She'd rambled on about why video games were becoming such a cultural touchstone, about how she loved opening up their beauty for all to see, as much as any art lover would drool over talking about a Da Vinci or Michelangelo.

She found inspiration in that, and pressed on with an argument about video games as the best art form of all, that started shaky but grew eloquent. She described art as falling on a range, from a box holding a sheep to a fully immerse game, and each could be exactly what you want at a certain time.

It was be that kind of interview where you feel like you've been your best and been appreciated.

“Anyway, ads pay the bills,” Elan added. “I’m not saying we’re supposed to write about nothing real at the same time. But it’s a trade-off. You get older Betty, and you get that, you understand? You understand? You understand like I do. I like you, though, that’s the good part. I do like what you bring to the table with your reviews and your longer stuff.”

“Thanks.”

“But I’m running a website here, and we all need to pull our weight. So, I’m going to do something quality control. Seriously now, don’t make me look like an idiot, ok? Just do the damn job.”

“Yessir.”

She slunk back to her desk, not worried but also feeling super secure.

Watching her draft again, she realized Elan was right. It employed a fake chipper-ness to try and sell its lack of soulfulness. It wasn’t trash, but it was fairly insincere and flat.

She’d been too focused on getting it done to think about the fact that life was supposed to be fun. She needed to manufacture that, not just tick some boxes on a list of popular subjects. It was supposed to be enjoyable.

And so Betty doubled down, staying late at work, and starting from scratch, but keeping what she’d done at the bottom of her CopyRight file to save a little bit, for use maybe through incorporation.

She thought more like a Buddhist, more like the person who had taken “*The Homefield Advantage*” to heart.

For “*Knowing the field*,” she pulled up video of Royal Raceway on a Mario Kart game and then a part of KDO where you could walk back a dragon to fight you in the water, neutering his fire while leaving him vulnerable after his attacks.

For “*Being well-rested*,” she slept in Minecraft and set up a hospital in a crime-ridden neighborhood in CityRiddle...

and on and on. Betty wondered why she didn't just take her time and do all that earlier.

For the rest of the day, she pierced together the clips, padding them out with other ones. She layered in multiple runs through the same scenarios within games with different results and flavors of events. Any small spatial place within a good game could create all sorts of unique moments.

Then, she started writing the script, with sincerity. She took an hour to read again the first the first and last parts of the book, and jotted down phrases.

When she finally got home after 10 pm -- at the end of a short subway ride clinging to a warm metal pole that only made her feel more greasy and gross -- Jimmy was already asleep.

She thought about all those people in her CityRiddle game, working away as scientists. Jimmy had been so exhausted from rehearsals that he'd pass out almost immediately if she wasn't there, she realized.

She pushed play on her Xbox and loaded up Minecraft. She knew she'd pay a price the next day, but she needed a few hours of gaming. Her bleary eyes would tell the story, but at least it would be a different one than being the polite and talented ditz.

# Chapter Seven

## Stuck to the Floor

Driving now always struck Betty as a luxury. It was a return to the experience of steering through the world. At that point in her life, it was foreign; she couldn't just plop down and press down on the gas. Even just being in a car then was an indulgence.

She'd been living in the city for several years, and barely ever hailed taxis or called up BoopBoop cars to go anywhere. Almost never zipped around the city's edges in the back of one, the highways rising and falling against the water. Or bumped along in the backseat, looking out at pedestrian crowds and glittering colored bulbs of stores and bars and restaurants.

She did every week or two ended up in a taxi. But mainly she walked, or walked herself underground to walk onto a subway that would take her somewhere else to walk.

Everything was more restricted in the way she existed, more tied to the ground or stairs or elevators up into long boxes. But then... there was also getting around through the streets, surrounded by so much humanity pretty much always.

That wasn't restrictive, and it wasn't a terrible thing. The comforting familiarity of feeling like being there but mixed with an entirely different soup of people, of passing the same chunks of sidewalk but always having each turn out to



be new. With new faces, or new shadows, or new thoughts in her head.

That was no doubt a positive.

And, yet, for all that urban-living offered, she had to admit it to herself: She missed enjoying regular occasions to sit behind the wheel and just roll along. Watching all the other cars bobbing along with her, like a sea captain. Since learning to drive with her father, in the back of the university parking lot, she'd always liked it. It made her feel taller.

Driving was a thing that anyone could do better than someone else. Male, female, tall or short. It was like being in a game, like being asked to rely on her skills -- abilities that could potentially top those of any opponents, as she took control of an avatar either better or worse than their own.

Just sitting in the driver's seat called up those emotions again.

The distinct smell of a clean car, too - almost leathery, but not quite. She pursed her lips and lifted her ice coffee's straw, sending even more jaunty feelings bouncing around in her strapped-in torso.

She'd gotten the sedan for the afternoon from ZapCar, the hourly rental car place. Luckily, it turned out, because they were running out of available cars at most pick-ups throughout the city, except all the way up in the Bronx, and she'd booked one of the last downtown.

She took the train a stop, encountering a break-dancing troupe, to pick the car up in the West Village. It was in a parking garage there under an apartment building. As they walked down the tunnel, tall black signs listed their rates for various lengths of stay there with a straight row of dollar signs at the start of each line.

She'd decided to put the rental on Jimmy's account partly because she didn't have one. But it was also because she harbored hope that doing so would help encourage him to come along.

To be sure, Betty also totally knew that Wednesdays were one of the days that the cast and crew took off from getting ready for the play that Jimmy was in, *Fat Taft!* It was probably a better day to try to get him out of town, rather than when they were practicing. No matter the size of his part, he was really committed to the show.

She understood it to be a light-hearted musical drama about the friendship and falling out of Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. But since the play had yet to open, she hadn't seen it. But he'd lived with it, consistently long days for six days a week for six or seven weeks now.

With all the intense focus on preparation for opening night, she figured Jimmy would be up for something like a road-trip.

He usually would be, in normal times, interested. Over the summer, for instance, he'd joined her a couple of times on daytrips to the Shore in New Jersey, where they'd baked in the sun, griping phones under towels, with Jimmy posting pictures of their awkward poses on the white sand.

And so it came as a happy development but no real surprise, that he finally agreed to join her. She promised not to crash the car. He set odds for an accident happening. She punched him, but softly.

And then, as Betty accelerated the car up and out of the garage, looking both ways as she entered the sidewalk, all those driving fantasies vanished.

Right off the bat, it clearly took them way longer than Betty had hoped to get out through the tunnel. They ended up crawling bit by bit down the last few streets toward it, and then rolling at a walking pace through the first part of the tunnel itself.

Between fiddling with the radio, Jimmy cracked his window open and turned the heat on and off.

By the way he jumped between stations, she could tell he almost never sat in a car with a hundred-plus channels of radio. Previous rentals had no satellite radio, only local and

streaming services from their phones, which actually worked just the same. But then again, she only did because her mother had made it that way.

As Jimmy entertained her with stories about the showy members of the cast of *Fat Taft!* and the sarcastic crew, Betty jerked them forward by car-lengths through the long concrete cave.

Jimmy debated her on the merits of self-driving vehicles. She doubted that there was anything likely to come to the market for decades and decades.

He asked what she knew about President William Howard Taft, and he tried to fill her in on some of the story, how he was somewhat jolly but principled, staunch and somewhat nerdy.

Taft was an honorable administrator, who ended up with a chip on his shoulder and made some bad mistakes along the way, Jimmy explained as she stared ahead into the dots of glinting red and yellowed lights curving above her.

He'd allowed black civil servants who were just as honorable to be kicked out of jobs, that Taft. He disappointed progressives, even though he brought antitrust suits and helped Congress pass amendments creating a federal income tax and the direct election of Senators.

Betty noted that they'd both promised to see the new Ridley Scott movie together. It seemed like a hard SciFi movie, the good type that developed its characters into unique beings along with huge visual effects .

By the time that their rented car made it to the highway, climbing the road and banking left, the sun was coming down in the sky. It turned the horizon to the right into a blinding white.

Wanting to feel the wind in her face, Betty rolled down the window by a small amount more. Jimmy followed suit, snatching a sniff of the fresh oxygen as he angled his head out.

Betty's ears rang with the sound of the synthetic music filling the air and pushing back against the breeze.

He'd settled on an all-pop station, with upbeat songs from former child actors like Ariana Grande, Katrina Canella and Ross Ricardo, and a whole new crop of young women who looked and acted even younger, along with a few dreamy boy groups.

Betty could feel him grooving to the music in the seat beside her.

One of the ingénues singing kept repeating a chorus, "Pure and harmless, pure and harmless, pure and... hararararamlesssss."

As Betty steering them past the thin smoke stacks towering over futuristic factories and releasing fluffy unnatural clouds, riding high above the industrial machinery beneath, Jimmy turned to her.

"Let me ask you a question," he asked. "Can I ask you a question?"

"What kind of question?"

"Ok. So. If you were me, would you want to go on a date with me?"

"What does that even mean?"

"Like if you were a man, who was me, Jimmy Cho, would you be interested in dating me? Like 'getting ready to probably eventually marry me' type of dating. Not just seeing to hook up."

"Hmmm.... Well... So, I'm you... Don't you think I'd date someone better looking than myself?"

"No, seriously. Like personality-wise. Because, I was thinking about it, and you know, I know you don't really date, but if you were me, I'm not sure I'd date me. Too complicated. Too much drama."

"You were thinking about this?"

"Didn't you read my blog? I blogged about it."

"You don't have a blog, Jimmy."

“Right, so instead I was thinking about it, right? In my head.”

“Right.”

“Like, I was lying in bed the other night. And you know, it was loud out on the street... I don’t know if you noticed or were already asleep. And I was thinking: what if I couldn’t even date myself? Maybe I couldn’t? How can I expect anyone else to want to date me? Am I un-datable if I don’t even want to date me?”

“C’mon, buddy. You’ve dated some guys. They liked you. You probably could have kept dating one of them, at the very least.”

“I guess. I know, I know. Not that Colin should really count. He was always going to need to go a different way. Anyway, look who I’m asking, the unbroken heart. The non-dater. Argh, I always say this is a problem with having you as a roommate. Not that I don’t respect that.”

“Thanks so much.”

“It just makes it hard sometimes. To get my point across.”

“You ever wonder whether that’s not me?”

“And sure... but we do fun stuff, roomy, right?” he said in a voice dripping with faux sweetness.

“It you, Jimmy, it you. You make it fun,” she responded across her shoulder with an even sappier simulation of aural confection. “Anyway, that’s what you’re thinking about lying in bed?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, miss deep intellectual thinker, curled up thinking about quantum physics and third-wave feminism.”

A dark convertible sports car driven by a man with bright red hair jumped in front of Betty’s car, barely missing her as she lifted her foot from the gas. He steadily put distance between them even as she began accelerating again.

“I get it. You’re saying that because I’m a gamer, because I don’t really date, I should only be aware of things like cheat codes and Dark Souls lore? ”

“You’re the one who told me that her answer for: who would you have dinner with if you could have dinner with anyone on the planet... was herself. And I really think you meant that because you just wanted more time to play. And, I don’t even know what Dark Souls is, honestly.”

“I’d like you to know that I watched a whole PBS show about physics, with Brian Greene. String theory. It’s wild. And I said myself because that is, in fact, the correct answer by virtue of being most difficult.”

“Right...”

“And you know who was a good feminist? I just heard about this, you know I read things too, I stay up on what I need to...”

“Who’s a good feminist?”

“Baum. Frank L. Baum.”

“Who?”

“You know, the guy who wrote about Oz?”

“Like the prison show?”

“No, Oz like Oz... the fantastical land of.”

“Like, the Wizard of Oz? With Judy Garland and Ray Bolger as the Scarecrow?”

“Yeah, but not even that so much compared with the book and his other books. Not that it said anything where I read about him being mentioned, really, it was just on a list. And I just know the other books, from when I was a kid.”

“Oh, I kinda thought Glinda was a bitch... Elphaba was cool, though.”

“No, like in the books he wrote. Frank L. Baum? The guy who wrote them. Kansas? Oz? The originals?”

“How many did he write?”

“I don’t know, more than ten? I only read a few. But there are tons of girl rulers; they were always the smart ones. And the guy’s who ruled things, like the wizard, were often bumbling dummies. Like the wizard.”

“So, like a sitcom on television, with dudes being dumb all the time? Like a fat older dad, or butler, or an uncle

dude?” he paused, then made bunny ears with fingers on both hands. “Or ‘uncle’ dude. Some big dumb guy or guys, just being stupid klutzes?”

“No, like not all the dudes. I mean, wow, it was crazy, this comment made me think it about it, there were talking flying sofas with moose-heads and walking bug men and things. So, like, I think they were dudes...”

“Ok...”

“But, totally, it was cool, the girl rulers were badass. They had armies. Superpowers. All sorts of stuff. Glinda was like Gandalf-powerful, and there was this witch that was totally ruthless and rotten, like a great evil character like Vader or something. But more pathetic in the end? It’s been awhile since I read them.”

“Well, I did not know any of that and now I do,” Jimmy said. “So thank you for not only telling me, but being so illustrative with your explanation.”

He looked out the window.

“You know what was a screwed up story?” he said. “Rumplestiltskin. Why was the miller so eager to give his daughter to the king, letting her get trapped there overnight? Especially if you think about it as a metaphor...”

And so they bantered on. A light rain started falling on the windshield, and within a minute, Betty needed to put on the wipers. It was only tiny skinny drops, and so despite her initial guess, she never moved past a slow wipe and pause, wipe and pause.

As she drove on, she did this thing where she tried to blink when a wiper’s path positioned it over a somewhat matching shape, like a telephone phone or tall signs. Just a quick flash of her eyes. Like she could cause it to explode if she timed it just right.

Open spaces and tall trees lined the road then, offering a sporadic target.

Jimmy engaged himself looked down at his phone for a while. Betty could hear the rat-a-tat singsong of this atheist

vlogger he watched sometimes, Samantha Stan. She was yapping from his phone about something a church in Kansas did.

Betty stared ahead at the moving traffic. A yellow bus filled with red soccer jerseys pressed against its windows ahead was losing ground to them. As their car began strolling from behind the wide back of the bus to the front, Jimmy's chuckled uncontrollably at some stupid joke about sinners.

Pulling past the driver, Betty looked up to see a wrinkled man with a big frame sitting up straight behind a large wheel, staring ahead. His bus kept chugging along with her for a few second but slowly fell back, first from over her shoulder, and then disappearing from the mirrors.

She blinked as she passed a wireless tower stretching high up above the highway like an android tree in the late fall.

"So, anyway," Jimmy said, looking up from his phone and blinking his eyes, "remind me again where we're going exactly?"

Betty heard the familiar sign-off from his lap, and visualized Samantha Stan's familiar exaggerated blowing of a kiss. Man, Betty wasn't even sure she'd seen her enough times for that. It wasn't like she was even someone Jimmy watched that much of.

But Betty figured it was better than whatever the next group of junior high girls he might otherwise fall into fandom over. Every so slightly less shrill, at least.

"I told you," Betty replied. "To meet these guys, from the email I got, in a public place. And you're my backup, ok? I mean, sure, I'm meeting them in the middle of a lot of people, like I normally do with anything sketchy, or where I could get snatched..."

"Or whatever. It's just that it never hurts to be careful and if you're going to be here, I'll be double protected and I need to give you some job anyway."



“How about my job is getting a couple of buttered pretzel nuggets at one of those Uncle Lemon stands? A mall favorite since 1916.”

“How do you even know what those are? When do you get to the mall?”

“I used to go all the time in Duluth. The Miller City Mall, with the Younkers department store? I’d take my cousin when he’d visit. To the mall, not the Younkers.”

“You just don’t strike me as the type to frequent malls...”

“Frankly, I’m surprised. You should know I very much appreciate buttered pretzel nuggets, and the like.”

“Fair enough. I learn something new about you everyday, Jimmy.”

“How about you? A fan of Uncle Lemon?”

“Sure, who doesn’t like buttered everything?”

“That’s what I thought.”

The road signs pointed the way, gently confirming the directions snapped out by her phone’s maps.

Betty followed the arrows and branching lines calling to her from the green pop-ups hanging in the sky. She began pestering him with questions seeking confirmation of her choices. He provided it as they moved along, flowing with the other vehicles being pumped along the area’s veins.

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A giant sign, slightly taller than a semi-trailer’s haul and surrounded by mostly empty flowerbeds, announced the Mall. The rectangle stood stiff, tall and proudly at the main entrance to the outer rim of parking lot.

Betty turned right to circle the cluster of logo-ed structures that rose in the middle in a counter-clockwise motion. A rhythmic squeaky groan alerted Betty to the end of what had turned out to be a short and mild downpour.

She wasn’t really sure where to park and enter, since she’d never been there before. All malls were the same, but

there were a couple of different versions, different country maps.

As she passed each anchor store, Jimmy prompted her to consider it the closest to her destination. He started just saying store names. Sears? Macy's? Lord & Taylor's? But, she shook her head each time. They'd shown up a bit early anyway, so she kept circling. She liked knowing the layout.

The initial flatness of the perimeter to which she hung began rising and dipping as pulled past a third side of building fronts.

Finally, she pulled down a white-hashed row.

They first passed almost completely empty spots, with only a small car covered in an advertisement for a local car decal place and a stray pick-up truck with extra-big tires, spilling out over its post.

As soon as they entered the jagged cluster of parked cars of varying heights, Jimmy started encouraging her to skip over empty spots toward the back. He kept looking to park closer. But not much was available afterward.

Approaching the building itself, Betty eyed the blue handicap emojis in the ground, and then rolled around them. She calmly swung her car right. And with her eyes having not failed her, she pulled in to park about a dozen cars up the next row.

Stepping out, Betty noticed the smoky smell of the rubber ground and spying tailpipes. She waited for Jimmy to exit and slam his door to make sure the car was locked.

"You good?" she called.

"Yeah, sorry, my phone slipped under the seat. Got it, though," he responded.

As they stepped out of the tight space between the cars, a red minivan came from out of nowhere, roaring toward the exit. Nearly clipped, they were both forced to all but jump back.

Before striding back out, they each peaked their heads over the roofs of the cars. Satisfied, they proceeded toward

the windowed doors hung on off-white beams.

Betty walked them quickly past a graying crowd waiting outside for a bus several paces in front of the doors. Not as quickly as they could have by breaking stride, but now that she was moving, she wanted to get there, not draw attention.

Jimmy fell behind again just before the entrance, and she saw him hold his phone up beside his ear, and then turn his head and begin talking to it. He dropped his arm after a few seconds, and hustled to catch up with her again.

They passed through two sets of heavy doors and entered the mall. She watched Jimmy holding his phone in tight with his body as he played with it as he moved, leaning his left shoulder forward into the doors.

Eyes adjusting to the sedate lighting, Betty wandered up to a black block sticking up out of the tiled floor. It was covered in boxes in happy colors and, below, a dense block of white text. She felt like it was the type of thing to be seen from afar with epic music.

Her eyes studied the diagram, broken briefly by a quick look over her shoulder to confirm her bearings.

As she bounced away, Jimmy followed her, commenting on the sporty hat store ahead of them.

Through the glass, an audience of stiff flat rims rested, high-up, looking down, across a handful more of straight rows. Jimmy asked why there weren't standalone hat stores for other types of interests, like fishing or comics or religions.

They passed a Spencer's Gifts with a rounded boy in front killing time by pressing buttons that made rude noises. A few store-faces down, the airy whiteness of the Apple store invited shoppers to stop. Strange whirring toys scurried around a wooden kiosk.

The hard wide alley came to a crossroad and they turned right and began passing another row of shops.

Betty's friend - not the one that she still sometimes saw, but another -- had worked at a mall during college. She was a mousy little girl in glasses, Karen. The thing that bothered her were the people who brushed her off with "just looking," like she wasn't a real person, Betty remembered.

The customers were so awful in other ways too, it sounded like. Karen always talked about them threatening to tweet negative things at the corporate account.

On the plus side, she'd joined in trades of employee discounts across different stores. They had someone for sneakers, candles, sunglasses and games. Karen used to invite Betty to tell her things she was going to get anyway, and got them a good deal cheaper.

Eventually, Karen would grow up a bit more, and actually become really attractive to guys. And still fun, but then she didn't quite have so much time.

Stepping onto a long escalator, Betty looked down to check her phone for emails from work. Nothing was pressing. Her *Homefield Advantage* story had run on the website the day before. It'd gotten a decent amount of hits, but barely any comments, only ten or so, mostly making fun of the philosophy.

Elan was fine with it, in the end, and Suzy had only wanted a few changes. Suzy had sent it back to Elan after those were made, and it went out, published, a situation that she didn't let get out of hand.

Betty let them both know in an email overnight that she would be out trying to nail down a story that afternoon, and had gotten no response. Which she took as a fine outcome?

An immense food court, jagged at first, rose over the top of the climbing stairs. It was double-sided, and multi-colored, and wrapped around them as they ascended like a spaceship accepted a commander.

Reaching the point of their ride where her feet slipped onto stable land, Betty continued on out of necessity to avoid whoever might be coming next up the rolling black

teeth behind her. A mix of greasy and soapy scents mashed together filled her nose. A mother started yelling at a child about being spoiled.

Betty's sneakers slid and then stuck to the floor as she followed Jimmy into the crowd, dodging between the light chairs to a table. At the fast-food places surrounding them, an array of different faces stared out from behind the counters that shut them in. Many were smiling.

Above the anonymous rumbling of the crowd rose the upbeat prattling of a man's sales voice and a woman's inquisitive responses, in synch with a handful of TVs overhead. In an infomercial kitchen, the male host moved quickly, showing off knives. The wide screens high up cast down colorful light.

As expected, Betty and Jimmy needed to wait for a bit of their rendezvous once they sat.

Betty first scanned the other tables to take in who was sitting at each, and then began pointing out those with funny appearances to Jimmy.

She definitely wasn't being mean about it, focusing mostly on the clothes and hairstyles. And occasionally on the odd pairings of couples, like a huge black man with a polo shirt stretched over his belly and a small white grandmotherly woman clutching a purse.

He bounced a little in his shoulders as moved beside her. It was just a humorous thing to see, he had to admit that, and she didn't mean anything bad by it.

After waiting for a good bit, Jimmy went to go get them both fountain sodas from a burger place.

He really wanted to go to the Uncle Lemon, but it was halfway across the mall. He didn't want to leave Betty by herself bored there, he said, even though he told her that he was sure she'd be absorbed in something on her phone within fifteen seconds of him getting up.

While he was gone at the counter, she first opened GaglePlus, and then decided against using it. She checked

across her social media accounts for anything pressing, and found nothing. One of the Kardashians apparently did something and a politician's bad joke was a scandal, but that was about it.

Her arm twitched slightly, wanting to come up with something funny to type in response to someone. No opportunity really presented itself, however; it was mostly corporate accounts and twisty conversations that she didn't feel like trying to unwind.

And then with a "bloop," there was another Vine from Jimmy, making faces while he waited in line that sent his eyebrows bouncing all over his face. Turning, she saw the same scene, a slice of a sea of counters, behind her, the same signs, but much smaller and without the eyebrows.

Still hanging out where they'd sat, Betty pulled up the phone number she'd stored, 732-555-86...

Wanting to be patient, she double-tapped away and then tapped into a matching game. In her left hand, a cartoon fruit-filled loading screen began getting crammed with a volley of smoke puffs.

And then Jimmy arrived back, chattering like a sports talk host.

"Betty, Betty, Betty... You wouldn't believe the situation over there with the people in the line. Suburb people. We are not home anymore, Betty..."

The cola he handed to her was sweet and chilled. Her straw sucked the last drops from around the ice with rude noises. Jimmy called her out on it, the lack of manners. She just gave it another little sip in response.

Putting her cup down, Betty noticed a pair of college-aged men in sweatshirts with beards. (Both the men had beards and the prints on their shirts were beard emojis.)

They were standing by the entrance to the seating area, just stuck to the floor and looking around. One was holding a GamerPerch bag, she'd recognize the black with red bars

from twice as far away. They appeared lost, like they weren't sure whether to enter the forest.

But then, with Jimmy still prattling on about his nana's rules for manners, a woman with straight blond locks and loose flowing clothes grabbed their shoulders.

Wide grins spread from her mouth to each of theirs, with only the slowest of pauses, and Betty felt blinded by the display of teeth. And it wasn't long before the rest of a group, three guys with floppy hair and a girl with big glasses, joined the three.

They all departed, tripping out past the escalators, bumping into each other and heading toward where the floating sidewalk led away toward the second floor of another anchor store.

Betty felt her knee shaking in frustration.

Walking past that crew, there was a thin-limbed nerd with messy short hair and a huskier nerdy kid in a puffy sports jacket. They approached the food-court. And then headed toward the general area in the tall grass of seating where Betty and Jimmy sat at the table.

The squarer kid who was wearing a sporty jacket sort of waddled between the chairs, but stoutly and not wobbly. The smaller one, in a loose-fitting windbreaker, almost rolled with a bouncy shuffle, but it's rhythm was awkward.

Betty noticed a Spencer Gifts bag and iced-tea bottle in the hands of the first boy. The other was carrying only his phone, which he gripped in his hand like a sword hilt.

She figured, with a half-formed thought, that their mother was waiting on a food order, and would be joining them at the table somewhere in the section where she was sitting with Jimmy. She distinctly pictured a woman with brown hair and certain features. She wasn't too old because her children weren't too old.

Nevertheless, as she watched, the pair of small forms walked directly toward Jimmy and her -- with purpose, Betty

realized as she studied their faces -- and then stopped right in front of them.

Jimmy tilted his head like a cat. Betty turned her phone over and put it down.

"You look a lot like your profile picture, which makes things easier," the smaller boy, whose looks reminded her of a pigeon, said in a calm voice, returning Betty's stare.

Baggy, well-worn jeans covered his little legs.

"I mean, if you don't mind me saying that? I don't know... maybe you don't like your picture."

Up close, she could see the boy probably came up only to her chest if she were standing, or maybe the bottom of her shoulders. Which Betty realized was really short. The last time she'd been around people of this size was most likely a wedding or one of her cousin's barbecues.

The one speaking seemed even more nerdy, clearly, than his friend? Betty realized that was also saying something. The only real question was whether he'd know more about The Lord of the Rings movies, because she was sure that he was more likely to have read the books a couple of times.

"I'm sorry?" she finally responded.

"Wow, impressive," quipped the other boy, with a half-wave. "Honestly, man, these guys look really like a pair of paranoid robots. We've finally got the upper hand..."

His buddy stared as he started to chuckle, muttering something to himself about comedy. "I mean, sure, why not, at this point, huh?"

Betty hesitated, before over their shoulders seeing someone. He was over by the strollers, a dark-haired man in a blue baseball cap waiting by himself. Both hands were shoving themselves in his pockets.

She instantly grasped that these kids had been sent to deliver a message.

"Hey there," Betty said, soothingly. "Ok, so you know who I am, right? From my profile picture. So that shows that I'm Betty Van Buren, right? So, you can tell those guys, or



whichever one is over there who came, to show themselves now. Do you need to go tell him the coast is clear? Or do we need to follow you somewhere?"

"What guys?" said the huskier boy, still chuckling. "Some other guys?"

Betty's breathing doubled up for a beat as she let go of the air through her nose.

The man in the baseball cap pulled out his phone from his pocket, and strode away, looking around as he departed, but in a normal not shifty way.

He was almost immediately replaced in the spot by somebody's sweater-ed husband, who drew his phone out of his own pocket and looked down. He scarcely seemed interested in whatever was around him.

Ok, so wait: Maybe these boys didn't know anything about the emails?

She noticed Jimmy giving her a glum look. Great... how much longer would she need to make him wait already? She could hear him asking. At some point, it'd get too late, though it wasn't close to that yet.

But they saw her profile? Or at least one of them did, the little guy. Random fans? A fan? Hahahahaha, she laughed inside. It technically wasn't impossible. Marshmallow or ThumbLords? She looked at the uneven pair before her. Probably ThumbLords, if they weren't too young to be reading a year ago.

Jimmy jumped in before she could ask.

"I'm sorry boys, but we're looking for a couple of people we're supposed to meet. Since you don't know them, could you please hustle along and do whatever you were going to be doing: shopping, eating, crapping. There's a pot of gold waiting at the end of those rainbows. Trust me."

"Us too," he said, firmly for such an undersized kid with bad hair. "We're supposed to meet someone. And we do know them."

Betty noticed a long string hanging loose from his shirt, as he looked over her shoulder, scanning the seating area behind her, observantly.

“Ah...” Ah, duh. Betty slapped her head. “Onno?”

“No... or rather yes...”

“Or, rather, yes but ...”

“It’s my account and no one ever really calls us that. Either of us.”

“Oh, right, you mean your real names...”

“Right.”

“He’s Connor and I’m Seb...”

She looked at the kids in front of her. They didn’t seem old enough to take a city bus. They didn’t appear grown enough to ride on some coasters. They were tiny little things, even the wider one.

“Connor and Seb? Really? You’re the guys I’m looking for?”

“I thought we were looking for you,” the one who was Connor responded.

She studied them again, and, using her totally imprecise powers of deduction, pegged them at fourth grade. When she was that age, her mother would have let her go anywhere on her bike. She rarely took advantage of it.

“But you’re kids...”

“We don’t have any kids...”

“She means we are kids, Connor.”

“We are?” He looked at Seb, then his own arm. “Oh right, we are, I guess. Now you see how messed up it is.”

He turned to her. “Give me break, Seb and I, we’re both kind of losing our minds here, Betty. That’s the whole reason Seb decided we should show up.”

“Quite honestly,” Jimmy said, interrupting loosely, “I think those are nice names. Why didn’t you tell me their names, Betty?”

“Who’s this anyway?” Connor said, with a twang, directing his words only to her. “I thought you were going to

come alone," he added, focusing his eyes uncomfortably on Jimmy, through a slight grit of his teeth.

Looking barely up at the boys, she realized she felt about as threatened as when a small dog would look up at you, planning to leap into your lap. Still, it was slightly uncomfortable. She felt herself bracing to push him off, and hopping not to hurt it.

Instead, the smaller boy gestured at their table with his thin arm.

"Shut up, Connor," he said shot out of the side of his mouth with a funny whine. His face groaned as he looked to Betty and Jimmy. "You mind if we sit?"

Betty shook her head on impulse.

"Anyway, we're both very happy that you could come on such short notice," Seb continued, frowning at his friend as they sat, and then signaling him to take off his fluffy jacket. "And nice to meet you, mister. I'm incredible sorry if we're wasting your time."

Across the table, Jimmy huffed for some reason. A wild rapid panting. But almost immediately after, he broke into a grin and let out a chuckle.

"Hey. I hope your dog's had his shots," he smiled.

"This is my roommate Jimmy," Betty said with a sweep of her hand. "It's a long ride out from the city. I wanted some company."

The whole element of needing protection now seemed mute, as she guessed at their heights in her head. Maybe four feet? Or was that definitely more than that? She didn't normally need to measure people.

"You guys, huh? You kids aren't really Seb and Connor are you? I mean, jeezy, heezy, whoa... You're like in elementary school or something? You could have said something when you got in touch. Are you guys even old enough to dress yourselves?"

"That's us. I know, I know, we're young. Can't say it's a choice. So... again, thanks for coming, that's why we need

your help. This is insane. We don't really know what to do. And you're a clue. I wish we were only worried about learning about the digestive track and how dolphins perform tricks and normal stuff like that."

She felt a letdown. She'd probably made the trip for nothing. In person - or in young person - they seemed more crazed than online, she wasn't sure why she hadn't picked that up.

Still, they didn't look like the type to be trolls, even if they were small, like some trolls would be.

Being there either way, Betty made the decision to take out of her spiral notebook from her handbag, along with a chewed up black pen. She laid them on the table. What was life but taking a chance on following something to its conclusion, because it was put in front of you?

Her life would be better if she was just writing about what was put in front of her, and other people, and all of that. See was certainly seeing something different.

"Ok, so, I'll bite," she said. "You two kids, you really think somebody has been kidnapped?"

"There's pretty much no doubt to us at this point. We can show you things, strange things, clips here and there, that tell the story, back it up really." Sitting, Seb seemed closer in height to her. "And, yes, we dress ourselves. I didn't realize this was a Project Runway thing."

Jimmy leaned in, almost whispering. "You watch that?"

"No," Connor whispered, "but I know of it from the gifs."

"This is about a gamer?" Betty pressed. "Missing?"

"Kidnapped."

"And he's still missing?"

"His parents aren't, we don't think."

"But they're not the only ones. We know there's others."

"And, like we said, he's still making videos."

Over Seb's shoulder, Betty noticed the group from earlier led by the men in sweatshirts with beards walking past. A prickly chinned man standing in the line to Burger Barn

noticed them too with a particular focus on the girls. Without stopping, the group moved on, and the man moved forward to the place his order. She guessed he would have a burger.

“You don’t say? How old are you anyway? Nine-ish, ten?”

“We’re eleven-ish.”

“Eleven?”

“Twenty-two if you put that together. Anyway, my older sister’s working with us on this too.”

They never before had mentioned a sister.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she’s much older.”

“Like fifteen.”

“Oh. So you’re eleven,” she said, “and she’s fifteen?”

“She’ll be here any minute, she had basketball.”

“Tryouts. Or a meeting about the tryouts.”

“Our school’s not very good. It’s in a small-school league, and usually totally at the bottom of it.”

“Why didn’t you mention her? Your sister.”

“Paige?” Connor said.

“What page?”

“His sister.”

“That’s her name.”

“Oh, ok, then Paige. Who is she? Why didn’t you mention her? And why didn’t *she* email me, if she’s ah, a little older? Fifteen? How is she getting to the mall? Can she even drive? Do your mothers and fathers know where you are?”

“She wishes she could drive...”

“Connor, please.”

He turned to Betty. She liked the way he offered up his thoughts, after thinking things over.

“She can’t drive,” he said. “But we have transportation.”

“Sometimes. For now.”

The smaller boy looked at his boxy friend. He shrugged.

“What? It’s true.”

“... so, anyway,” Seb began, “we didn’t mention her – Paige, and we should have because she’s going to be here, shortly -- because Connor annoyed her. And then, like, I guess, Paige pretty much got fed up with me. And so she said she didn’t want her name involved when we first told you ours. What with social media and everything.”

“But she really was just ticked off at us, personally.”

“She can back up your story? Whatever that is exactly, really?”

“Yeah, she just was pissed off for that whole day, Monday, when we got back to school, and she had to keep it a secret from Winnie and Marisa,” the stout boy said. “But she got over it, I think. She always does. We fight.”

“They bicker constantly.”

“If you’re us, that’s what you do. It’s like that commercial. But to me there’s no doubt that if you look back far enough, you’ll see she started it.”

Betty thought she saw a creeping smile on Seb’s little face. But as he began to talk, it fell away, slowly at first and then altogether.

“Anyway, though... that’s not why we’re here... We, uh, got this situation, like you know... ”

“Happy to meet you, by the way,” Jimmy butted in, extending his hand. And, as small as his were, their hands fit inside his like a baseball glove. Each of them shook it across the table.

Betty was glad she’d brought him, especially if there was going to be even more of them. It also helped her ease into how ridiculous it felt. At least seeing Jimmy towering over them, like they were grownups who’d be hit with de-aging rays, it made her feel like her perspective was accurate.

After Jimmy finished offering his guarded greeting, Seb tried again to explain the situation, his eyes daring down to her little spiral notebook. Betty could tell he’d tried to prepare a speech but had revised it so many times, he couldn’t remember any of it.

“So, right... We’re here to tell you about Batzinger, Batzinger123. You probably don’t know Batzinger, from GoVidGo and YouTube. Right?”

“Nope.”

“He’s really been growing his channel fast but he’s not super big-time yet. He’s big locally actually, but at this point, it’s just twenty thousand or so followers across platforms.”

Betty wondered why they hadn’t told her the name earlier.

“You’ve got your phone, we’ll show you some stuff on it about Batzinger. And we can show you some stuff too. We can show you right here this,” the boy said, pulling out a phone sheathed in glass that was hanging off in some places and whitened with cracks in others.

“It wasn’t so much his sitting on it as it probably rained. Paige agreed, even just briefly, at some point.”

Betty took it in her hand.

“There’s no way of getting anything off it. We asked a Genius...”

“But it’s his.”

“Bitzinger?”

“Bat-zinger. Or... but his real name is Mike Powers. But he doesn’t call himself that on GoVidGo or YouTube or anything. He just plays by the rules of the game. It’s not a secret but it’s not what he goes by.”

“He’s actually really funny. A total goofball. Do you like CityRiddle? He does some really good CityRiddle videos. Including this one, City Twiddlers, with awesome mods. And he used to do speed-runs but he says he been totally losing his skill, can’t keep his patience up long enough while talking anymore.”

Betty looked down at her notebook. She written: *Vlogger, convinced missing, 11 yrs old, 15, Batzinga, CityRiddle*. She thought of her own unfinished mission with the scientists she’d stuff in the southeastern corner of her city.

“Ok, so, let’s start from the beginning. You say he’s missing. But how do you know that?”

And, then talking in turn but with the smaller boy leading the story, they told her what they said they knew: about the missing footage of his abduction, about the fake room that indeed looked fake, about the empty house, about the unfinished lot and the men and the family, a little girl and tender couple, taken.

And then how they couldn’t do anything with the phone and couldn’t find anything really from google-ing and google-ing. Only her story’s comment section really existed as a place that showed any sort of promise.

And, how suddenly, after they somehow got their driver BoopBoop guy, John, to bring them back over to Batzinger’s house, they needed to react to a changed situation, something than Seb struggled with.

Batzinger’s parents were sitting inside with the lights on, across from each other on separate couches. But since it was daytime, the kids hadn’t notice until they were just outside the windows and needed to hurl themselves into the grass.

Upon closer inspection, the older man and woman – Randy and Tamara Powers were their names, apparently to they’d found out from some relative -- appeared to be just sitting silently.

They looked weary. Their son didn’t appear to be in the house. And then they sat there, unmoving, for hours, with eventually each picking up their phone for a bit, but eventually laid it aside again.

Paige joined them midway through the telling. She was welcomed warmly by everyone at the table.

Betty had to admit the fact that she vouched for the story meant something. The girl seemed like a likable, credible young girl. Probably had a bunch of very sweet friends, but might someday fit in with the cool crowd.



Still, it was pretty incredible, the story, even if the details seemed plausible.

“Look, we’ve tried everyone else we could think of that wouldn’t get us in trouble. We traded emails to a couple of the people he games with, like MisssterMassster, and this guy from Canada, KillerKawa. But they don’t seem to know of anything weird going on with Batzinger, and they don’t really actually know him in real life. And we’ve been talking with his cousin, without letting her know anything, but she doesn’t really know anything either...”

“Nobody else gotten back to us and it’s been almost a week.”

“What would do, if you were us? Seb said that once we found you, it must be because you could help us. That you investigate stuff like this, even if that comment or whatever is just a fluke.”

Betty had to acknowledge she remained unsure about their tale. And just because she was how she, she had to be transparent.

“Are you guys hatching some elaborate plot on me to make some sort of viral video? Because I’m not really thinking that I can just believe this.”

“Ha.”

“No, and trust me,” said Paige. I also figured this whole thing was some sort of prank, right? The thing you need to realize is that those characters in that comment on your story, dee-dee nine, whatever, you know... those were from a license plate from a car with bad people in it. That I saw them with my own two eyes. And I wouldn’t lie about that. You don’t know how much trouble I’d have been in if I got us all killed.”

“She has excellent eyesight.”

“So let’s say this is all true....”

“It is,” Seb said, “and honestly it doesn’t feel right to us either to be stuck in the middle of something completely

weird like this. Like we're some weirdos bringing you crazy stories..."

"...we understand that..."

"... but we're not making it up, about what we saw, not anything from the start of it all."

A family passed with crisp hot dogs and fries on a tray. The smell hit Betty before the others, even as the little boy concluded. Amid the silence, the beefy grill odors grabbed the others' noses.

Betty rubbed her own nose, crinkling her sinuses and sighing.

"So, you know, what I told you about Player, Player44451 is still true. I don't see anything there in his comments on Marshmallow that are all that weird. And I don't know where he went. He has posted for four months, and his profile is basically blank."

"We appreciate you looking into it," Seb said.

"What about *your* parents?"

Paige looked between the other two. "Listen," she said. "As the oldest of us, I've decided that for the time being, our parents are just going to freak out if they hear what we've been up to."

"It's really not our choice at this point," Connor added. "Our parents would be pissed off."

"And yours?" Betty said to Seb.

"My mom definitely isn't getting told."

"Ok, Let's say it's true, your story. So now what? I assume you've done a lot of searching for answers if you ended up with me here. A lot of searching that got you nowhere. And you think I'm going to have answers that you don't? About some vlogger I'd never heard of before."

Jimmy had raised his hand. "And I still don't get why you all don't go to the police, if you're going to really think something this serious is going on."

"The police? You think the police will believe any of this? And if they do, if we end up on their systems somewhere

reporting this, do you think they've got the computer security to keep out hackers?"

"Yeah," Paige added. "My friend's mom ended up reading all of her texts in real-time and it was like the apocalypse. That's why I didn't even want them mentioning my name."

"Yeah?"

"Well, that and Connor was being a doof. He'd farted in my bedroom."

"Only because..."

"I don't even need to know," Betty said, stopping them. "All of what you're saying would lead me to go to the police if I was you kids. I've got to be honest with you. But I also get what you're saying."

"We're just trying to be careful," Seb offered.

"So, ok, so I guess that this is what it is. You're telling me something incredible and I'm supposed to either believe it or not, and then try and figure out what else I can figure out."

"Basically."

"I can tell you right now, I don't know anything about Player44451 except for his posts when he was commenting. And they never were really all that interesting or shady. Just basic stuff like lightly applauding posts or pointing out grammar mistakes. Unless you saw something there? I didn't get a chance to look through absolutely all of it."

"No. We didn't."

"And so you know: He doesn't have a primary email on his account on Marshmallow. He used a separate account with another site to sign up, and it doesn't look like he uses that site anymore either. But I can probably get someone I know to dig up whatever email address he used to register the account. We send out a confirmation email."

"Thank you."

"I'll be the one emailing him. You kids want to lay low? Then fine, lay low. Just don't get your hopes up. I'm going to guess that a lot of times people just register with an email

at someplace anyone can sign up for to get an account and throw away, like gmail or yahoo or bing. And if that's all he put in, that's all we have."

She studied Seb's face, stuffing the encounter so far into his memory.

"I'll also watch whatever videos come up next and let you know what I think, if there's anything out of the ordinary," she added.

Connor was smiling. "That's awesome."

"He'll probably be on tomorrow, so try to check it out and..."

"Really," Paige added, before Seb could finish, "thank you. Thank you, thank you. This is so not what I need to be getting into with basketball tryouts coming up, and you have no idea how serious things have been for the last week. I mean look at me..." She tilted her head to expose a patch of zits on her chin.

"It's no problem. I'll call you when I'm done or find anything else out. We can meet out here again if you still don't feel comfortable talking on the phone."

"I may or may not come," Jimmy added. "Sorry Betty, I'm pretty sure now that these guys aren't really threatening. I think you'll be ok without me."

"Paige is. Threatening."

"Seriously, though, Scooby -- shut up. I honestly cannot even deal with you anymore."

Jimmy stood up, and with a playful "jeez, already, you kids..." stepped away from the table. The rest of them followed, with Betty being the last out of her seat.

Rounding the table herself to catch up with them, Betty needed to push in chairs that'd been sat in by two of the others. She focused on the threats to her waist for a few steps, before settling into a dodging rhythm.

In front of her, Seb's head was ringed from above, flickering with the flapping arms of the woman on an exercise machine shining down. Betty's vision split, she

blinked her eyes, and she emerged from the maze of sturdy furniture.

Her phone buzzed with an alert and she looked down at it. But it wasn't her mother, as she somehow thought, but instead a text from her friend from college, with whom she would sometimes meet up, with a bunch of details about her date. She decided she'd ignore it. It still was just halfway through the week.

"Do you guys come here a lot?" Jimmy said to them as they joined back together to walk. They were passing a Foot Fitter. Its white dazzling windows lifted the temperature of the color all around them.

"This is our mall," Seb said responded. "We come here for stuff a fair amount, but we don't hang out here or anything like..."

"Although, to be honest, I have been here a lot this month," Paige added.

"We don't really come here because we're just, like, too young, to find shopping and girl watching interesting. I mean, we don't really have much money," Connor said.

"You know what you need to do," Jimmy said, "is you need to start a side business or something, like selling vitamins online."

"That stuff is such a huge rip-off."

"Well, do you want some money to go shopping or go on dates with girls? Or what? I'm just saying... "

"Hey, by the way, Jimmy, if you don't mind me asking?" Connor said as he bobbed into the center of the group, "but do you guys like boys or girls? I was just thinking about it, because, you know, you talked about rainbows before. And that's a thing, I know."

"Well, I *do* like boys, so you know," Jimmy said, similar to how one might introduce a contestant on a game. "And I guess Betty likes what she likes. Just because she rarely goes out on dates, you might find it hard to believe." He looked nose his nose at Connor, but was striking a stern

pose clearly in jest. "I wish you luck when it's time for you to start getting into relationships."

"I tell them that all the time," Paige said.

"I bet."

"No, like, seriously..."

"Oh, I get it."

They walked on together toward the exit to the mall, passing a candy and magazine booth shoved into a corner. Betty paused them, and went over by herself to grab a bag of coke-bottle gummies as she took out her wallet.

Connor joined and grabbed a Snackors bar. She took it out of his hand, realizing that paying would be the right thing to do.

At first upon her grabbing it, he looked defeated. Then, as she stepped with the chocolate baton to the counter, she felt him behind her, turning and smiling at Seb, pleased immensely, she was sure.

As Betty spun back, the small straight-talking boy was returning the look with vexation. She imagined he'd gotten past the point of seeing it as fun.

After passing through the doors toward the crisply damp night, with the big building spread up and out behind them, Betty commenced with assuring the group that she'd be in touch. Seb pulled out a folded envelope and handed it to her. He said it was this guy's -- Batzinger's -- address. She took it as she walked.

Checking her phone as she stepped off the curb, she realized that with absolutely no traffic she possibly could return the car to get charged only the half-day rate. But, at the same time, she knew that wouldn't be possible.

Almost as soon as they were about to pick up the pace and split paths, Jimmy stopped them. He again took control simply by doing what he was going to do.

As they huddled a foot from the curb, he flicked his index finger at the kids in front of him, and Betty realized again just how young they looked. It'd be at least a few years

before Seb and Connor would need to be worrying about stress pimples. Paige couldn't even really drive.

"Just one more thing," Jimmy said as they closed around him, his brows furrowing. "Do you any of you guys know Slumber Party Six, they're these YouTube people?"

Betty shrugged off a look from Paige.

Connor cleared his throat. "Ok, so I watched like one or two episodes once, I think... I mean, it's like the one with the girls that do all that stupid stuff, like Pirate Wars? A lot of them have braces, right? And there's the one with red hair?"

"That's probably them. Aren't they precious?"

Connor blushed. "They seemed pretty stupid."

"But that's what makes them so precious. They're just being glorious about it."

"I think they're ok too," Paige mumbled reluctantly. "I used to watch them but they got into some fight at the MTV-GoVidGo Online Awards with another YouTube group that I like..."

"Crimson Kitchen. Sure. That was messed up though."

"Wait, what?" said Betty. "A fight?"

"Oh it was just a verbal thing. Or verbal and gif."

"It got pretty ridiculous but then got vicious for a second and then it was all ok."

"Ah..."

"You know, have every checked out Very Shari, Jimmy?"

"I should?"

"You totally should, I think you'd like her..."

"Hey, then," Seb said, stepping forward, with what she was recognizing as his more serious tone. "Just one more thing for me, too then."

He turned to Betty, his head just below her chin. "Let me ask you something else: Why did you come meet us, anyway? I know we must have sounded loony. We probably still do. Obviously you wouldn't have meet us if we told you our ages, but even so, I don't know why you met us."

“I meet people,” Betty responded, feeling the urge to wink. She didn’t. It wasn’t the right emotion anyway.

She could tell the kid was actually not used to this, any of it. None of them were. They honestly hadn’t ever gone anywhere alone yet. But when it came to diving into the unknown, Jimmy probably was not much better off than them.

“That’s what I do,” she continued, looking at him and then back at them. “It’s part of the job of being a writer, right?”

She saw each of their children’s heads pivot. By no possible assessment were they able to answer that question, she realized. But it was true, as much as it made her want to burst out laughing, the whole field work thing proved to be pretty useful so far.

“Or at least, that’s what I do when I actually get the chance. They want me doing a ton of pretty stupid stuff these days, to tell you the truth. But I used to get out and meet people.”

She caught Seb’s eye from her perch above his small body and held it.

“And sometimes I still do,” she added.

And even in that instant, she wasn’t quite sure why she did. Because she suddenly had made a series of promises to children. And promises to children were something you should keep.

She wasn’t guaranteeing that she could get anything done anyway. But the opportunity to try and help was just floating there now that she’d identified the least that she could do.

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Jimmy spent the whole ride back in the seat next to her on YouTube on his phone. He watched Batzinger videos, jumping about within one with a drag of his finger and then



jumping to another. He cranked the volume louder than normal.

Betty tried to listen while focusing on the road, the whole time taking in Jimmy's narration of his hunting through the titles and comments. At least twice, Betty couldn't hear what the map app on her own phone had to say, and nearly missed taking the best directions.

Before getting into the car, she'd checked her work email, and several other accounts actually. There was barely any activity. Even the spam and promoted postings were half-hearted, touting minor local business or standing out as gibberish. It was those in-between hours that late-workers were on their ways home, and others were just finishing cleaning up after dinner.

For Betty, the situation remained that now that she met them, Seb and Connor, she was really no clearer, except for being more sure of their character. No doubt, she'd first struggle with telling anyone about their ages. And then with the story, already? It didn't seem like they weren't making it up to funny, but it was also pretty wild.

Still... the girl, Paige, seemed fairly mature? As dumb as any teenage girl (or boy) probably, but definitely pretty aware of reality. And she backed up everything they were telling Betty.

For their part, the boys seemed a likely pair. There was a way about him that left Seb trying to speak above his youth, she thought, while Connor was mostly just interested in the spectacle. But she could also sense a morsel of bothersome panic in the larger boy that he was trying to keep down. Somehow it was another thing that mad her believe them.

She dropped off the car in Jimmy's name with him, and then they ducked down from the street to catch a subway. While they walked, Betty searched for some online presence for Seb and Connor or Paige, and found nothing, like she expected.

Finally, arriving home at the top of the staircase, Betty realized it was fairly late, after the prime time shows were over. Though before the eleven o'clock news, Jimmy pointed out.

They spent the rest of the night sitting on the couch, re-watching more fully and carefully those old and recent videos of Batzinger. Soon, they picked up on Batzinger's catch phrases - "ok-ay ok-ay ok-ay" and "I'm here or you're there," or how everything is "sensational" - while studying his room and mannerisms.

From the comfort of their cushions, with Betty's computer playing on the television, they learned to like the mussed hair boy with a silly moustache. Betty could tell by the tone of Jimmy's laughs; they started coming from his gut. She noticed, too, that her own cheeks had grown sore from smiling.

He actually seemed like a nice guy, Betty decided quickly. A cool but dorky manner. Just an all-around agreeable guy.

She'd spent a fair bit of time using her phone to review what he had posted on Facebook and Twitter, his connections, his tagging. He didn't really seem to have many friends? Plenty of "friends" and "followers," but just a few that he interacted with seemed unconnected to his Batzinger persona, as far as she could tell with his posts.

He came across as friendly in those interactions as he always seemed in his videos. She took note of the names, but they all just looked like normal profiles of other gamer dudes of little threat.

She had to admit that she liked Batzinger's choices in games, too.

Not that CityRiddle was such a radical choice. Either way, if she liked it or not, he seemed to have a good choice in titles and subjects. On the other hand, she didn't watch too many "Let's Play" videos, so she didn't know whether it was more or less compelling than others.

She could see how people enjoyed zoning out to those videos for time to time. Why not that?

In the past, she certainly turned to them when she just couldn't figure out how to beat a boss in a game she was playing. But she didn't really have time for it as a hobby; like she knew some people watched a ton, but she preferred to use that time for games. Nothing that she couldn't appreciate, though, especially with how free and organic it felt.

With the benefit of a few hours of watching then, she had to agree with everything that Seb had laid out about Batzinger's room between the videos. How it was obviously a different place. And, Jimmy and her both thought that a strange forced tone definitely permeated his latest few videos, no doubt. It was subtle but noticeable. He stumbled while talking more; often his eyes darted off to the side, uneasily, like he got lost in trying to get to his next thoughts.

Between videos, Betty and Jimmy tried to avoid talking about the time, but eventually, Jimmy pointed out that it was past one a.m. They both needed to go to work in the morning. Nothing was going to be solved right then, not by watching his differing shades of goofiness.

Still, shoving her legs under her blanket, Betty kept watching Batzinger on her phone in her bed, trying to see if maybe she'd been talked into seeing something that wasn't there. As she twisted her body to stay plugged in to the wall, Betty didn't even really have the time to think through it all.

She felt like everything that was staring her in the face was arranged like the Google search results from poorly phrased searches. Random and only coming close to what she was looking for, with each new site posing even more questions.

Her tired mind could barely keep her eyes open, until it couldn't.

Her dreams were strange indeed, and somehow drifted toward being in games herself. She was in a type of virtual reality where the VR would stop working unless she could go back and explain the situation. There was a situation with a hotel, she thought, and rows of pools.

In the morning, she listened to Batzinger some more while she undressed to shower. Brushing her teeth for about three minutes, she was no clearer on what she had gotten herself into.

Sure, she was starting to like the stiff hair on his lip, quite honestly. It was making her laugh. And his upbeat and honest greetings. His CityRiddler and MasterSmash playing, his competition with other YouTubers, his The Mario Bros. speed-run failing... they were all actually pretty enjoyable for Betty to watch. But they weren't revealing anything new to her.

She moved quietly through the apartment itself in her towel, since Jimmy had another hour to sleep.

Of course, he also would have the longer day. She didn't expect him to be back home until several hours after she returned again. This time, she wasn't expecting to just zone out in front of her consoles.

It wasn't until she was dressed in dark jeans and a brown blouse that she decided to peak her head in on Jimmy. He looked too peaceful to disturb, curled up there in his bed, the sun framing a chunk of his body.

She knew, anyway, everything he knew; it was going to be there first time apart after all those hours together, driving back and forth and being at home.

She packed her lunch, grabbing a cup of banana yogurt and apple from the fridge. She tossed the meal in her bag, and, fishing her cellphone charger from the under her bed, stuffed it in, too. She tried to not let the door slam on her way out.

Betty arrived at work a little earlier than normal and so the elevator was barely crowded. And her floor was quite

quiet. A single printing slowly spit out a page. The bloodshot eyes of the few people there seemed uninterested in conversation as she passed. She imagined she looked similar.

But that's what people do, they get coffee and wake up. Betty sat initially and just stared at her screen. Was this dude, Batzinger, in there? Somewhere? Eventually, Betty's brain reminded her that she could use the tool. She pushed in her headphones.

In a small box with a small box on her monitor, Batzinger apologized for being late, his little moustache bobbing above his little lip.

She obviously knew one of her next moves at least. She pulled up her email. She didn't want to commit to much. But clearly she needed to listen to the kids. She had a heart, for one thing. And there seemed to be something worth considering.

To: [onno11@gmail.com](mailto:onno11@gmail.com)  
Re: Plz help! Big mystery...

*Just wanted to let you know that all of that sounded really interesting yesterday and we're definitely going to want to stay in touch. Thanks for reaching out.*

*We'll watch tonight and talk again soon.*

She phrased it all a certain way. She paused for a second and thought about adding some more. She felt like she should maybe make some mention of her studies of Batzinger so far? But, no, she decided to err on the side of brevity and directness.

At this point, she mostly didn't want to spook them, because they seemed like they were terrified on the inside even while they outwardly were doing a pretty good job of keeping their cool.

Even if they had essentially shown her where they lived by telling Jimmy and her where Batzinger lived, and how long it took them to get there, and where the mall was in relation to all that.

She chalked that up to a youthful mistake.

Betty tried to imagine the mismatched and yet harmonized pair right then, wandering the halls of their school, quiet with the morning, whispering into the other's ears, wondering what would happen next.

How could their story be real - or at least something that they'd thought was real -- and them not be freaking out?

When she was that age, or around that age, she could remember sneaking into a movie theater, toward the end of a horror movie Oliver had wanted to see, and getting really messed up when the boy's eyes had been taken out.

After exiting with the crowd spilling into the mall, the logos across the tops of entryways began swimming around her. She'd broken down crying.

In reality, that day was also pretty much one of the last times that she'd had such a huge freak-out. But, it was also one of the first times that she'd gotten anywhere near danger, more or less. Here, these kids seemed in control, at least to some degree, despite everything, in a way that really impressed her.

Obviously she appreciated the truth about what they'd seen in the last Batzinger videos that he'd posted, and how they seemed suspicious, and not in line with the others for so many reasons.

And that made Betty realize that the people who took him -- if what Seb and Connor and Paige had said could possibly be true -- could also be somewhere behind the screen. Right there with him, or in close proximity. So she just ended the email, with,

--BVB

Unfreezing, Betty looked away from her computer. She let her eyes go unfocused as she stared across the floor. The faces bobbing there offered a sea of fronts and backs of jabbering heads.

Yawning, she remembered: She also needed to try to get an email address for Player44451. She would try to send something to the three Batzinger's friends - two fellow seniors at his high school and a girl at a local college -- that she'd found online as well, but she already knew how.

She shot off a request for a favor to a guy she knew in the systems department, Yosef. He was a judge-y young man with wide uneven eyes, a foreign tongue and a warm heart, so she was hopeful that he'd come through with it.

Still, she was pretty much without any hope that she'd ever actually get a response after sending an email to the address, if she could even get that.

Sure, she mostly expected to at least send out a message, reaching out to him. But at best, it'd be like a reverse message in a bottle, trying to connect from the middle of society to someone adrift somewhere out there on their own within it on an island.

Before Betty could really think through her next tactical options, the approaching morning editors meeting began stirring figures in each section of Marshmallow's floor.

Standing, they pressed down their shirts or flattened their dresses, consulted one last time with their reporters, and made their way toward the glass meeting room. Movement swept down the various aisles between cubicles.

As Suzy passed with a stinging whiff of perfume, Betty signaled to her with a pantomime consisting of her hand in an L shape waiving between them to stop by her desk when she returned.

Betty didn't even know why she did it. It was instinctual? A weak bluff toward closeness that she wasn't sure she believed? Probably more like just something that she felt would be the expected move of someone who wasn't trying

to be suspicious. She knew that Suzy would be stopping by eventually anyway to check in on her pipeline of articles.

An astute-enough woman, Suzy nevertheless nodded.

It struck Betty as an honest nod, aware of the fact that they needed to get together to do their own jobs better. Suzy was easy on Betty often in fact, because she knew that they needed to join forces to survive the challenges that Elan threw up for them. Not a pushover, but patient.

Renaldo leaned in as Suzy strutted past the low desks toward to the meeting room, a glare reflecting off his bald head.

“Do you think she’s going to push my piece?”

Having noticed him, Betty turned to face his bushy smile. He smelled nice, like cucumbers.

“I thought it was quite good, no?”

“Did you send it to me?”

“Don’t you check your email?”

“I get tons of stuff. You’re going to tell me you know all of whatever email that jams up your inbox?”

“All? No. But if you sent me the draft of a story, and I thought you generally wrote very well, then there’s no way I would have missed it. You know, I’d be looking. It says something that you didn’t notice.”



He pouted facetiously

“Sorry,” she obliged.

“Sincerely from me, it’s not my best work. I mean I won’t win any awards for it. But it’s ok, I think. If you think it’s stupid, that’s cool though.”

Betty looked up at him, brushing back her hair. He was causally studying each wall of the office, rubbing his right hand over his bald head. Still, she could feel his desire for affirmation, dulled as best as he could dull it, lurking, yearning for acknowledgment as a man in his field, if not yet a master.

“Well....”

“What?”

“You have a computer and a phone, if you wanted to see a little bit of it...”

His tone was more than serious than playful, but not a great amount of either, to be honest. He tossed out the information with expectations, but not overly sternly, more imploring.

Betty typed out Renaldo’s name in her email search box, and pulled up the unread message, wondering why she’d missed it before. She hit the download button and then checked out the start of his article.

“Talkersation?”

“Exactly.”

“I’ve never heard of Talkersation. So, it’s some kind of messaging app?”

“No, it’s a philosophy that you can download as an app.”

“Uh, right. Where’d you even find these people?”

“They were mentioned by this comedy YouTube dude that I watch, Sargent Argent. He’s pretty crude, but he’s funny. They’ve raised a ton of money already, as a business, considering.”

Betty shook her head in agreement as she passed the figure.

“Well, it’s definitely pretty interesting, I guess. If I were Suzy, I’d push it for front-page top. Like it and spread it, definitely.”

Renaldo raised his eyebrows, and, pursing his lips, asked, “Should I think that you’re being honest with me, or that you just feel like buttering me up?”

They both stole glances at the editors in their little room, talking, but it seemed a deep discussion was taking place.

“That’s all I’d ever do. It’s cute. Elan will love it.”

“Thanks. What are you working on?”

“A kidnapping.”

Renaldo stopped cracking his knuckles and then a smile grew again on his face. She sensed that he could tell that she was not quite yet convinced herself.

“Seriously?”

“It seems like it ‘maybe.’ You know, I’m just in the initial phase of newsgathering. Never judge a tip until you track it down, right?”

“Who are your sources?”

“Two eleven year olds and a fifteen year old sister.”

“Ah....”

“Yeah... so...”

“So... who is missing? Is it the Easter bunny?”

“Look, I don’t know yet what to think about the situation. But that’s where I was yesterday, out in the suburbs.”

“Scary.”

“Right?”

“Yeah, the suburbs. A bunch of kids.”

“Hey,” Betty said. Thinking about it as she stared past him to an empty row and woman standing at a printer, she added, “Where’s Teresa anyway?”

“Oh, she went out to City Hall. The mayor was having a press conference about something.”

“Something that you or I would care about?”

“Homelessness, I think.”

“Oh, well, that’s worth caring about, wow.”

“Yeah, I don’t know why we have any of that. You know, except for the nuts, Betty.”

“Renaldo,” she responded, “you are proof that even nutsos can manage to live in homes.”

“What? Really Betty...” Her tone had shifted and he picked up on it. “I am just joking around.”

“Not cool, Renaldo. I bet you’re the type of person that never gives change to the men on the street unless they’re some grim-covered young female street urchin that’s halfway between a hippie and a Goth? Or that’s halfway between a hippie and an OD if she’s got nice eyes.”

“I imagine you’re the type that gives every single time? You know that some are just scams...”

“I look into their hearts. I’ll skip a few. Like those guys with sandwiches that they say they’re giving to the hungry. Someone should throw them out of the cars. But, really, it’s just right to do it, the right thing, to give a little money most of the time.”

He nodded, and she realized by the look on his face that she’d probably broken his cool. She couldn’t bring herself to apologize before they turned back to their respective desks. She wondered whether he’d be sore about it, offended, for a couple. Maybe so, maybe not. Ugh, work was just so much more complicated than gaming, or working at a place that was about gaming.

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Shortly after the editor meeting wrapped up, and following a brief stop with Renaldo to update him on his story, Suzy would arrive at Betty’s desk. The grown (if short) man’s shoulders performed a little rhythmic dance behind Suzy as she turned away. Talkersation would make the front page, it appeared.

Suzy walked in short tight steps toward Betty, almost as if she was trying to stretch out the approach to give Betty

time to be ready to greet her. In one of her skinny hands with shiny nails, she was holding several sheets of paper against a pad. She placed the pile down on Betty's desk as she began speaking.

Her flat intonation, hiding the hint of a nasally accent, always reminded Betty of a lonely vlogger doing response videos on YouTube. With no point to make and no real concern about that.

"Hey Suzy," said Betty, addressing her boss with what she felt like was the appropriate amount of respect. Betty believed that she wouldn't care about her meeting with Elon, in terms of her jumping the chain of command, but she wasn't completely sure.

"Hey, Betty... So, how are things with you?"

"Fine, really."

"Really? Everything's moving along? Another crazy morning for me. First, it's one thing, and then it's another. How about that, right? Can't find a few minutes even to visit the lady's room, if you know what I mean."

The type of YouTube poster that would end up getting less than double digits of thumbs up, over and over, and just not give up.

That wasn't quite right, though, because Betty knew the woman arrived at Marshmallow with a full career. But she now came across as weary, flighty, and slightly sloppy even, in Betty's opinion. More than once, Betty turned in story drafts to Suzy and she'd introduced spelling errors and misspelled names.

In addition, at least eighty percent of the time, Suzy totally had no idea about the topics that Betty was writing about. Genuinely nice, but she knew essentially nothing about games and gaming culture, obviously, and barely anything about the front end of pop culture.

Of course, even if it was pretty bad, Suzy was never completely reckless or anything close to that. She leaned on her writers to know what they were talking about. So, it

wasn't like KDO could end up as GMO during one of her copy edits.

It was true that people like Suzy would know of superheroes from the movies or *Game of Thrones*, but they wouldn't know something formative like *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life* or anything about *Pokémon* except for the name and maybe Pikachu.

Yet, and there was no doubt about it, clearly Suzy was an agreeable lady and a fine manager, and Betty appreciated that. The woman might not have been someone that Betty would have been friends with, but she wasn't a bad boss at all.

Betty remembered the time really early on that she'd been late with every assignment for a week, and Suzy had only threatened her on the last day.

She then turned in several hundred words of pure gibberish, more or less, at the deadline, about a poorly selling game put out by a third-tier studio. Suzy had stayed late, patiently moving what felt like every single one around to form something that was publishable, if only just barely.

So that happened and then she didn't end up being really the type of editor that Betty, with a little more confidence after finding her footing at Marshmallow, would come to expect to make her writing all that much better.

But she was nice, and Betty wanted Suzy to continue giving her some space at work. For instance, there was the expense of getting the car that'd she taken out... she wanted Suzy in a good mood for when she submitted that for reimbursement, and for her to continue letting Betty do things like that. She'd maybe want to get a car again.

Betty was happy that she'd asked Suzy the previous week about her time at the *Dispatch-Tribune*, and kept prodding her with questions. Because Betty knew it gave her a kick.

Quite simply, the older woman loved the invitation to share her stories of covering the town and the plastics

industry there. When she was worried about the deadline with her stories, Betty was sure to prompt Suzy to share some recollections.

Tapping on the papers she'd laid on the desk, Suzy seemed a bit more of a stern cautioning mode than an eager narrator. She'd be nice about it, warning Betty against slacking. Maybe it was an even worse idea then, she'd realized, to try to preempt Suzy stopping by with her gesture earlier. But since the goal was essentially to preempt it, she knew it didn't matter. Betty knew but she'd probably be ready to jump back on her for stories.

"Yeah, I guess. Just wanted to say hi. And sorry I was out yesterday afternoon. Anything come up?"

"No, Elan just emphasized to me that he was happy with how your last video turned out click-wise, and to everyone that he didn't think we where we need to be overall, so try harder. So you need any help moving anything along?"

"No. Look," Betty said. "I didn't mean to suggest that I won't get another story or two in to you this week when I said in my email that I'd be out..."

"Thanks, Betty. No, I know: You know how Elan is with measuring everything. He wants to get to where he needs to be to tell the people at Near Media what they need to hear. And, I mean, look who I'm working with here..." She waved at Renaldo and Teresa's empty seat and a few of the other writers filing stories to her. "These are hard working people already. Even you, sometimes."

She was doing her best, Betty appreciated that Suzy got that much at least.

She wished there was some way she could tell Suzy about the whole situation with Batzinger and the kids. Maybe it'd been a bad idea to say something to Renaldo, but she needed to hear how it sounded out-loud. She still needed to say it, to believe it was real. Bu it'd definitely be a bad idea to tell Suzy, Betty was almost sure. Still...

“Suzy,” Betty asked, “can I ask you something? Something about a story I’m working on...”

“Of course, dear.”

“You promise not to laugh?”

“Never,” she said. “Editors can’t laugh at their reporters, it’s a bad habit.”

“Well, have you ever been in a situation where something was happening and you didn’t know what exactly, but you were pretty sure if what a source said was true, it could be illegal? Not what you’re doing with the source. But what you’re hearing about.”

“Sure plenty of things like that.”

“Really. Plenty?”

“I was a real reporter you know, Betty. I wasn’t always an old lady.” Betty knew that no one would really call her an old lady. “Like there was a rumor that the mayor of this small town in our area was only letting his brother-in-law’s company mow the grass all over town on the town’s dime at the inflated rates. The taxpayers’ dimes. We published that actually.”

“Nice.”

“Or there was the time that I tried to write about a supposedly illicit relationship between two people, both on the planning board, and it just never came to be.”

“I don’t even know what a planning board is.”

“It a board that plans things, for a town. You know, a group of people, like a Congress. In a small or even medium sized town, or community or hamlet, it can be really powerful. Especially if there’s some big business trying to run everybody over, through representatives or whatnot.”

“Wow.”

“Or... there was also the time that I did write about a really sad puppy mill. For another for instance. Which of course lead to the dog killings a few years later... they got the publisher’s pet, which also helped give me some breathing room... so we investigated, and it turned out

basically everyone in this one part of town knew it was this teenager, this butcher's boy, with all sorts of issues."

"Did you ever think of telling the police about those things? You know, before you printed it, if you even did?"

"Well," she smiled, "when we felt like we were close, if it was really illegal, we'd call the police or an inspector's general and ask for comment, or just to give them a heads up. Guys on the cop beat would get really, really annoyed if we didn't. The thing with the boy who killed the dogs was being solved as we were looking into it, so we waited for an arrest. We usually gave them a few days as we finished up other stuff, the layout and whatnot. There wasn't any Internet back then, things didn't work as fast. Back then, everybody wasn't all up in each other's business like they are now, as you kids used to say."

"So if you weren't sure, that you had a story to print, you wouldn't call the police?"

"Probably not. Nope. Not at that point. Not unless there was some real special reason with someone I knew through a friend."

"What about telling your editor? If it was something that started off as seeming mostly crazy...."

Suzy gave an exaggerated cough and cocked her eyes.

"Ah, I see what you're going," she said with a wag of her finger. "As you know, I embrace fully disclosing your work to your editor. But, if you're appealing to me for advice from my past, I also think you should reserve the right to keep some things closer to the vest."

Betty watched Suzy's hand scratch a few times on her cotton shoulder.

"Y-yeah..." Betty mumbled.

"Was that a hypothetical question or should I be worried about something?" Suzy added.

"Hypothetical. For now."

"Right. Good."



It was weird how they existed there in the middle of the office, talking in the open but in their own little bubble.

“Anyway, I was thinking I could write a follow-up on CityRiddle addicts. There was another study released this week, so I thought I’d just do that. Oh, and I’m looking into something about an upcoming app from the makers of Candy Corny. But that’s probably not going to be for a bit -- like a few weeks -- because they’re not going to be ready for a bit to talk.”

“Ok, when did you think you could do that follow-up then? I’m kind of stressed about not having much this week for Elan, and your talk of dark secrets isn’t making me feel any more confident...”

Betty closed her eyes for three seconds, visualizing the words that she’d write filling up the CopyRight document. Read aloud in her head.

“Are you going to be free this afternoon to take a look?”

“Oh, no, most likely not; I didn’t think you could do it that quick. But if you get it to me, I’ll make sure to get to it first thing and moved on in the morning.

Betty knew it’d be an easy thing to do, a short little item, a handful of hundreds of words, and, depending on how many people clicked on it, it could be worth as much as a long article on some serious topic, in terms of her job evaluation. She figured she could get it done in an hour or so, recycling what she’d used before for artwork.

She knew how it would go. Suzy wouldn’t really understand. And Elan would either like it or not, in his peppiest voice, based somewhat on whatever market segment or advertising partner was being forced down his throat that day, and how fed up he was. She could also imagine scenarios where he’d reject it just to prove a point.

Suzy’s stare drifted away, and Betty noticed her double-triangle earrings.

“And, oh, Betty,” she said, turning, “please make sure to tell me if there’s anything about that game that I

mentioned. Destiny: Unity? The one that said that I was hearing was popular. Who makes that? Are people still playing it? Anyway... do what you're going to do if you get it done easily enough, but after that, think about if we should have a piece on that."

Before Betty knew it, Suzy was departing. She wondered about Suzy's need to try and make people better, at their jobs, and even with their personal lives, Betty'd noticed. Like the awkward boss on *The Office*. It probably had something to do with the "boss" in her functional title, but also her own grandmotherly inclinations. She laughed silently thinking about telling her that.

To Betty, it seemed natural for someone like Suzy to try to gently enforce rules. To Seb and Connor, she was sure, it would seem like a teacher, droning on like *Charlie Brown's* or something.

Still, Betty jumped right on pounding out on her keyboard the few hundred words for the *CityRiddle* piece that she needed as soon as Suzy left, after a quick break to check out Twitter, where a link to Facebook made her realize that she never checked out Facebook anymore.

She finished the article over the next hour-and-a-half, only taking a little longer than she expected because she had forgotten that's she needed to eat her lunch. So, she made slow progress with one hand for a bit.

The buzzing of her cellphone on her desk beside her tried to interrupt her as she was saving it to all the appropriate drives. In response, she slapped at the mouse a few more times, and slid his hand across to pick up her phone. She saw on the hone's screen,

*nice, glad you're abroad*

and then, *aboard,*

and then *anyway thank you Betty!*

and finally, disappearing almost before she could finish because she read it last, *stay in touch with us. my mom's going to kill me. but this feels like some deep [poop emoji]*

*we've gotten into, and I can't not wonder what in the what is going on.*

# Chapter Eight

## Shouting Into Mirrors

Betty spent the rest of the day hovering over her computer, wearing a serious look, researching Batzinger and Mike Powers for a little bit — and finding all the same obvious stuff again — and then really looking for ways to get in contact with Player44451, in real life. Or at least track him down.

As you'd expect, Google was no help with finding the mystery man/comment-leaver. (Even if Google did suggest an amazing story about how scientists had taught a computer how to teach itself to write music. The song started off awkwardly, before revealing itself to be enjoyable. Pretty funky even? She couldn't help but click, and then groove.)

Based on what she did, professionally, Betty was more of an expert than most people at how to make the faded rainbow-colored search engine work for her, how to mine it, how to shoot through the labyrinth. She felt incredibly comfortable sitting in front of the long blank bar, picking at her lips with bitten-nail fingers.

So, she tried putting his user name in quote marks, as well as breaking it up into component parts. And she searched just the numbers, and then only portions of them, and then in reverse order, then all of it in reverse order. She went on the “barely anything” that she had to go by.

Betty picked up the envelope she'd been handed by Seb, an object as lightweight as a balloon, essentially. It sliced through the air as she turned it over.

She'd earlier dropped it on top of a stack of papers beside her computer, letting it float down to rest under a printed-out picture of her family. It was of Betty's mom, dad and Betty at her college graduation, and was taped up on the only significant free area around the wall enclosing her desk space.

Unfolding the lined paper clumsily, realizing she'd skipped a beat of breathing, she saw a scribbled address beside a couple of flowing doodle shapes. She added the address to her search.

And, still, even with that no matter what, the results pages came back over and over again filled with two types of offerings: too much of everything, or almost nothing but Russian and Arabic sites, waiting to be translated and yet apparently completely unrelated.

She'd never learned Russian or Arabic, and the "too much of everything" category was impossible to dig through... So she started again, spinning the wheel of the search bar. Eventually, her arms began to get tired, in her head.

Even if Betty had been given the fastest computer in the world and actually knew how to code, she bet she couldn't come up with a computation that would dig up Player44451 in any reasonable timeframe. Maybe in billions of years, if given the chance, it could, if she was lucky.

The irony was: If this dude was out there and she found him, she was sure she'd be able to get back to him in the snap of a finger. The whole thing wouldn't look hard once she had the answer, she felt, confident. Something about him was out there, waiting for her.

Her pants buzzed, and Betty pulled out her phone. She was being texted, by Jason, who she'd worked with him at ThumbLords. He was really into Japanese culture, but

otherwise mostly normal. They'd talked while she'd worked there, and then texted occasionally, but hadn't really communicated for months.

*How you been, I keep meaning to shoot you a note or try to schedule something, just been so fricking jammedw  
?*

They were long past the point of where he'd been feeling the potential for something romantic. She wondered if he could have forgotten. She'd imagine that would be hard, considering that he'd ask so bluntly in the chat out of the blue, and she'd given such a definitive answer.

She briefly weighed the pros and cons of responding then, if at all. They'd still remained friendly, after all.

She tipped a little to the right, and with that hand steadied her phone.

*Ohh hi! Same here, out of my mind. How u doing? Get out soon?*

which she felt was very non-committal.

And he responded,

*Good sure love to. Talk soon.*

which she felt meant that they'd each remain free to postpone as long as necessary.

Turning back to her computer, Betty reclaimed the feeling of feeling stymied but not ready to concede. A thought popped into her head, or so she went and poked around the Internet, checking out sites that Player44451 might be showing up on. Google's algorithms didn't see everything like a person (like her) would see it. She just needed to stick her nose into the middle of a lot of discussions across the web.

The key was that it would be easier to find a needle in a pile of hair. So she scouted out comment sections, message boards, Twitter, and Reddit, she searched them all. And they were each, in turn, disappointingly unhelpful.

Betty almost wanted to explore the dark web, but she barely knew anything about it. It sounded like a term some

cop show made up for its hacker character to say. The Dark Web.

Not that she considered herself a hacker. Video games and hacking are two different things. One is a recreation for some people; the other is amusement to a different group. Each, Betty thought, took a level of expertise. The expertise needed for hacking being the more difficult to obtain.

Even if she did know a little about Tor and encryption and blockchain and things like that, she wasn't brave enough to take the chance of clicking on the wrong link. She had no idea how to protect herself against whatever lurked out there. She could expose Marshmallow to malicious viruses. And, she definitely felt little interest in filling up her laptop with any.

Soon, the afternoon hours added up. And, after returning a message from Jimmy checking in and a trip to the vending machines for red licorice vines, Betty found herself again watching Batzinger videos. And being soothed by his chipper voice.

The grown boy's ramblings jumped out over beautifully engineered images from games brimming with colors. The music of the games served to double or triple the hypnotic signals.

And she let herself get absorbed, studying details like how the books laid messily on his dresser. Which had barely changed since the video before. Or had it? She didn't think so.

And then there was his shifted cadence in the recent videos and frequent detours in his prattling, mentions of random outside things. She watched for at least two hours more, until she slowly noticed the people around her starting to stand up and pack up to leave for the day.

Just as Renaldo pushed back from his desk to head toward the filling coat closet area, an email alert flashed on Betty's screen. She cracked her fingers, and opened it,

waving across her body as Renaldo's movement stirred the air beside her.

Within the message in her inbox was simply an email address. She chuckled. Well, that was something. It came from the administrator she'd emailed in the systems department, Yosef. Whom she now owed a nice big favor.

Man, Yosef really was awesome for stuff like that, when you needed favors yourself, Betty thought. She'd been right to think he'd probably get it.

She definitely didn't have anyone like him when she was at ThumbLords. A single fat bearded guy oversaw all of their technology. He wore blue-tinted sunglasses and a brown leather jacket out on the streets and, when she needed his assistance, rambled either fairly insanely or almost incomprehensively. More intense, certainly, than the situation ever called for and far less comprehensible.

Yosef, on the other hand, though he spoke with a difficult accent and offered an off-putting stare, was well mannered and polite. And he actually knew what he was doing, which she couldn't necessarily say for the ThumbLords tech guy. Plus, Yosef had all sorts of other people he could ask, like his Chinese boss, Tong, who liked to grip two phones in one of his hands, if he needed any help thinking.

With her barely even realizing, Betty's own fingers had begun moving in front of her, tapping out a version of the brief message she'd prepared in her head,

*Hi there:*

*This is Betty Van Buren, a writer for Marshmallow.com, a website where you have commented in the past under the username of Player44451. It would be terrific if you could get in touch about your account, since there is a matter that needs your attention.*

*If you can respond, I'll tell you all about it.*



*Thanks,*

## **BVB**

This was her strategy, carefully plotted out. Nonchalance. She could always follow up later, she figured.

It could hard to pull off nonchalance when you plan it, but over an email, at least, it could be easier, she thought. The best approach would be that way, slightly formal but still casual.

No need to get fancy about anything.

It wasn't like Betty found herself at the airport, shutting down her electronics and about to get on a plane, where she'd lose all cellular and WiFi, disconnect from everything, every network. Or... maybe that didn't even happen anymore? Maybe all planes had WiFi? She hadn't been on one in a while.

Regardless, if her first email, this personalized and direct, wasn't going to be enough to get this mystery man to respond, it was likely that nothing she wrote would be. If he even checked the account, that was.

Obviously, she'd try to be more convincing eventually, if needed. Try to ply him with compliments or vague threats. But right now, Player44451 either would be open to contact or definitely not. And if he wasn't, that could itself mean many things itself. A couple of them could probably be cured by her sending another email a few days later.

Still, a cool satisfaction lingered after she hit the send button.

What a time to be alive, she thought. She might not know anything about this person, Player44451, about their shape or size or color. And she could be to him, in his head right now, like he was to her - completely foreign and unknown.

And yet, there was always a chance that some emails could connect you with someone who doesn't even exist in your physical world.

She wondered to herself why she was even so interested in their story. She thought back to the mall, and realized there'd been something about the smaller boy's first words, about recognizing her. And it didn't even seem right, wondering.

Her parents looking at her from a picture next to her monitor, she pulled open her drawer and grabbed a notebook.

When she finally stepped away from her desk, feeling eager to see what was next, Betty's plan was to slip out without Elan seeing her. And yet, standing by the exit already, there he was, talking to Teresa.

The vivid browned girl was pumping him with dynamite story ideas and white smiles. There didn't seem to be anything fake about it, except to the extent that her regularly casual demeanor might be considered a slightly adopted affect. She'd always been that way, though, so it seemed unlikely that you'd get put off by it, even as she used her charm on the boss you shared.

As she shuffled toward the door, Elan caught Betty's eye with his deep stare and raised his refined eyebrows unevenly.

She couldn't think of anything to do, except to smile too, aping Teresa. She just couldn't act normally that day, like she kept dying at the same stage of a level, like an absolute doof.

It was an awkward smile with too much cheek. She was grateful that she didn't let it linger too long, at least.

Elan's maintained his look for a moment more, bemused. His look was firm but not judgmental -- some part of it acknowledged that he wanted to put some trust in her, like she realized he put his trust in lots of people.

Indeed, when he turned back to Teresa, Betty heard him saying something about meetings on the higher floors. Which she knew meant other parts of Near Media's space in the building.

Betty was still trying to shake the image of him studying her out of her head as the elevator doors closed. Once enclosed in polished silver, she mind immediately turned to plotting out her route home. She couldn't remember if it would be dark out (but it would turn out it wasn't quite yet.)

By the time the ground floor pinged, she felt like she'd at least be able to forget about work overnight.

Jimmy arrived home at the apartment, not too much later than Betty, revealing that he'd done something that he never did and asked to leave.

He'd claimed he needed to feed a friend's cat. The play about the fat president would have to wait, he told her. She felt guilty for getting him involved, but it was too late for that.

And, so together, they settled in to wait for Batzinger to come on.

On his phone, he ordered each of them a calzone, which arrived piping hot from the restaurant around the corner a little more than half an hour later. It was stuffed with cheese and meat that would be at first dangerous to the tongue.

The smell was intoxicating. Like a sausage being grilled in a garden. Jimmy, who was out of sorts from hunger, began comparing the odors -- of the meat and cheese and tomatoes -- to the citric chemical smell trying to damp down the urine in fast-food places in the city.

Since GoVidGo was flashing anyway on the screen, Betty pulled up a streamer who played music videos, pop stuff like Katy Perry and Katrina Canella, and commented on them. His name was ManTryingVideos, and he wore huge red sunglasses and a wild wig.

He chuckled more than commented, and it was likely that he'd eventually be reported and need to shut down because

he was using all the music with paying anyone. The songs themselves were well chosen. Betty observed Jimmy chewing to the beat as he finished off his meal.

Before much longer, Batzinger's channel flicked to life. Jimmy saw it first, and gave a little shout. Betty leaned forward to enlarge the experience.

Watching the screen filling expanding, she almost forgot... Her fingers then depressed a wide configuration of keys on her laptop, and a movie real in the corner of her screen confirmed that she was recording everything that was showing there.

Batzinger sat silently in the box, biting his bottom lip beneath his moustache. All around him, images of being soaring through the city finally started playing. And over his shoulder on the wall sat posters of The Killers and the Kryptic Bagels, groups of long-haired men frozen in place, some in the desert and others on some ranch.

Batzinger cleared his throat, letting a wide smile spread across his pale face.

Betty's heart raced in anticipation. Well, she thought, here we are. Here in her apartment, no doubt, but more importantly, there during that moment of time. She felt a slight wetness in her hair as she brushed it out of her face.

She realized that this is what the phenomena of YouTubers was about: suspense from the familiar. Excitement over the thing that you've seen before and that's now happening again but somewhat differently.

Although she could see it all unfolding already in her mind -- Batzinger's bouncing arrival and then steady clicking and clacking of commentary on the game unfurling around him -- she also knew that you never knew really. Every video was its own thing. Even in normal times, any day could have a great, side-splittingly funny video, or just a soothingly hypnotic one.

And maybe this time he'd give up something about what was going on with him, with a joke or a story that she could

use to either put to bed or confirm the rumors of his disappearance? If he really snipped the end of the video where the kids had said that he'd be abducted, who could say that he wasn't editing over other videos, removing clues? Where there clues that she wasn't seeing, that kids didn't even notice?

Maybe watching live would make a difference. Maybe she'd witness something small that would bolster her ability to help Seb, Connor and Paige. That was how she uncovered things. From a little thread that she started to pull one day, she'd find a whole amazing web of truth.

Not that she was super-confident there was any wiggly little fiber to grab. In some parts of her brain, she still almost felt like the kids were egging her on to poke around in a random corner of a game level for a warp, to a future level. And that warp wasn't really there. And yet, as much as felt like that, she also felt like maybe the warp was really there.

And, then, as Batzinger began spilling out words in his voice, that voice that she'd grown to recognize so well, Betty caught Jimmy's knee bouncing up and down from the cushion next to her.

It made her feel in her chest like she was looking down a rollercoaster ride. Like she was coming home from GamerPerch with an unwrapped game, still in its thin plastic tickling with static energy.

Or like she

“And ok-ay ok-aaay ok-aaaay,” he said slower and slower, “now I am here, yes, here I am,” the flashing of the screen on his face, hiding his lips mostly in shadows. “Yes, yes, yeeeeesss, I’m here, and you there, you guys, you. So, thank you. Thank you, for coming. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

He paused, holding up a finger, and pursing his lips, and clicking through the select screens, purposefully. As he clicked, the flashing changed colors and strength and cadence. Shortly, his mouth began moving again.

“And, anyway, as you there know, I’m Batzinger123. Yes, the Batzinger. B Z B Z 1 2 3. And I’m here for another sensational time with... CityRiddle.”

The words,

*CityRiddle*

came up big on the rest of the screen where he wasn’t.

And then almost as quickly they faded away.

“And, today, we’re doing some building, because we call this stream , Batzinger Builds: CityRiddle.

“I know you’ve probably been looking forward to this, and I have to admit me, too. It’s a good series, and I really like letting my creative juices flowing. You know? Sorry I missed a week....”

He looked inward with a blink, and huffed out a single chuckle.

“Things came up.”

As the boy in the tiny box on her screen took a sip out from a lime-green and silver can, Betty glanced over at the side of her browser, noticing the words that had begun scrolling up.

***Welcome to the chat room!***

...floated there and just below came,

***kimcando86: Waddup BZ!***

Followed by,

***playa8er: hey bz123!***

**gjo187:** Do more with the college town area pls  
**farragogo:** give it a try with the nuclear plant like oyu said three episodes ago!  
**farragogo:** sorry, nuclear  
And then,  
**kimcando86:** College town would be cool.  
**jazznutspanda3:** ha W  
**that\_Jersey\_kid\_:** Yo Batzinger are you going to be around on Friday with Smash?  
**ashketchup:** Anyone see the glitch where the fat guy gets stuck in a door????  
**gjo187:** ur dangerous farragogo lol  
**kimcando86:** BZ BZ BZ BZ BZ BZ  
**gjo187:** y don't u pwn some cops? Get some more crime going  
**farragogo:** looks whose dangerous now  
**gjo187:** ok ok ok  
**that\_Jersey\_kid\_:** New Smash DLC CHARACTERS!  
**xFluffy\_Unicornx:** When are you going to make your City public?  
**ashketchup:** omg WHY YOU SHOUTING  
**jazznutspanda3:** Found your glitch video  
<http://www.rickro...>  
**farragogo:** I really do love Batzinger Builds tho  
**farragogo:** **BB from the BZ**  
**farragogo:** **BZ123 that is**  
**jazznutspanda3:** Anyway  
**jazznutspanda3:** ; )  
**kimcando86:** wowsers, where's the sandwich shop?  
And finally,  
**GoVidGoBot:** \$ The stream has been live 3 minutes 47 seconds

... before the next round of shouting into mirrors.

Betty was pretty sure none of it carried any significance. And she imagined that the kids would let her know if it did. She didn't even bother asking Jimmy if he'd read any of it;

he didn't mention anything about the wall of remarks, either.

Thinking about it then, Betty figured they probably wouldn't risk it but, wouldn't they? She wondered if there might be any chance that onno11 would make an appearance. When Batzinger's videos got posted on YouTube, the chat was never attached, so she had no way of knowing what got said except for his occasional on-screen references to the chat.

She tried to imagine the three of them - Seb, Connor and Paige... jeez, they really were kids, she couldn't believe they were all hanging on the same words now -- huddled in front of a computer in a dark suburban basement. Tucked behind a carpeted column. Their shoulders touching in one long row as they watched.

She had a hunch that the small one, Seb, could potentially do something like that, like jumping into the chat, charging ahead blindly. Or maybe it'd be Connor? She couldn't tell, he was sometimes all over the place and even a bit stupid about things, she figured.

Among themselves, Jimmy and Betty quickly agreed that it wouldn't make sense to participate with comments. At least not yet. They'd not quite exhausted all other avenues of investigation.

Thus, neither of them had signed in to the streaming site to watch. Their GoVidGo accounts lay dormant (she wasn't even sure she could remember her password.)

Instead, they vowed to just check in with the chat every once in awhile. They were just going to observe, at least for this one day more.

Batzinger kept being Batzinger. If anything, he seemed lighter, by a bit.

"Right, so... building time with Batzinger...."

A city spawned out before them, as Batzinger tumbled forward with the camera, buildings and cars and people walking. Shiny and then taller and then covered in foreign



words. Elevated trains ran like in a toy store display. A stadium, ringed with parkland, rose next to an overpass. A whole district of greenhouses shone in the fake sun.

“And today with Batzinger Builds is going to focus on what I was getting started on last time. With the marina,” he said as the face in the corner of the screen. The rising game music drowned out his words a bit. “If you remember, we’re going to call it, The Marina Del Batzinger. So I hope that’s what you’re here for. And I’m sorry if it isn’t.”

He looked up.

“I’m doing my best here...”

She detected bitterness creeping in as he finished.

Then, squinting her eyes to peer into the little square floating where Washington state would be on a USA map, Betty started to notice something else. The darkness of his little home in the corner of her screen had eased as the GoVidGo program began subtly evening out the picture.

Starring at it more, she was pretty sure that Jimmy would see it too.

But still, she un-squinted and blinked her eyes, stoong up and approached the screen. She blinked some more, then she squinted again with deeper concentration.

At that point, it was clear. She felt no doubt that Seb, Connor and Paige would notice, at least one of them. After a little bit, anyone paying attention would, but you probably wouldn’t if you weren’t.

“Uh, so, ok...” Betty finally said to Jimmy. It was louder than she intended as she again broke the silence that she hadn’t noticed in their apartment.

“What?”

“So, you see where he is? That’s his room.”

“His room? Right...”

“No I mean his *room* room...”

“So, his room?”

“Right but... no, where he did the earlier videos from, most of the videos. I mean the kid’s actual in-real-life room.”

“Ah...”

“Seriously there was the clear shift to a new filming space, right? And this is what it shifted from during the last few videos.”

“Seriously: Ahh...” Jimmy said, standing up, up as well. “It looks like that, doesn’t it, huh?”

“To me, it does. Clearly. I mean, most clearly obviously.”

“Do you think that it could be an old stream? Not that that wouldn’t be weird, too. But something he’s just putting up now.”

“Doesn’t look like it but maybe?”

The screen blinked a couple of times, moaning with his groaning. They turned back to watch.

The game was glitching as Batzinger loaded up a particularly dense part of the city. Reality pixelated as the machine on his end stirred its fans into action.

Batzinger was explaining how he’d realized, after playing the game for awhile, that such glitching often meant that he needed to turn off a district’s political polling. At least until needed. Which actually seemed like a good trick; it was like turning off religion points in KDO when playing with a slow connection.

Finally, Batzinger ran his hand through his hair and then stroked the tips of his mustache. He looked to the side and then shook his head. His travels through the city picked up speed.

Betty and Jimmy decided to keep watching.

“So, by the way, did I tell you guys that I’m really excited for something? It’s to watch X-Men: Generations, ok? It’s probably not going to be as good as last one, sure. But I didn’t even start to realize how good that was until I watched it, like, three times. I’m definitely I’m going to watch this one at least that many.”

He paused, tilting his head up. Outside Betty and Jimmy’s apartment, there was shouting, like a fight was going to start, but it died down quickly.

“I mean, definitely, in the theater. Duh. Watch it in the theater, right? Sorry. It’s seriously better on a big screen. Get popcorn, lots of butter, and soda. I’m going this weekend with some friends but whatever, I’d go by myself if I needed to...”

The movie was indeed coming out that weekend, Betty thought. It was weird Batzinger was excited for it because everyone hated the last one. She’d seen a commercial for *X-Men: G* somewhere in the past few hours, hyping the opening. But she’d also seen a bunch of mediocre reviews.

Betty looked to her roommate, who obviously wasn’t quite the geek that she was, but still hung close to that label. Jimmy’s face screwed up into a sour puss.

On the screen in front of them, Batzinger continued. Jimmy finally spit out what was he thinking.

“The last X-Men movie didn’t even have any good acting with Professor Xavier and Magneto,” he noted. “No one can believe still that they picked those duds to follow in the footsteps of Stewart and Fassbender, McKellen and McAvoy. I like that they’re going to make some reference to X-Men 2099, but it looks like a turd.”

But then Batzinger started answering questions from farragogo and that\_Jersey\_kid\_\_, thanking them. Someone else mentioned in the chat something about a Kardashian that had occurred that week.

Betty saw less and less of a chance that it was recorded in the past. She could still think of a couple of ways that it might have been. But she leaned against those being likely, at least for now, and Jimmy agreed. It felt like probably they knew when, and maybe even where.

Betty’s phone buzzed with a text, sending vibrations into her thigh.

It was from Seb’s number, the number they’d given her right at their beginning. She wondered whether it’d been a great idea to give them her own number, considering how

the people calling and texting you was tracked by the government. That meant that someone also could also do it.

*U watching bz?*

*U live now?*

She held it up to Jimmy.

"It's one of them. He wants to know if we're watching," she told him, as she started texting back,

*yeah. you notice anything we should be planning attention to?*

She got the waiting dots. The three biggish circles in a long little oval at the bottom of the screen. The waiting dots that reminder her of the head of a strange little robot.

So she waited.

Turning his attention away from the comments and more fully toward the game, Batzinger rambled on from the bright screen in front of her. He was flying the camera like a drone through the downtown of the bustling city. Different city colors and amenities like wide sidewalks marked the neighborhood as tilting toward posh. They didn't stay long there.

From somewhere a state over, another text finally came:

*it looks exactly like his place now. Definitely. there's the tip of a strategy guide there on the bed. Connor threw it there.*

Betty read the text aloud, talking over Batzinger's tour of an ice skating rink on the edge of the district. In the light from the bigger screen filling the room, her phone's screen twinkled, like a lake's water first thing in the morning. Gasping alive again from darkness, it buzzed in her hand another time,

*He's home*

Barely waiting a second, she shot back,

*seems that way to us too? I watched a lot of BZ. this is inconsistent.*

She paused, feeling Jimmy's eyes on her. She had to laugh on the inside for a second. Shortly, her thumbs added,

*but why wld he be back?*

*I don't know. Do u think we're lying still?*

No, Betty said, for the first time realizing that she hadn't even earlier for some reason. *watching the same thing as you here. after watching so many his earlier videos. Like parts of 18 of them. and a couple of the recent ones twice or three times.*

*LOL that's a lot. Ok well then here we are.*

Betty watched a dairy truck driving through his city on the screen, and realizing she was craning her neck to listen for one at their window.

*It's pretty messed up, Seb's phone added.*

And so there they were, Betty thought.

She felt vaguely impressed that whatever was really going on with Batzinger, he just kept on going, doing his videos. Like clockwork, like a steampunk dishwasher...

"... And I was hoping you guys would ask me about the diamond district that we built last time. As you don't you know," he began singing. "Diamonds are a girl's best friend."

He paused. "Or so I'm told. Anyway, we can stop there because it's right around the corner from the dockyards and the dockyards are right around the corner from the marina..."

While she was just a little girl, Betty's dad had read her a story about the London dockyards. It came from a tall book with worn mushy covers, still stiff on their insides.

It was one of the few books he'd read her that she still remembered. Some pages contained artful black and white doodles for pictures; most held wide-margined blocks of large text in soft fonts.

Sure, it had some strange turns, over the course of its few pages, like the part about the chimney sweep. But it wasn't meant to be Shakespeare. It was just some *Oliver Twist* rip-off meant for pulp consumption. Drawn in broad characters and zoomed-in slices of the fake story world.

She now could never remember the point that it was trying to make. In other words, the moral of the story. But when she listened to it back then, she'd make her farther read it over and over, again and again. And ever-after she retained the visions that it had planted in her head, of rough gray piers filled with rope knots and wooden boxes.

She realized that the book was as much responsible for her visions of dockyards as *Ocarina of Time* and *the Hobbit* shaped her ideas of forests.

Betty looked down and saw no dots on her phone. Just the trail of messages, ending with,

*It's pretty messed up*

At least for now, she could not argue with that.

Almost with the voice of a tour-guide in a red vest on a double-decker bus, Batzinger was explaining all about random facts of his little city and his AI minions there,

Betty and Jimmy were just watching now as he moved deeper and deeper into the city. Betty didn't see what else they could do right then. It was like they were stuck in the back of a cab with him.

Even so, he lacked any real urgency. In fact, he occasionally stopped all the way to suss out the vital signs of a neighborhood. He'd pause and pull up a head-up display, with statistics on welfare and community in translucent white and red around the perimeter of his screen. With numbers and symbols it described what he was seeing.

Where needed, he'd do things like adding police and scheduling parades, like he was watering plants. Talking about building his citizens into a huge team, he mentioned X-Men, again, this time about how Katrina Canella was to play Mystique. He made an off-hand remark about his KDO raids being slaughter fests.

Eventually, he reached the part of the city a bit south of where he meant to be building more of the marina. Hitting the waterfront, Batzinger moved north along the shore,

displaying the rolling beauty of the sunlight on really realistic water, until arriving where his intentionally circuitous route had been taking him.

He settled into finishing laying out docks and telling stories about past gameplay with friends, both at home and on the CityRiddle servers. A switch had flipped, as it often did with him, and he entered into building mode, a trance-like state in which he slowed everything down with a calming tone.

Once his docks had enough slips to draw some boats, he turned his attention to filling out the shops on the boardwalk. And, by the time, he decided to finish, he got less done than you'd think was possible, but that was how things went.

Betty realized she'd been gripping the couch cushion for the last 40 minutes, more or less uninterrupted. Her fingers cramped as she used them to pull herself forward to listen and watch what appeared to be the last few moments of the stream.

"So anyway, all of you guys, as usual, it was great to have as always, keep striving. Come back for some more with B Z B Z 1 2 3. I'm feeling good. Hallelujah. Marina's coming along, probably will move on to something else. Give me some ideas in the comment section...."

Would he give any more hints?

The soft starting cords descending from a song off of *Epithalamium* kicked in behind him. It pulled the heartache muscles a bit.

"Anyway, I'm going to post this video later, so like it, spread it, and never regret it ... And," he said, looking up, as if trying to recall what he was forgetting, "remember to check out my buddy, StevenEven, like I mentioned last time. He's so funny. But before that down below, leave any comments you want. And next time on Batzinger Builds, I'll try to answer any questions you have, and promise to see if I can take any feasible suggestions. And, seriously don't

forget to be sure to check out my other channels for more meant-to-be-awesome videos on all sorts of stuff...”

As his stream clicked off and switched over to be replaced by a waiting card on the screen, Betty was left without what she felt to be any useful hints except the big one: about where to find Batzinger. He was home. At the address she had.

A few minutes later, with Jimmy in the bathroom and Betty still sunk back exhausted and confused on the couch, her phone rang. It was Seb.

Connor and Paige had watched it together as well, and they messaged, and they’d all reached the same conclusion, Seb told her. Batzinger was home. Which was beyond bizarre. Someone or something had taken him and then brought him back.

Otherwise Batzinger’s manner remained mostly similar to how it had always been, jocular and aware. He actually built up a fairly impressive marina, even if it needed more work, describing step by step mixed with jokes. With only maybe a hint of something amiss in his jumbling of words and paranoid twitches and tipping of his eyes up.

Betty promised to rent a car again, and come out after work the next day, and go over with them. Seb started talking about calling up their BoopBoop driver to drive him over now; she insisted that he hold off from doing that. He reluctantly agreed.

She thought over their story. Trapped in the dirt. Watching a bunch of heavysset thugs with guns. Fearing for their lives. These were the types of kids that you expect to be the younger siblings in a sitcom, the comic relief. She wondered again if it could be true. They were either telling the truth or the best liars she’d ever met.

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Sitting the next morning at her desk, Betty could barely keep her eyes open. Her lids were puffy and pink and her eyeballs were itchy. She felt a fleck of crust still stuck on tips of her right lashes as she rubbed them. If she'd put her head down flat on the desk in front of her, she'd probably fall asleep.

She'd been up all night. One problem was that she didn't disagree with Seb's terse description of how he saw the situation.

When they'd gotten off the phone, they'd all watched more Batzinger. More Batzinger playing games and rambling, and then playing games and games and rambling and rambling some more.

Jimmy eventually went to sleep. But after she'd followed him a few minutes later to her own bedroom, she'd just laid there with her phones in her hands again, with Batzinger, wondering what in the world was going on. The YouTuber that once was lost now was found, but she still felt blind as to whether she'd be having anything more to see.

When Batzinger got home, he'd be able to be found, that much was clear.

The newest stream wouldn't be posted until, so she'd gone back and once again confirmed their suspicions about the rooms in his little cube. They'd been different, clearly, and per her memory, now were back to being the same. Then, growing sleepy, she propped her head up with pillow and watched some more. Until she finally drifted away, well past the witching hour, the glow of games on her cheeks and the moody sounds of them mixing with his voice reaching her exposed ear.

Her eyelids still a bit raw from her rubbing, Betty combed her hair with her fingers. On her desk sat a large, mostly emptied ice coffee cup, drops of tan hanging on its clear insides and drops of water outside.

She was the type of tired that made her stomach hurt. She sipped the cold drink in a bid to settle it, even though

she knew that was probably not the right answer.

Breathing deeply, her imagination was delirious. Floating with buildings and fiery battles. Surfers with machine guns on huge waves, the frantic hopping of Mario through worlds.... These were all things that Batzinger played; she was so immersed that it nearly hovered before. Instead, it infected the brain.

Her visions were interrupted by a call that jangled her phone across her desk. She looked, and it turned out to be from her mother. By instinct, as she'd answered it, she converted the call to FaceTime.

Staring at her mother's shadowed face in front of her law firm's golden tan conference room, Betty mumbled an apology for not being in touch. But her mother wasn't trying to make her feel guilty. Betty forgot that they had their own lives. Her mom just wanted to check in. She had had a break at work.

Betty appreciated that her mom wanted to ramble on, to inform her of drama between two of the partners at her firm, and of Betty's grandfather's thoughts about the upcoming state election. He'd known one of the campaign managers, and felt like the man had tried to cheat Josie Johnson from becoming the first black appointee on the University of Minnesota's board of regents. She scarcely needed to remind Betty of the old man's stories about the fight.

Somehow her mom started to next ask her about whether she dating, but Betty turned the question around to make it about the marriage of one of her mom's friends, and what kind of state it was in since she'd gone back to teaching.

Her mother getting going again, falling deep into the local gossip, Betty grunted her way through the rest of the call.

Around her, people were yacking away on their phones at their desks. Each voice sounded along a distinct line

through the air. The perpetually wearied editor in charge of the pop culture, celebrity and vice stories, Denproff, coughed as he called out to one of his reporters.

Betty saw she had a missed call from Luther from Wilmington Studios. But he hadn't left a message and she didn't feel like calling back.

To her left, she heard Renaldo's speakers crackling with the sound of a deeply paranoid voice.

"And so, actually," the voice was saying, "the truth is: no, just no... Apocalypse in the Greek of the time in fact meant 'a lifting of the veil.' It was a revelatory thing. Like a trip to Universal Studios. Like a campout under a starry sky. Not a thing to be afraid of. It was a different word, different than how you hear that word used today. Apocalypse, apocalypse, apocalypse... Like it means the end of everything, like you find out that there's someone or something come to tear it all down in a bad way... like you need to be afraid of the natural evolution of the course of humankind..."

Betty scooted her chair a few feet closer to his desk, the wheels barely catching in the carpet.

Looking down, she realized that she'd brought along the golden pack of traditional gummi bears that she'd taken out from where she'd stuffed it in earlier. She folded the plastic over and rolled it a few times, and then jammed it in her pocket. She peeked in, casting a round shadow on the screen.

"...And if in reality, you fail to fear the apocalypse, but instead feel confident, do you owe that to what you believe, or what you believe because of the commercials you've watched and sponsored posts?"

An overweight man filled almost the entirety of the enlarged rectangle on Renaldo's screen. The flickering brightness cast distorted blurs of a dirty room back. He had a Yankees pennant on his wall.

"What in the world are you watching anyway?"

“What?” Renaldo said, first jolted and then startled, in two separate visual reactions.

“What are you watching now? I feel like I’m watching ‘The Matrix,’ or something.”

“Oh, yeah, hey Betty,” she tossed his head back and forth, as he lowered the volume on his speakers.

“Hey dude.”

“It’s just a guy on YouTube, a nobody, or, like, mostly a nobody. He has about twelve thousand followers. He does conspiracy videos.”

“Got it...”

“Real truther about everything, really gets excited about it, just about everything. Even truthers... yeah, he was laying into that in another post. I just stumbled upon him earlier after looking at a couple of *airbrush truth* videos. I’m sorta working on a story.”

Betty could still hear his wild lecturing, now flattened and at a lower volume. He broke up his phrases mostly only to breathe, but he had to do that a lot, she realized.

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t even know... uh... Larry... uh...”

She watched his eyes work with his right hand to drag the relevant portion of the webpage, the little black username below the video, into their vision.

“... Larry Legenda... Legendary... Larry Legendary.”

“Quite a name.”

“He used to go by FattyLarry, I think. Yeah,” he said, staring at his screen from his chair as he body shifted, guiding the item behind the glass down in front of her. “See,” he said. “FattyLarry47 uploaded a bunch of the other posts on his page.”

“I see why he changed it.”

She realized she had slid in close enough to smell air peppered with a whiff of Renaldo’s skin. It was rare that she’d get so close. “Anyway, what’s he say about truthers?”

“Oh... that most of them are actors, working for the government. He says that the real conspiracy theorists need to be ready to engage with their viewers, so that people can test them with questions. Is it a story? I don't know. It is Friday, no? Seems like something worth checking out on a Friday here.”

She felt like she heard the words, but she was having a hard time trying to fit them together like they were meant to fit together. She felt unimpressed, but by her own logic, that was mostly because she was focused so much on her distractions. She was tired already and starting to get cranky.

“Right,” she said, guessing through the haze, “that's definitely far out there.”

“Truthfully, yes? Something as far out as wackadoos as Larry deserves a post of some kind?”

She grunted.

“You know what he brought up in two videos early? The time that eight female badminton players were disqualified from the Olympics for losing matches. They were all from out east, you know, China, South Korea, Indonesia. Which was totally abusing and demeaning the sport? He brings that up as a way to say sometimes things that look like near-term losses are actually clever ploys. You know, good ole FattyLarry.”

“That's, um, interesting?” Betty responded.

“Hey, anyway, again,” he twisted his shiny head around to face her, “but talking about mysteries of the unknown: How's it going with the *The Case of the MyFace Kidnapper*, anyway? You never told me what happened there.”

She'd forgotten that she had mentioned Batzinger to Renaldo.

“Hard to say. He's still streaming so, you know, he's still alive and healthy, so that's good...”

“Who, the guy? So he's not dead? That's gotta be a good thing?”

“Yeah, like I said, but there’s been a twist.”

“A twist?”

“He’s home again, streaming from there again.”

She smiled.

“Well, honey, that is quite a twist for an abduction. So, case closed?”

Over Renaldo’s left shoulder, Betty watched Larry Legendary’s torso bobbing while his ranting continued silently.

“I guess... I don’t know, yeah? Most likely.”

“I guess, you’re right, you never know. Sometimes you don’t have anything left to follow up on, and a year later? Boom -- what you already know fits like a glove with some new information. No like a puzzle piece, into what you’re working on, like a puzzle from under the couch.”

“You think?”

“Totally. You know, if you do have that end up happening. It happened with me once back in Portugal. Totally stopped talking to this guy in the highway ministry for nine months, and then turns out the tolls on this one highway were failing to keep track of the money coming in. And, yeah, I obviously got some help figuring that out. But I was able to go back to him, Minster Gomes, and confirm it. Even if I did need to follow up and take him out for a nice dinner and a whole lot of red wine.”

On the screen, an ad video popped up, trying with sharp cuts and crisp close-ups to sell a sleek luxury car, which was being showcased driving through a computer-generated CityRiddle knock-off. The pixilation was just all wrong on the abnormally long streets and uniformly straight buildings, though.

Renaldo felt Betty’s looking, and turned to catch the end of the commercial. White print flooded the screen, listing details of the offers, and disclosures. It was poorly targeted advertising, considering how they were currently urban dwellers, unlikely to need cars.

Footsteps from hard shoes rang out, and they looked up to spy Teresa returning, now making her way past the printers. She carried a small purse and a long phone in her manicured hand, and let them just tumble onto her desk.

Betty couldn't help but noticing as she settled into her workspace that her hair looked really amazing. It called attention to itself, it was so very finely styled. She had straightened it again so it hung in long sheets. And whatever she was using for shampoo looked like it was doing impressive work, building healthy follicles and an animated bounce. And her conditioner clearly left her hair silky and smooth.

From where she was sitting, Betty watched it hovering like it was all but weightless against her co-worker's dark skin. She'd have to tell Teresa that it was looking good.

Before she knew it, meanwhile, she realized that her hand had gotten somewhat stuck in the knots in her own warm hair. She tugged it out, and it dropped it down, embarrassed.

Renaldo stepped around her and called out in the singsong from his chest that he used.

"Hey, Teresa," he waved. "You got a minute?"

She tilted back, her hair moving like a single sheet, and, after a quick breath, smiled.

"Just a moment por favor," she called back, clicking something awake on her computer with a short passcode. She licked her lips and then smacked them, then smacked them again twice more. And then she pecked out a few separate words and punctuation.

Betty poked her head toward her for Renaldo for an explanation of why he'd wanted her. But even with Teresa's eyes clearly not on them, he just held pointed to his bare wrist, signaling her to wait. She didn't love that, but she did continue to join him in turning to look away from his desk, where his computer had until recently distracted them.

At her other side they watched Teresa looking further between the screens of her phone and computer. She then dashed off what looked like an email. Her fingers flew high off the keyboard in front of her with each letter, but she seemed to be accurate with her wild communicating.

She mouse-clicked at the end with force. Then, pausing awkwardly, once again. And finally swiveled her chair in their direction.

“So, what’s up, you wanted me?” she said rising to close the small gap between.

“Hey, Teresa,” Betty said, still in something of a haze. Her day just continued wherever she was, no matter what was happening, no matter how tough she felt. “What’s up with you?”

“Just the same old, you know, chasing some stories, hanging out... But really Betty, what’s new with you? I like your blouse, by the way.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“Did you hear that two Counter-Strike players with millions of GoVidGo subscribers got unmasked as the owners of a gambling site they were promoting? Crazy, apparently tens of millions of dollars go through these types of sites. You doing anything on that?”

“What? No?” Betty said, smoothing the ruffled pink shirt that she had thrown on in the blurry morning, from the back of her closet, where she knew it would be clean. “I’m busy, actually. Been busy. Just didn’t see anything about that... Counter-Strike guys? Nah, I’ll google it, though.”

“Ok, I just thought that because you wrote about how Valve banned some high single-digit number of pro Counter-Strike players for being involved in fixing matches – you know, when you did the bios of those dudes who took a dive? — that you might be interested?”

Teresa’s memory held way more than Betty for such things, other people’s work, the details of what they wrote.



Or just an immense amount more of everything in general. And, definitely even more than Renaldo's.

"Oh, yeah, sure... It's just that I'm so busy right now, so if you want it..."

"Anyway, ahhhh, I know, right? Right? Work? Ugh... Sorry... We've all got plenty to do recently. Plenty on our plates. Like don't even get me started..."

Renaldo's eyebrows rode high on his skin-wrapped head when Teresa finally turned to face him.

"Do you know what a moment really is?" he asked.

"Do I know what a moment is?" she asked back in turn.

"Yes, a moment. A moment. Uno momento. But a moment. You asked for one. By the precise definition, a moment is ninety seconds. So if you're asking for a moment, you're asking for just a minute and a half."

"That'd be great if you weren't making that up."

"No it's true, it's medieval. That's what 'a moment' was during those times. Ninety seconds."

"Medieval...?"

"Yes, it's a true fact."

"Wait, no one really lies about the medieval?" Betty asked, cutting into his macho cattiness.

"Truly never," Renaldo responded, bouncing her sarcasm back at her. "Unless they need to." He deadpanned, "but that's really a thing, the moment thing, I don't know why you're not believing me on this."

Betty wondered whether he'd picked that up from the National Geographic channel show with Morgan Freeman about religion. He'd said that was supposed to be good. And the church and Islam and wandering Jews all over the place were around during the middle ages. Or maybe it was Larry Legendary? He seemed to be a fountain of facts as much he was a desert of wisdom.

"Great, so, anyway... so Renaldo, is that what you needed to tell me?"

“No.... Also, I wanted to ask you a question,” he greeted her in a more huskily earnest -- but still playful -- voice. “For our friend Betty here, actually. And it is: What’s the biggest story you ever had that didn’t work out at first? Like one that looked great initially but was a whole lot of nothing that you could print, and then it eventually, after a lot of time passed, finally busted out as something epic? How many times have you had one of those at this point.”

“Sure, a ton of those, let me think... Big like what exactly?”

“Typical things: Amount of senior people in some position of power that you mentioned. Or the number of laws being broken. Or money being lot or stolen. Or whatever other thing like that you that you can think of?”

“Like when I found a whistleblower who wanted to out the CEO of a tech company that I was covering for having an entire relationship with someone who wasn’t his wife?”

“Ah, that sounds like a good one. Who was she?”

“I didn’t know at first,” Teresa continued, “he didn’t either, the whistleblower. He really just had a hunch. And so it’s like... people should be allowed to have private lives, or whatever, right? Not that they should be allowed to get away with doing stupid stuff, but they also shouldn’t forced to let some snooping reporter bring it all crashing down on them for some common indiscretion?”

“Sure...”

“But then, it turned out that this woman, the other woman, or ‘mistress of ms-dos,’ which is what they called her, was the general counsel, you know the top lawyer, at another tech firm. And the one company made widgets and the other made widget fuel or something, and they ended up several months later right in the middle of a takeover negotiation.”

“That’s pretty good.”

“I thought so. Probably most fun I ever had doing this. I must have gotten eight really good stories out of it,

probably more than twenty if counted all the little items.”

Just then, Betty noticed a thin man coming up their row of desks, tilting his head inside the cubicles and looking at the numbers located on the right inside walls of each. He stopped at Teresa’s desk. He turned to face them with his bulging baggy eyes.

It was Yosef, the system administrator. She hadn’t seen him in forever. She owed him one.

“Dee-aight?”

“Oh yeahs,” Teresa said, with a hop. “Teresa. Here, sir. Thank you very much. Ding! Dee-eight.”

Renaldo made a strange motion with his hands, like he hadn’t really thought out what he was doing. Teresa, not even looking, stepped past him and away.

“Sorry guys, I had a computer issue,” she called over her shoulder. “But who doesn’t right? It’ll just be a minute.”

Looking closer, Betty recognized that Yosef was actually always younger than she remembered. Comparing him to ThumbLord’s guy wasn’t even fair. He was no real man at all, only in his early twenties, like them.

As Teresa flowed past him with perky steps to her desk, Yosef stared at them for a quarter-moment longer. Finally, he spoke.

“Heigh Behdi... Izz Yousefh”

“Hey Yosef... I know, of course, of course... You don’t want to even get me started, you’re my hero, thank you so much...”

“Evern heer bouck frum dat guyyy?” Yosef asked. “Dat guyyy I sant you da emeile foh?”

“Nah, he... or she, it could be a she... I haven’t heard back from them yet. Like I said, he hasn’t used the account in awhile.”

“Ooooh,” Renaldo said, “is this about the guy you were checking in on? With that kidnapping thing?”

“Not him exactly but, I don’t know... a clue? A source? A witness? Probably doesn’t matter now anyway. So yeah.”

“Toou bawd,” Yosef said, shrugging. “Vell, aenee thime, Behdi, aenee thime.”

He followed Teresa back to her desk.

Yosef fiddled with her computer, apparently with great success. He was nodding his head with a satisfied expression and pointing to the screen. She followed his finger and nodded her head as well.

Betty and Renaldo chatted on for a few more minutes about Suzy’s knowledge of her kidnapping story. She begged him not to say anything to her. To find another Talkersation or something, and focus on that instead.

Betty knew that she couldn’t let them get involved at this point. It would be better for her to keep her decisions from being second-guessed. She figured that they’d all be pushing her toward the police at first, and to give it up now.

But Renaldo had his Larry Legendary now, right? Teresa was probably juggling four or five great stories. Not that Betty felt jealous of that, except to the degree that she’d wished she could be as relaxed as Teresa on a much broader level.

She returned with Yosef.

“I know, I know... he could just remote into my desktop, but it always gets done so much quicker if he just comes over. And you don’t mind, right, Yosef? Anyway, what’s going on with you Betty? Yosef says you have *aun proubleem* with some mystery man and that’s why you needed that email address. Big story? I hope that’s not going to ruin your weekend. I thought maybe you were going to come to my birthday party, at Club Lounge. On seventy first street.”

Betty realized that Teresa had smoothly extracted all of the potential information that was possible from Yosef. And now, she was looking to get her in a place where she let down her defense. It was impressive how she worked a source.

“It’s just something stupid. I’m just looking for someone that used to comment on Marshmallow.”

“What? Want to ask them how they could have possibly found something you wrote to be clever.”

“No, it’s not that...”

Teresa looked to Yosef, who shrugged.

“So what is it?”

“I just really could use to find somebody. For someone else, actually, I’m not really even sure if it’s a story or not.”

“You know you can find out where anyone on the Internet is? You can track them down. People could have done it to you the last time you posted something somewhere...”

“Seriously?” asked Renaldo, rolling his eyes. “You sound like someone in need of Snopes.com.”

“No, yeah, it’s everywhere, really, if you know where to look,” Teresa said.

“What is?”

“Where someone is hiding. There’s always an IP address address. And, if you have an IP address, and they’re everywhere, you just need to dig it up on someone...”

Betty noticed that Renaldo looked a bit lost, in a way almost meant to be endearing, except she knew that she was lost.

“What’s an IP address?”

“It’s an address,” Betty began, “for your computer. Like where you’re logging in from. I don’t know what the IP stands for.”

“Internet protocol,” Teresa said. “Yosef maybe you can explain?”

“Wvat abut id?”

“About the IP address.”

“Vell, wvat abut da IP addressh?”

“Tell us, how it works. You’re the computer guy. I know my way around them a bit, but only because you have to, really, in order to do reporting. But my parents pushed me

toward pre-med, not computer science, I'm just stumbling through this stuff."

"Hald un," he said, reaching into his pocket. He tapped out a few words, waited, dragged his fingers across the glass and tapped it once more, and finally passed over his phone. After a beat, he said. "Dis wold bee eezier, I dink."

Teresa took it and immediately began reading silently.

"Yuu stooped guhys. Caunt oonderstaund me sow muuch sow loouk adt dis."

"All right," she responded. "Good idea. So it says, 'The Internet Protocol address (IP address) is a numerical label assigned to each device participant...' But, hold on, let me translate..." She paused long enough to read to swipe up twice on her way back. She remained upbeat. "So, you can totally take a URL or IP address of a website... and trace it all the way through its different routing locations.... and back to its route..."

"Yeah?"

"Just trace it all the way back like that. You just go to the start menu, run the command, and it's not hard, it's just: type CMD Trace R T and then the name of the website... It'll go through all the different routing stations it goes and bounces through and returns the IP addresses, and eventually gives you the final one..."

They nodded their heads, listening.

"There's all sorts of services online that will give you the location of that router. But, it looks like this page is from 2014, so I don't even know if any of these particular ones are still in business. But I'm sure there's similar ones."

"I don't even know of a website. Just the guy's email address."

"Vell, if dhe evern geets bouck to you, you caan yuse dat..."

"See..."

"Is in emeiles too."

“Ok, so it’s in emails too. But then what does she do?” Renaldo butted in.

Betty could feel a slightly warm breeze as his body shifted. She realized that Renaldo had been trying to be her friend recently. She hadn’t admitted it to herself before, but it’d been happening.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“You know, in order to find the actual street address of the actual person you’re looking for, you would need to subpoena the Internet service provider, basically. Which you can’t do. And they’re not going to willingly allow you to breach privacy.”

“How hard is that to crack that, or hack it or whatever?”

“Iz hard.”

“On a difficulty scale of Mario Brothers Babies to Sauron?”

“Closer to Sauron,” Renaldo offered. “And you don’t have any Samwise. I mean, it’s hard but not impossible, but you’d probably really need to be familiar with hacking to know how to do. It’s like as hard as the Sauron battle in Lord of the Rings: Adventure Island if you never played before”

“That true Yosef?”

“Jah. Hardt. Truff. Mordor hardt.”

“Ouch.”

“En da boouks, youh wuld bech steel wif Gouloum eevun.”

“Right, ok, so, there is all of that,” Teresa finally broke in back, “but at least she’ll know which town or neighborhood. If she just uses the IP address with one of those simple look-ups, that’s proven helpful to me...”

“I’m not saying it wouldn’t possibly have a bit of value. It’s just a very blunt tool. Especially knowing that someone is within this zip-code doesn’t make them easy to find. You see that?”

“I see that but...”

“Wait, how do you guys even know all this?”

Betty was surprised because she had felt like, aside from Yosef, she was the only one who did anything with computers, like nerdy, techie stuff.

But obviously real reporters, like Teresa and Renaldo, did all sorts of stuff with computers, too. Databases, research, rendezvous. Especially if they'd been around the block a few times, they'd probably know how to work with data and mine server information.

Betty suddenly really felt her youth, thinking about all the things she barely knew about.

"It's something you do," said Teresa, "when you're pulling on threads. Can come in handy. But, anyway, whatever... Ren's probably right, it's more of a long-shot thing."

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A few hours later, Betty saw Suzy drifting toward the restroom, only to stop to speak Jim Chung, the movies and music editor. After a few minutes of an animated and apparently good-natured discussion, she started drifting again. When she finally got there, Betty stood to leave for the day.

But Betty only took a few steps before Elan's back popped up in her way, its light grey blending in with the office.

She encountered his flat jacket with two shoulder blade bumps about halfway across the floor, in front of a printer, causing a jam in the traffic flow. As she started to duck her shoulder to scoot around him, Elan finally turned to face her. His brown eyes caught her like a lasso.

"Betty, hey... glad I caught you. Can you wait here for a minute? I'm walking out after this too, and I wanted to catch up about a few things. We just need to figure out something with the video ads before leaving."

He imposed without just a few words.



“It’ll only take a minute.”

“Hi Elan,” she responded, “of course.”

“Thanks Betty. Not a command at all, so just let me know if you need to leave. Just trying to keep Marshmallow afloat in the cocoa here.”

So, instead, Betty settled back on her heels to wait for him.

She knew she shouldn’t be overly worried about finding the story among the limited storylines available in her mess with the kids – she kept coming back to it needing to be something around youth’s naivety. But she wasn’t ready to explain it, not to Suzy or Elan or anyone, at least for now. Real life: It was like a whole other life.

Plus, she knew she was working toward something possibly big with Batzinger, maybe.

Look, the guy was cute, especially to a certain sort, if they were worried about ads. Maybe she’d found somebody special. And the story would be wacky, and he’d ascend to the heights of being a true blue YouTube star.

Or maybe he was already about to break out on the back of something totally unrelated, and she and Jimmy had just happened to be there. Or maybe he was a clone, or maybe they’d cloned his room. There was something there, she thought.

Betty absent-mindedly flopped her hands around in her pockets, and couldn’t believe what she found next: a Swedish Fish. Pulling it out, she found it too covered in lint and hair and debris to be brushed off and picked over completely enough before she was rejoined.

Closing his door, Elan started gliding toward her with his long strides.

As he returned to her, she was trying to remember the plot to a Falling Skies storyline. It was a television show about aliens and had snippets of historical lessons about America. The particular storyline that was she trying to recall involved an alien recreation of the character’s lost

bedroom, with his dead wife and everything safe. And he knew it.

They only walked a few steps toward the elevator before Elan was stopped. He began pumping his hand into a tall skinny sportswriter's, giving the kid a few kind words, a pat and a nod. Together, those things elicited a goofy grin and two thumbs up from the kid.

Feeling generous, Betty offered a little bow to the guy before turning to catch up with Elan.

"Good kid, that one. One of Tornissism's new hires, from some state school in the Midwest. He handled a cross-post between us and SportBuzzard. You know, they apparently got a ton of ad money to spend to build their brand. And I guess we thought some of their hipness would rub off on us. It didn't hurt that they sponsored the whole thing. I was going to tell us to push for that but he'd already nailed it."

He depressed the elevator button and it lit up in red. She half-expected him to turn and head toward some management-only elevator, hidden behind a bookshelf or painting, even though they had neither in the elevator well.

"Oh," he added, clapping his hands together, "did you see what they did with the Home-Field Advantage on SportBuzzard? They did it all on videogames, sports games. Really got the essence of the book in how they explained it, too."

"What?" She hadn't seen that. "Oh... that's weird."

"Yeah, it pretty much worked for them, I thought."

He strode forward, joining a few people from the upper floors who hugged the walls of the elevator car.

"But that's their brand. Anyway," he said, as she felt the door closing behind them, before he swiveled around to add, "you have anything else coming up that I should know about? You've been a little slow this week but I bet that's because of..."

He looked down at her, and she looked between the backs of the two heads that had boxed them in. One was

domed with sunned-brown hair and the other's hair was tucked over the shoulders of her stiff jacket. She nodded her own head repeatedly in their direction as she spoke.

"You're. Right. About. That."

He followed her glance and a grin grew on his face.

"Yeah? Right then... "

"Yeah," she said in a quiet horse voice. "I've been working on a cool story, investigating some things, investigative stuff, some mysteries," she said, pumping eyebrows at the rest of the car and hoping that she could use the excuse to obscure. "But I'm only really getting started with smelling it, flipping it over, checking it for bones. Giving it a reporter's once over. Not anywhere near parceling it out."

"Should I even ask what it's about, thematically? Or am I going to regret it? I don't need to know, but should I ask?"

Betty, half-drunk on a cocktail of sleep deprivation and adrenaline, looked at him with as much gusto as she as could muster. But she could still feel her heavy cheeks hanging blankly. She appreciated that her fatigue would at least help her hold off suspicion. Either that, or Elan was going to think that she was on drugs.

"Can you spell thematically?" she asked.

"I'm pretty sure I can. Can you use it in a sentence first?"

"Fine..." she said, looking at the red bars numbering the floors in their own little black box. High up enough on the wall to be looming down and, high enough up still in digits to reflect no immediate escape. "Well, thematically I think I'm going to be writing something about..."

She thought of the goofy boy she was tracking, with a couple of other silly boys joining the pursuit. And Paige. A cheerleader? Was that right? No, basketball. She didn't really look like she'd be good, but she didn't look like she'd be horrible at it, either. She was a bit too long in the limbs to approach sports in a coordinated way, but not too tall to trip over her own legs.

A light bell rang and looking around the tall box they were in, instead of falling into Elan's eyes, Betty saw the tony man with business suits setting out the door in front of them.

"Well," she said, "it's kind of hard to say, but it's based on something on YouTube, some vloggers. And I think you're going to like it, if it works out. Could be fun. But also, don't worry, I'm going to get some hot games soon. Give me a little time. Just real straight stuff and triple-A games-types of video, that are perfect for search engine optimization, you know ess-eee-ooo. There's a whole slate of releases starting next month for the holidays."

"YouTubers, huh? Listen, Betty, do you know who Phillippe Petit is? Does that name mean anything to you? He was very famous once. Like Kardashian big."

"Never heard of him."

"Sure you have. He's the French guy who walked a tightrope between the Twin Towers. The original Twin Towers. And went back and forth and back and forth across it."

"Oh wow."

"Yeah, and you know how he did? He practiced a lot and then just went for it."

"Oh..."

"He'd also done the Notre Dame before. The cathedral in Paris."

"Wow..."

"Yeah, anyway, so he picked something and believed he could do it. I like YouTubers, Betty, I really do. Because they stayed focused always on building their crafts like that. And you know what I want, Betty? I want you to do that, too."

He clapped her on the back as she stepped out of the building's thick glass doors and onto the sidewalk.

"Which way are you going, by the way?" he asked, looking north. "I hope I didn't delay you too much. I really only wanted to say hello," he added, in the same warm

tone. He'd been using it throughout, she realized, which spoke to the essence of his good character.

"Yeah, thanks, I'm going downtown."

"I haven't been that way in a while."

"It's not so bad."

His shoes' hard soles grinding as he turned, Elan sized her up another time and said, "Okay Betty: You being you? Keep doing it. Keep doing what you're doing as you. And let me know if you need anything."

"I will," she muttered, impressed.

"So, good? It was good catching up for me."

Even before Betty's foot hit the sidewalk going in her own direction or her mind began thinking through the successful feelings, she started wondering about her next step with her very strangely self-solved kidnapping mystery. She didn't have any obvious other abduction story.

But before she could even get too far into that, another call came from Elan behind. Looking back, she realized that he'd barely moved.

"Hey," he called. "Seriously? Be cool Betty."

"Huh?" Betty groaned back, unsure of what he meant.

But his suit's back was already facing her as he walked on into the crowd. Betty watched him for less than a moment as he disappeared around a corner.

She looked down at her phone and began moving forward.

If she would have been able to zoom out and examine the state of the people in the city...

Betty couldn't imagine it would have shown everything being as tumultuous as she felt around herself...

And she couldn't imagine it being boring, but not more exciting than being down on the streets themselves.

# Part III

## A Couple of Loons

# Chapter Nine

## Obscured His Face

To Seb, in his life, it was always: A house that you see again after some time... that's no closer to being a house that you don't know than a house that you see every day, a house that you've really seen, you know.

That was just his way, and the way he was. That was how he'd known to look on the garbage can in the water park snack bar for his keys. Once he visited somewhere, a place in real life, he felt like he knew it. He remembered it more really than anything that he'd read or watched or played, unless he'd read or watched or played that thing a ton.

Certain Mario Kart courses, for instance, probably. Or the bubble fruit game on his phone, especially during the last school year. Seeing that in his head when he closed his eyes meant that he'd never forget it.

But a real place was different. A real place didn't need to be special to stick with him. Not to be taken with him. Like it was with his uncle's house, or that tutor's that his mother had made him go to once. Or with Cordell's house, to which he'd taken Connor to exactly twice, on top of the dozen or so times he'd been there himself.

He remembered each in a series of distinct image, strung somewhat imperfectly, probably, but for the most part complete.

And, now, there they were again. Back at the Powers residence, and him taking Connor there for a second time

too. It was never a return that he'd planned to make.

He recognized the mailbox across the way and the green hair of the lawn sloping upward, now with a bit more fallen leaves scattered across it. The stone path up it was where it should be. The upper windows hung like glasses above the mouth of the door. There was still a rocking chair on the porch.

Seb checked his glowing phone, and it told him it was exactly 8:23 p.m. And yet it felt like it was past midnight. If it was midnight... would he still be there? He didn't know. All of a sudden, anything was possible.

Since they'd last had been there, Seb and Connor had both been a mess, pretty much, for the whole week. Somewhere between pretty freaked out and falling apart, like Marlon, Nemo's Dad.

Seb's classes didn't even exist for them anymore, the last few days. He didn't so much play his games with his pen while sitting, just let his hands wander, thinking about Batzinger. He answered in health class with answers for life sciences, and vice versa, confounding Mrs. Campbell and Mr. Kohn.

He'd seen Holly at recess, holding court over a gaggle of girls in a pink polo shirt, making them laugh. And, when she'd waved, he didn't even try to say hello. Just smiled from afar, as wide as he could. He missed grabbing brief moments with Holly, and Connor giving him a hard time about it, but they didn't have time for it. That was the type of the activity for when things were dreamy and relaxing.

He'd even mostly avoided his bully, Lawrence Johnson, through proper planning, somehow hashed out in his distracted head. He realized that Lawrence Johnson's gang could be sidestepped, especially if he sent even more of his time with Connor. Because Connor would make the whole experience less enjoyable for them, since Connor made even more of a scene than Seb.



Truthfully, Seb didn't have it in him to make a scene at that point. His mind was elsewhere.

When it came to his mother, he just went with that: distraction. And she mostly bought it, since that was one of his normal modes. At the dinner table that week, he'd kept his head down, and did his best to answer her questions about his schoolwork. He knew that she suspected that something was up, but was waiting for him to be ready to reveal it.

Which wouldn't be for a while. It certainly wouldn't be until he had finally made it back there at least, he thought, looking toward the home, feeling like it was looking back...

Until he finally made it back to Batzinger123's house...

The last time getting there had gotten them somewhere, for sure. But almost too far. A little mystery that they couldn't believe had suddenly become real once they stepped inside that house. And when it did, he'd put Connor and Paige in danger.

He could still feel the cold dirt in his hands outside that big empty building, chilling him, smelling it with each anxious breath. He could still hear Paige's shushing incantation.

He tried to remind himself: He was only eleven and it wasn't his fault. It couldn't be. But he still felt uncomfortable about it. At first right after, he'd felt worse. But Connor's enduring friendship soon made sure that he felt better by a little, amid Connor's own ravings about the situation, who he needed someone to share with.

Still, Seb couldn't stop himself from regretting some of his decisions. They'd dodged the worst outcome. But he'd almost got all of them killed, maybe even, by pushing them forward at each step. Which was the opposite of his normal inclination. He figured his mom would flip, let alone Connor and Paige's parents.

And, yet... and yet, there he was doing it with Connor again.

This time, however, something was different. Betty Van Buren was at their side. Or, more accurately, standing off by herself with her vision focused elsewhere. But she was there, so that he wouldn't be the one leading Connor down the path alone.

Seb watched her examining the house and the yard, running her dark eyes from side to side, never resting them for too long on one frame. He caught her checking out the side of the house, one of those tucked away places that no one ever went in a year.

She tugged on the jean jacket that she was wearing over a simple gray shirt. White sneakers poked out from under her. A little spiral notebook stuck out of her rear pocket.

Studying the sandy tones of Betty's face while she was studying the residence, Seb could tell that she was thinking, if not exactly what she was thinking about. He liked that.

He realized that she'd looked and listened and asked questions as much as talked about herself when they'd met at the mall. She also looked down at her phone a fair amount.

He liked her, in fact. There was something about her voice that was recognizable, something about her temples that conveyed being interested, something about her short mermaid shape that was reassuring.

She was smaller than Seb remembered, standing there with Connor and him, not more than a foot above them. She'd pulled the driver's seat forward by as much as it could go, hugging the wheel into her chest.

Her friend, Jimmy, a brash Asian guy whose comparable smallness may have contributed to Seb's earlier misperception of Betty, hadn't been able to join them. That was apparently because his play - Off-Broadway -- was finally opening in two days, if what Betty had said was true.

Jimmy did enlist on their mission for few seconds, over the phone, during their drive over from Connor's house after Betty had picked them up. He gave a pixelated "thumbs up"

to everybody from backstage at the theater, and wished for them to break their legs, or something similarly gruesome. He actually talked their ear off a good five minutes of the ride.

When finally he'd hung up, a noticeable amount of energy left the car, as if a balloon that filled the space had been thumbed down. And then, Connor finally stuck his head into the front seat, then the calm let up as he started asking about her work and gaming habits and things like that.

His sister had really wanted to come but ended up needing to cover for the boys, they'd all agreed.

Their parents, Howard and Margaret, were going away for their annual weekend trip to upstate New York, where they'd met while in college. The tradition with their own friends from those years of their lives -- who they'd rarely got to see otherwise anymore -- had lived for almost a decade.

The kids couldn't just leave the Tippet house empty, though. Especially Paige, since she knew she'd be held responsible.

If Seb's own mother couldn't get in touch with him for some reason, if something unexpected came up, first thing she'd do is go over there. And, Connor and Paige would similarly be screwed if for some reason their parents came back early and no one was there, or decided to cancel their jaunt before they even reached their destination.

The weather included a low-pressure front, it sounded like, so a lot of rain was certainly possible. Not that the weathermen are always right.

The truth of the matter, at the same time, was that Seb both wished that Paige was there, and he didn't. He knew that for all her bravery, she didn't like being brave. She'd do it for them, but she didn't like it. Connor, at least, he knew would find satisfying his loyalty to be enjoyable.

Pacing, Betty asked them to go over what the place looked inside, one more time, before she laid a foot on the

stones leading up the lawn. So Seb explained, walking her through the house of his memory:

The front doorway, then little living room, then hallway and kitchen. His parent's bedrooms and the other rooms upstairs had been so empty. And then there was door in the kitchen that led down to the cool basement.

To be helpful, Connor paced off the approximate size of Batzinger's room in the street. And then, with a small hop, the computer's location within it, and swirled his arms around the show the size of the desk. He pointed to where the bed and dressers would be. Seb didn't make a big deal about the dimensions being not quite right.

He struggled with what he wanted to say next. Feeling his phone in his pocket, he wished he could just sink back into a bubble game. Needing to set expectations right, however, Seb decided to tell Betty again about how Lisa Powers was acting recently, in more detail.

In a quiet voice, he recounted across the asphalt of the road about her sudden reticence to talk with them about her cousin. It wasn't that Lisa suspected them of anything in particular, they believed, so much as she'd been gently warned against talking about Batzinger in general, and maybe realized they were among the main classmates who were likely to bring him up.

Moreover, Lisa didn't seem anxious or upset to them -- not like they, Seb and Connor and Paige, all were if anyone had paid attention -- so she probably didn't really know anything much about what was going on. It wasn't that Seb, Connor and Paige knew all that much themselves, but they were far from blissfully unaware.

The two boys wouldn't be there otherwise.

Things were different ever since they'd somehow, as a bunch of kids, convinced their app-ordered driver to take them all over town and slightly beyond. On Google Maps, it was barely a journey, but that the night had been seriously messed up.

Remembering his steady stare wrinkling his forehead from the front seat, Seb almost felt bad that John wasn't there. At this point, though, Seb would have felt worse, if they'd caused John to get tangled up with those thugs again. Looking back, it'd been too close a call for the stoic driver as well, Seb knew.

It wasn't a game that he was playing, Seb thought, as the glow of the moonlight made pockets of the sidewalk around the court look like levels in a platform game, like *Ducktails*.

"Well, I hope my accommodation of your ride needs tonight was indeed sufficient?" Betty said, delivering in her regular soft grainy voice the normally accented phrasing. "You were comfortable? Yes?"

"It was ok," Connor replied, "but I hope you don't you really expect us to tip you? You don't think she's worth it, do you Seb? I hope not..."

Betty rolled her eyes and tugged on her pants. Seb could tell that, like him, Betty had grown used to Connor's babbling.

"You know what I hope? You better hope that my work pays for this is what I hope. My expense budget is out of control, I think I'm peaking on it. Suzy, my boss, she's going to hit the roof after tonight."

"Is she strict?"

"Actually..." Betty said, appearing to think about it, "she's not strict, but more persistent. Unless you distract her. My problem is: There's going to be a lot to distract her about."

"Sounds like my mom."

"Yeah? It's only like my mother if she wasn't too busy to even crack down on me. "

"Well anyway, I'm really glad you could come. Thank you. I don't know if we could have made it without you... You're like our Han Solo."

"I thought you said last night, on the phone, you were heading over then? Like you 'couldn't wait a day'?" Betty said, with a faux whine that he still recognized. "I really

thought you were going to do it. You were worrying me there, kid, and I barely even know you.”

“Well, he’s definitely broke,” Connor said. “So there’s that.”

“Long past broke,” Seb acknowledged, in a grown-up way. “You know, I don’t know how you grown-ups do it with money, right? Like you need so much to do any of that. A couple of BoopBoop trips and we had no money at all, and we’d dug up some we probably shouldn’t have even know about, let alone touched.”

“So that does have something to do with it, in terms of coming over,” Connor added.

“But really, I totally didn’t know before,” Seb said, feeling suddenly bashful. “How hard it is to not be broke. To be without a single nickel.”

“Paige isn’t,” Connor followed up saying a little too loudly over the hush of suburbs at night, “but she almost is. And she actually needs more dough too. You know, for teenage things, and girl things, and everything.”

“So there’s that, as well,” Seb agreed.

With all four of their eyes examining Betty, Seb felt like they were a couple of street urchins begging for change. They more just looked like two little boys, with the sheen of barely broken-in jackets and Target-bought jeans, and without any patches made out of rags.

Still, it seemed like they should have been holding out a pair of tin cups. Busking, they called it in England, Seb had learned at some point, maybe from a stealth game set over there.

“Don’t look at me,” Betty said, stretching out her knuckles. “If it wasn’t for the games I get for free to review, I’d basically never get anything special for myself. Aside from coffee and a couple of comics maybe once a month, maybe.”

“Sheesh. I thought growing up would be better.”

“Today, it all worked out, though, pretty much, huh? Since my Marshmallow credit card got us here? I think that should count for something, right? I may be poor in the bank but not in spirit or profession.”

As Seb’s mouth opened to ask what the young woman actually expected to find at Batzinger’s house, his friend jumped in, changing the subject.

“No, that’s cool, honestly, Betty, totally cool. I was just trying to explain it. But by the way Betty, you know,” Connor asked her, “can I ask you something?”

Connor looked up the street as he talked, where it was lined with a parade route of tall trees. Seb was pretty sure he was about to smirk, since he knew how to recognize that.

“So... I’m sorry but, have you heard anything about CityRiddle 2? The game? I know it’s supposed to come out soon, right? Like what do you know about it, is it going to be any good? Since that’s like what you do, right?”

Which Seb thought was funny, because the same question had popped up in his own mind a few days back. When they’d last talked with her on the phone earlier that day, in fact, she’d mumbled something about how a whole bunch of games would be coming out for the holidays. She’d need to sort through them and figure out which ones she should be writing about.

As Connor looked to Seb, it was with a look of common understanding between the friends, and Seb nodded back. Betty appeared to appreciate their question, or rather expected it.

“I should, right?”

“Yeah. Right?”

“And I do, you know?” she said. “You know, I *know*.”

“Ok, so why aren’t you telling me all about it right now. Hashtag ASAP?”

“Because there’s nothing really to tell you. What I know is... I just know when it’s coming out. But they want to keep it a bit of secret in case they can’t hit the release date. The

pre-orders are there either way. I haven't seen anything more of it, the actual gameplay, though, than the same trailers as you."

"Really? I would have thought differently."

"It's a big company, the publisher."

"And?"

"We're Marshmallow. Not Kotaku or Conan O'Brien or something big like that. A vlogger like Batzinger is more likely to get something early than me. But don't even get it me started on tha. You're not old enough to hear the things I would say about my boss, Elan's questions about us getting an embargoed copy..."

"So it's close to being released?"

"Honestly, I can't say. So please stop asking. But yes. And don't ask me for an exact date."

And as she glanced up the grassy hill, Seb could tell Betty was remembering again where they were and shifted her attention back to why. Her back stiffen slightly, and Seb could see her neck tense. He wondered if she would make him knock first?

He noticed Connor was poised to ask another question, and then another and then another... Seb could understand that he needed to head off the digression.

"So, Betty... ?" he asked, looking with her toward the house. "What do you think anyway...?"

"So, we should go up there?" she responded without turning to him. "Don't you think?"

"Sure," he quickly agreed. "Of course."

As the group took their first steps away from the blue station wagon that she'd rented for the day, Connor muttered sarcastically.

"Ladies first!"

Arriving with fewer than two-dozen steps through the lawn to the door, they looked between themselves. They felt prepared for anything or nothing.



Seb recognized essentially everything about that entrance. Even the color of the lighting from the bulb above, casting a sickly tannish aura. Because a door is a door, he held out his arm to stop Connor, who surprisingly hadn't yet even flinched.

Instead, Betty stepped forward first.

Seb had been silently hoping that she'd take them to places, lead them places that she had never been. He was in need of that? Maybe he wasn't a leader? Only... If something went wrong, her semi-recognizable face could be considered in just as much need of protection of his own.

She depressed the doorbell, its orange glow disappearing and then knocked on the door, unleashing three medium-hard raps with her knuckles. Seb caught her studying the rocking chair as she let the screen fall closed.

She slinked back so that each of them stood beside her. As she towered above them like a gold medalist, Seb remembered to breath.

"Let's see if anyone is even here before you guys try to pick the lock again," she said, rubbing her hands softly in front of her. "Or whatever it is you two super-sleuths do."

As she fell silent, the sound of trees brushing against each other in the wind hushed the neighborhood. The scent of turning leaves shrunk the entire development for Seb, as did being under the moon, and seeing its halo against the clouds. It made it seem not so far from his own home, like he could run there and hide if he needed.

And, just as Seb sensed Connor titling forward, from across the body of the friendly young woman between them, the door opened and a dark figure appeared.

Mesh obscured his face, and the brightness of his white framing. Yet, there was a figure there, in the same shape as them, a taller bowling pin silhouette.

As the screen door swung open and he emerged from the shadows, they saw the familiar black hair and bushy mustache across his upper lip. His face looked like it should,

though his eyes were perhaps too wide, almost bugging out. He was also probably smaller than Seb had imagined? But bigger too? Definitely thinner in his arms, and stiffer...

"Hi," Betty said. "Evening to you..."

The teenage boy who stepped out said nothing. He looked down the row of them, starting and ending with Seb. Seb over-arched his back as Batwinger's blood-shot eyes first assessed him through his glasses, and then settled into a more appropriate posture.

He looked past them, like he was searching for the presence of others in the tree line. He jerked his eyes back at them. Looking down, Seb noticed Batzinger subtly bobbing from foot to foot, a trait that at least seemed rooted in his character.

Batzinger then let them stand in silence for a moment more before finally clearing his throat to talk. As his Adam's apple bobbed, it suddenly got windier. He started making grunting noises and shook his head, repeatedly.

"A little early for trick-or-treating isn't it?"

"Trick or tricking?" Betty asked, following his eyes over her shoulder to the trees.

"Yeah, like, what's the deal? Trick-or-treating, Christmas caroling, Girl Scout cookies? Who are you guys? You trying to do something here or not?"

Seb appreciated that the vlogger was wearing something of a real serious scowl, and so he would be acting differently. But this wasn't really him at all. His character was not Batzinger. It lacked positive energy, like someone who was just done with everything. What had Lisa said...

"We're not trying to do anything," Betty responded. "We're just here because we wanted to talk to you, Batzinger... or Mr. Batzinger or whatever's appropriate..."

"It's Mike. I'm Mike, or Michael. But call me whatever."

"Thank you!"

"But... just so you know, I'm really not in the mood for fans right now, so..."

“Oh, ok, Mike, look, I’m not just a fan exactly, though I am a fan. Obviously. See, my name is Betty, so... nice to meet you. And I’m a writer for Marshmallow.com, and these...”

She took a peak at Connor, and her gaze hanging on him for a second or two. She stopped talking, and turned back with her finger in the arm, and nothing to say. Seb could tell what she was realizing in her head, turning over how they’d stupidly failed: to not even think of a cover for their little group.

Were he and Connor her little brothers, or was she their babysitter, or...?

All of the thinking and conspiracy theories devoted, and none of them had thought of a cover story? Seb was shocked at their stupidity. They knew why Betty was there but not themselves. If you’re going to just waltz into an FBI office, he thought, maybe you should have come up with a story about why you’re there, if you’re really there to hack it... or that type of thing.

“... So these?” she finally said, her hand hovering over them. “These are my interns.”

“Come again?”

“At Marshmallow.com. Where I work? Like I was saying, Mike, as a writer at Marshmallow.com... it’s an online magazine? A blog? You may have heard of us? At Marshmallow, my beat, the thing that I focus on there, is video games. It’s a pretty popular website. We publish A TON that goes viral..”

“Ok, yeah, yeah, I think of I’ve heard of that. Sure. But what does that have to do with me? The most important thing...actually, if you don’t mind,” he said, bowing his head in a polite gesture meant to tell them to buzz off, “this actually isn’t a great time...”

“Well,” she started, “we’re all really into video games. I I – just give me a minute -- I do articles and videos about them. And these kids are big into games too. And I noticed...”

I mean all of us noticed... some anomalies in your recent videos, Batzi.. Mike.. and we wanted to talk about it with you..."

As he recoiled, Seb realized that would be the moment where they lost him. What little opening that he'd left for really talking to him, Seb could tell was gone by the pinched eyebrows now on his face.

Really, they'd never been friends with him. What a beautiful thing had never really been all right; it was all a myth that he would greet them as bosom buddies, like they'd actually known each other. She thought she knew what he would say next but he wouldn't be just spitting out catchphrases.

Seb knew that but he couldn't really know that. They'd spent soooo much time together.

Presently, Batzinger stroked his mustache twice, before speaking slowly and in a clipped tone.

"That's enough ok? I think you need to go now. I don't want to hear about any anomalies, from you here, ok? I don't have anything to say about anything like that. Just leave me alone. Please. I don't care what kind of magazine you're from, just please..."

"But Batzinger..." Connor blurted out, startling Mike.

"No really..." he said loudly, turning to Betty. "You've got to leave. And who are these kids anyway? They're obviously not old enough to be interns. Not unless you're getting your interns at the puppy mill... Actually, though, I think I recognize him maybe," he said, looking at Connor, "from our school. But I don't know if the skinny one is ok or not, or from wherever, ISIS or something. I mean, who knows, maybe you're from ISIS. He looks sort of shady and you're with him."

Betty's dark skin began to blush beside him. She let out a sound like a giggle. Seb felt an instinct to push her, but the vision transformed into him catching her as she fainted back.

Blinking, he realized that they'd kept the front door open so far, and hence Batzinger was still there.

Betty's feint a vulnerability continued.

"I'm sorry, Mike. No, they're not my interns. But I am who I said, just a writer. And they have been really helping me. Seriously, in a way I've felt like they've been learning something. But, listen Mike, we're nice people, and we came all the way over here, so can I just ask you a couple of questions? Pretty please? Would you tell me about whatever it is that's happening with you, your story, so we can help you."

He looked again toward the distance as he spoke. Seb turned and it no longer looked a lot like platform game levels.

"I don't want to talk to you about anything, ok? For one thing, there's nothing to talk about, honestly. And, I don't trust the press."

"I do want to talk to you though, Mike. And you can trust me."

"And as for us..." Seb said, "we're not interns, we're just big fans who offered Betty here some help finding you here when she found us online. We're from around here. I used to live over here actually, on Poplar Street. But you're obviously ok, which is what we told her to expect. So, if it's ok, we'd love to check out where you film and everything. Just a peak."

For some reason, he felt that if he could show Betty that they'd really been there, she would have to agree and he would have to agree...

"Where I film? What do you mean?"

"Yeah. I guess I mean, do you mind if we take a look around?"

Mike looked angrier than he had yet, and Seb knew he shouldn't be bewildered by his cross expression.

"LOOK AROUND? YEYS," he said loudly. "YES I DO MIND."

Seb could feel Betty clenching her muscles beside him. She likely hadn't expected Connor and him to inject themselves into the conversation with it going so poorly. Seb felt like they had the right, but it didn't seem to be helping.

"But Batzinger," Connor responded, in a desperate voice, "we know you weren't here. You weren't."

"Ok, you listen to me, ok, kids?" Batzinger continued. "I'm here, and I've been here doing my thing, and I clearly don't have any idea what you're talking about... about any anomalies or abnormalities... or any of that, so please..."

"Seriously, Batzinger...?"

"Listen guys," he said, "and you too, Miss... ?"

"Van Buren."

"And you too, Miss Van Buren. Well, Miss Van Buren, actually Miss Betty Van Buren, since you're the adult here I hope you can appreciate what I'm telling you, especially: I don't want to talk to the press, and I don't want some kids mucking around with my stuff. Not right now... Honestly. So leave. Now. And if you're ever thinking of coming back here, honestly, just think that it's not going to be good." There was something sinister about his face as he said this. "Okay? I'm warning you. Whatever it is that you're imaging, you must have been imaging it..."

"But Mike, we need to talk with you. Just talk..."

"And, that's fine but no, no, ma'am, please just email me tomorrow or something. Really, my family has had some things going on, and I don't want my parents getting any more upset."

He dropped into a crouch and turned to Seb and Connor, inhaling deeply and collecting himself.

"So, I'm sorry kids, I'm always super-psyched to see my super-fans but I'm going to have to get back to you on a better day." He paused. "And really, don't take everything so literally."

As his bishop-shaped body drifted toward the door, Seb felt panicked. Like the clock on a level, or a timed course, was ticking down toward zero from under a minute. No matter how much he mashed down on the buttons, some reckless last-ditch move would be needed.

"Mike, we know," he blurted out as Batzinger's arm reached in front of him. "We saw everything. The guys, how they had guns, and literally grabbed you..."

"We saw them ourselves, really. In person," Connor added. "Taking a girl and her family. At one of the unfinished office parks."

"Yeah, we saw them," Seb said. "They looked so nice and so scared."

Batzinger hesitated, his dirty sneakers digging into the porch. They couldn't see his face, but his body seemed to sag, as he paused there in front of them. For some reason, right then, Seb worried that Connor would say something about his sister, just stupidly or whatever.

"We went in your house, Mike, looking for Batzinger," Seb continued, knowing that they didn't have much of a chance of changing Batzinger's mind as he turned and looked once more over their shoulders.

"And... I don't know what to say... No one was there? And then, a few days later, we saw your parents here, sitting and looking beyond depressed. But you were somewhere else, Mike, and yet you were still doing videos. We watched them, Mike. We know you weren't here. We want to help you."

The young man's hand fell from the doorknob. Seb imagined it would still be cool to the touch. He addressed them again.

"You guys say you saw all of those things, but you couldn't have seen anything because there was nothing to see." He lowered his voice into a growl. "So please, really, I need you to leave now."

Seb watched his eyes narrow further as he looked to Betty and begged her response.

"I honestly don't know where you found these kids, but they sound fairly disturbed. Nice kids, I'm guessing, but very active imaginations..."

"Maybe they know something Mike? That's how I need to think about it," Betty offered. "They're selling me a story, sure, but something definitely seems not right with you. Maybe we could help, Mike? Maybe, no?"

"Just go."

"What if we told the police finally?" Seb asked, putting down his last chip on the board.

"WHAT? WHAT IS WRONG YOU WITH?"

He was now shouting at them, loud enough for a dog to bark, and Seb could tell that was that. "SERIOUSLY!?! THE POLICE!?!?"

He started pacing.

"Listen, ok? Get it into your thick little skulls: I don't know what you're talking about it, there's nothing to talk about, and so you absolutely just need to leave, and to leave me alone. Just forget about it, ok? Give me that, if you're fans, if that's not just part of your disguise."

Seb tried to avert his eyes when his hero's looked toward him.

"Of course, 'cause, if instead you go to the police... I'm going to harbor a real grudge with you, which is the last thing I need right now."

He eyes softened, from a mean desperate glare, to something more of a hint of the pathetic. "For chissakes, give me a freaking break, already. I mean, more importantly, other people won't be happy about it, so please go on. Ain't nobody have time for this..."

Batzinger's silly mustache grew dangerous below his buggy eyes. Seb saw it wiggle as he ran his hand through his hair. A weariness poured out of his stare.

"Look at me, Betty," he added. "Please. I'm counting on you to just drop this. Take just these kids home. Take a little time off? Don't tell anyone." He pushed his hand, palm out,



at them. "If you enjoy, my videos, give them a like, subscribe, or tell your friends, and all that. Share them. But please don't be going and mentioning whatever insane plot you think I'm part of to anyone, especially not the police, or it'll turn out to be not true, and I'll report you guys and you'll lose your accounts and maybe even your jobs."

"Poking into things is what I do. This is my job," Betty responded. "And I'm sorry, I had to ask about these things. I doesn't mean I'll be

"Ok, yes, then, just please go. If you think you know anything, know that it's just a bad time for you to be here, so leave. Just say, 'Forget this' and get out of here. And good for you getting over here."

And before any of the three of them could say another word, he'd slammed shut the door of his house. They waited, slightly dumbfounded and half-expecting him to at least peek out from the window.

When he never returned, Seb reached into his pocket and drew out the boy's mangled phone. He stepped to the door, then kneeled down and placed the phone there.

He turned back and led them back down the hard path laid amid the blades of grass. He knew there was no point trying again with Batzinger right then. Perhaps knowing that they'd left the phone and proven trustworthy in their discretion, he'd be more willing to open up.

For his part, Seb felt unburdened a bit as looked back over his shoulder before squatting slightly into the waiting car. He saw Betty in the driver's seat, playing with her own phone. He took his own phone out and traced the outer rim of its case.

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On their way back to the Tippet's, Seb played with the radio dial. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, owing to his lack of knowledge about that part of culture. Popular

music. A salsa tune crossed with hip-hop opened up to a woman's high-pitched pleading, which Seb thought sounded nice, so he left it on.

About halfway back, a convenience store sitting in a patch of brightness came up on the passenger side of the road, which they first spied, then remarked upon and finally stopped at. As Betty dropped the car into the parking lot, a pair of gas pumps sat empty and another pair was getting used.

A white-tinted light fanned out from above the island in the middle of the small expanse of concrete, the primary colors of a third-tiered corporate brand ran across the signage.

The special smell of gasoline greeted them outside the car's doors. And once in the little shop, the dirty floors made clacking sounds as their shoes broke free from the stick with each step. A faint sour bleach-iness somehow still filled their nostrils. Seb led the others in.

Sitting behind the counter on a high stool, a man about the age to be in college, or to have dropped out. He acknowledged Seb by looking up from his phone and studied him, and then, without speaking, returned to whatever it was that he was doing with his long thumbs.

The music on the radio -- a fuzzy rock station playing an early Kryptic Bagel track -- struck Seb as probably this guy's choice. Seb signaled for the other two to pass without drawing his attention, with no particular reason for the sneaking except to avoid embarrassment. They obliged.

"Seriously, though," Connor said, in a hushed voice once Seb and he reached the back of the small store crowded with merchandise in boxes and tins and glass, "that was pretty sick. That he was there. And we were, like, arguing with him."

"Ha," Seb chuckled, as quietly as he could. It was true. "You don't do that everyday, right? Meet your hero and fear for your life in the exact same moment."

"I think we would have been more freaked out if we weren't already freaked out," Connor responded.

"I was freaked out," Seb admitted.

Betty joined them by the drink coolers, carrying something in a clear and golden vacuum-sealed bag. A rainbow of colors was staring back at them through the fogged glass. So many choices, a kaleidoscope effect.

"I know I said I was broke too, but get anything you want," she said from behind them. "It's on me."

Connor opened the door, and they each grabbed a drink from one of the frigid shelves. Connor first brought out a Yoo-hoo, before Seb's hand extracted a strawberry-banana orange juice. It was in a square shape with a peaked top that unfolded to a side spout.

Betty brushed past them to grab a little iced-coffee drink, and then followed them back down the short aisle.

"Like maybe, just maybe," she said, again from behind, "if it was someone we knew we could tell the police about it. He seemed pretty freaked out by that. Personally, I don't know how we're supposed to keep our composure enough at this point to not say anything? What's his play with that?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's he trying to do with that, by telling us to never tell the police, if he thinks we know anything?"

"Maybe he knows that? Maybe he wants it?"

"Nah, he looked really scared of the possibility. I don't think that he really had a plan; he wasn't really making sense. I'm thinking he's just hoping we'll give up on it. He wasn't worried about us. He was already worried when we got there. It was probably pretty surreal for him."

"Yeah," Connor said. "Me too."

"He's stuck in something and we were just the latest side mission. But I won't be surprised if he does return our emails after I send them. Just be prepared for them to be perfectly crafted by someone."

“I don’t get it...” Seb began to say, totally unsure of himself.

“Well, no me neither,” she responded.

“Me neither,” Connor added.

“I guess, all we can do now,” Betty said as she stepped to the front counter and began putting their drinks on it, “is to keep our eyes on Mike Powers, both online and via whatever connections you have with him in school. Like your friend, who’s his cousin; is she a Powers? I’m gonna keep looking for anything having to do with him or his parents. Anything Powers-related or Powers relevant, I’ll set up a whole bunch of alerts all across the Internet... I’ll scan for these ‘Powers’ everywhere...”

“Powers?” the guy behind the cash register asked, staring down at them. “You guys talking about *the* Powers?”

“What?” Betty asked.

“The Powers family, over on Tulip Street?”

“Yeah,” she said, arching her eyebrows and leaning in. “Them? Why? You know something about them?”

“I live around the corner from them. Mulberry. Our families, like, know each other. And they come in here all time. There’s, not mine, I mean. Though mine do too.”

Seb happened to know that was between Poplar and Batzinger’s house.

“So, you know them, Mike Powers and his family?”

“I guess. I sometimes see Mike’s car driving around, too.”

“You know about...” Connor grunted. He paused and then in a lower voice continued, “You know...” clear throat “like him as Batzinger, and whatever and whatever he does with streaming?”

“Sure... like YouTube...”

“You watch him?”

“I more prefer Tobucus or MisssterMassster or someone like that.”

Seb could tell Betty was being slow with the guy on purpose. He wasn’t quite sure why. But, with the opening of

any particular shell, there could be a turtle.

“What about, though, man: Have you? Ever watched Batzinger123?”

“Are you guys going to talk all night?” the girl behind them said in a whiny voice, over the shrill burble of a fashion vlogger on her phone.

“Just a minute,” Betty said, raising her voice over the din as a new alternative rock song gained volume as it started in the air.

Seb ignored them all, waiting on the employee’s next words.

“So yeah, I’ve watched him, like I said, I know him, sort of. And I thought all the gamers around here did, basically. I like games, right? And the Powers live around the corner for me, right? So, yeah, you know, his parents...I guess I saw them here the other night, like two or three nights ago, even. They seemed pretty down about something. I only remember because they were so down on themselves... like, really, she totally dropped this bag of chips she was holding, and got super upset. And then he got a really red face with a strange look on it. But he helped her pick it up. And then she bought some cigarettes, Virginia Slims, I think. I didn’t even know she smoked.”

“Do you remember what else they bought? Did they say anything interesting?”

“Nah, I don’t know? Beef jerky? Coffee? A couple of Danishes? Maybe a million people come in here every week. I’m surprised to remember anything at all, especially considering...”

“Honestly,” the girl said loudly, sticking her thumb over her shoulder, “I’m not even the only one waiting now.”

Seb saw the Hispanic man with a boy around kindergarten age standing behind her, and behind them an old purple-haired woman was approaching down the aisle toward the forming line.

He realized there would only be time for one more question, and that he needed to ask before Connor or Betty wasted it.

“... Anyway, you know, not unsurprising, considering how bad I’ve made my memory by abusing my brain.”

“You think you would remember Mike Powers coming in here recently?” Seb asked. “If he comes here a lot, I mean, that means you’ve seen him recently?”

“Nah,” the guy said, handing Betty a white slip of paper and their items in a bag. “He comes in sometimes, but, nah, I don’t think I’ve seen him around recently. But, you know little dude, what do I know? Maybe I did? You know how it is, right?”

“Thanks,” Seb said, as Betty opened the plastic bag in her hand and took out her drink.

On the way back to their car, they saw a group of four dopey guys in chains heading toward the back of the store. Seb thought one of them reminded him of Lawrence Johnson, the way he stepped tall across the pavement and towered over the others.

Seb thought about how much better it would be if the goon teams and the nerd teams and the pretty girl teams or whatever could settle their differences via Olympics, games of skill or chance. Then he remembered how a few years back he’d come up with the idea for Olympics based on religions, and how they could all let off some steam with that kind of thing.

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Laying later that night on the carpet of Connor’s room, under the poofy blanket from their parents’ bed, Seb remembered the very first time that he’d watched Batzinger. It was before he’d even really known his friend.

He remembered it clearly. He’d been stuck on a Lego video game, Lego Hook, like the movie, from the 1990s. His

mom had gotten him the game and two others for the Wii U for his sixth birthday. He couldn't figure out how to get past the banquet level.

At that point, Batzinger had been doing a fair amount of his videos on Lego video games. And his video on his walk-through on Lego Hook had turned out to be among the first videos to pop up on YouTube after Seb had applied his burgeoning reading skills to search for help.

Seb, who had gotten the Wii U from his mother for his previous birthday, immediately saw where he had gone wrong as Batzinger played through the level. He'd need to break a rock that he hadn't noticed, and get a cog that popped out to insert into something.

Batzinger was much younger than -- though to Seb, in terms of seniority in life, he was just as old -- and as he talked over the musical score from the game, much less upbeat and enthusiastic.

He didn't use a camera on his face regularly yet, not on every video, and barely made an impression on Seb over the two minutes that he'd watched him, looking for what he needed.

He'd left Batzinger frozen there and went back to the level, which he promptly advanced in, before becoming stuck, and then finally beat by easily disposing of the sharp nosed Captain Hook. Seb continued to play for a bit, by revisiting levels in search of items.

When he'd eventually returned to his tablet, the video was still there. Seb, robotically, clicked on the thumbnail of an image to Batzinger's side, a Lego game that he hadn't played before, Lego Indiana Jones 2. There was something interesting about the freeze-frame teasing him to load it, a blurry picture of a minifig in a leather jacket hopping away from a pit of snakes.

He probably would have never watched Batzinger again, or not for a lot of years, at least, if what happened next had never happened. The randomness later was what he

thought about when he thought about rare birds and second chances.

After the video ended, Seb let it jump to the next one on its own, the clock icon filling, clockwise. And, that's where the next video turned out to be Batzinger again, doing a walk-through on Lego Indiana Jones 2 as well. It was the Lao Chase, several waves of enemy vehicles with red triangles above them attacking his characters as he switched between.

And suddenly, Batzinger, or Mike, he guessed, started being really funny. Letting loose. Naming the villains before breaking their Lego bodies apart as they tumbled out of the cars. Riffing off the awfulness of the driving, and comparing it to his mom's. And saying, "That belongs in a museum," when running a rickshaw into a wall.

Hearing him that second time, Seb fell victim to his charm. He took note of the name, Batzinger123, and peaked at his playlists. He tapped subscribe, and began watching regularly the very next day. He didn't know then when he first found Batzinger -- and he still didn't know -- what the name even meant. He just started watching him without knowing that.

Seb rolled over and looked up at Connor in his bed.

His face spread out relaxed against his pillow, his sizable cheek on top hung loose, his hair wild. The boy's slow breathing seemed serene.

Seb listened to it for a brief while, following along with the slow expansion and shrinking of his blanket. If he strained his ears hard enough, he was sure he could hear over the hum of charging devices a timid wheeze at a whistle's pitch, something small caught in his nostrils.

At least he'd gotten back there, to the Tippetts, so he wouldn't be lying about that to his mother anymore. He thought about that scene from the X-Men: Generations trailer and commercials, when Deadpool says, "You think anyone saw that?"



Especially from the floor, Connor's room was fussy, bold and sloppy.

Big pictures of comic book characters, a few repeating Captain America shields across the posters and the cover of at least one of the books propped on his shelves. His alarm clock was a Ninja Turtle, and light blue stars and yellow rockets covered his blanket and sheets.

Out the window, Seb could see the thinning fingers of the clouds catching a bright reflection.

Without turning back, he cocked his ear to listen for his friend's breath, and found it again. He threaded one set of his fingers between the carpet's short fibers, picking. He knew he should just sleep because they had a lot to do the next day.

Instead, he drew out his phone and waiting for the WiFi to connect. The password was already in there. Once connected, he pulled up Twitter, with the fake account that they'd started in seeking to find out more about Player 44451. *onnoonno*.

Batzinger typically tweeted out no more than the titles of his videos with links, though he sometimes responded to other people who praised him with thanks, Seb already knew. For the past week and a half, there'd be nothing but the tweets of links to his videos.

Seb tried to block the light from phone with his body, and succeeded in mostly keeping the room dark, aside from his illuminated face. He scrolled back through Batzinger's postings again, without seeing any new clues. Just jumbles of words spotted with short wholesome phrases of gratitude.

Eventually, tired and bored, he clicked over to the Moments page of the app, Moments, where he saw, "*30 seconds of funny: Sims in real-life.*" And, being so actually funny, it sent Seb off on a distracted tangent until a yawn reminded him of the room around him.

It turned out that there was nothing left for him to find on Twitter. He could go check out the comments on Batzinger's

videos, but the latest one wouldn't even be up yet.

He thought about reaching out, again, anonymously this time, and via a Direct Message, to Batzinger, or Mike, or whoever he was. But he knew Connor would be annoyed with him if he made a move like that without asking Betty, who Connor clearly was beginning to trust.

And so, even though he knew it might cause a problem if she was already asleep, he wanted to text Betty right then. He wished she'd had some answers, right? But he was more wondering what she was thinking about it all. Did she have any ideas about what to do next? Batzinger was right; she was the adult. But Seb would feel bad making her feel like one if she didn't want to.

He rolled back over under the duvet, holding his phone beneath as his knees tented it. He tapped out a quick text, to Betty,

*Whoa. Now what? <Shocked emoji face>*

It wasn't until a few hours later, once Seb was fast asleep himself, that Betty responded,

*After thinking some more I can say:*

*I really don't know. There's only one way to find out*

*Which she would in the morning follow up by saying,*

*By which I meant I have no idea yet, but we'll find out by finding out that one way*

*You around?*

And, after waking up late, Seb would immediately find his phone under the covers and respond.

# Chapter Ten

## The Faint Chorus

With the kids in school again on Monday, Betty was back at her work desk. Seated there, she thought about how much work was like school, with the rows of seated figures and five-days-a-week schedule.

It got in the way.

You couldn't just do whatever you wanted, even if you could take a few hours or a day even, here or there. Before long, once again you'd end with a "case of the Mondays." That's why advertisements sought your time, almost as much as your money.

She couldn't just not show up to work without a good excuse any more than she could have just not shown up at school. Maybe there were people without school or jobs, but almost everyone but the most important vloggers or celebrities had them. Almost no one really was that rich.

So, there she was in the office, nestled into her desk amid all the others. She heard the overlapping halves of conversations, an uneven symphony of ringing phones.

Elan's office sat quiet and dark. He was out of town, everyone knew, for the Near Media leadership retreat. She overall was happy about that at least, or mostly thought she was. For a full moment when she'd realized, her heart had sunk for some reason. But how could she be better off with him around? The whole thing seemed inappropriate to

discuss with him, considering her role in endangering multiple minors, unless...

Sitting there, thinking, Betty realized that Seb had probably asked the deadbeat working the counter at the gas station store if he'd seen Mike so that she'd cast away any doubt about their story created by Batzinger's denial of it. She didn't need anything of the sort, however.

Their encounter with the twitchy vlogger had been different, no doubt, than she'd expected. For some reason, when she saw him, all thoughts of the kids' warnings about men with guns and conspiracies had gone away. She thought instead, looking at the vulnerable boy beneath the moustache, that he'd be willing to let them in on his prank or performance art or whatever it was...

That was not the case. No, everything about the boy, down to his unsteady eyes, looked ill at ease, suspicious, but he stood firm. Resolute.

Clearly, Betty believed the whole story that they offered a little more, meaning mostly now, as a working premise. They seemed unlikely to lie, right? Even if none of them fully understood the premise yet, in terms of what the facts added up to, at least she could work with that her jumping off point.

She felt reassured by Jimmy's reaction to hearing her tale of Batzinger's hardened manner when he got back that night.

It'd been later even than she'd been, after dropping off the kids and returning the car. But, with bleary eyes, he dutifully confirmed that the suspect's responses and movements, as described to him, sounded quite suspect.

Exhausted, dreams filled Betty's sleep that night as intense as when she'd get hooked on a game and played it from morning through night and then even further on her eyelids.

Once awake again, she remembered only tidbits, like endlessly searching the web, turning numbers into new

numbers, running with the Slumber Party Six, on the beach. And somewhere in there, she'd seen the face of Mike, Batzinger123, like a brooding portrait, but as if taken on Seb's phone, and able to move, ever so slightly.

Over the next two days, they talked over the standoff with Batzinger and accumulated evidence so far, but it yielded absolutely no break-throughs, just speculation.

Betty at first had stayed in constant contact with them, via texts and calls. With Seb mainly, but also the Tippets kids during the mornings and some of the afternoon.

That was when they were trading back and forth theories, mostly via texts, generally a few words at a time, resolving nothing.

By the end of the weekend, they'd had little left to say to each other. Between them, they'd thrown out so many possible explanations that none of them really didn't found satisfactory: The Mob, the government, Satanists, blackmail, a clone? Witches, Anonymous, Russian or Chinese hackers?

To be sure, they remained obsessed. But texting about it didn't seem to clear anything up at all, nor did their conversations the several times that she'd called.

They'd explored all the possibilities that seemed now possible. Betty had even also gotten in touch with MisssterMassster and FeeBird, a couple of the vloggers that Batzinger did a fair number of videos with. And she even, somehow with some skill, discretely tracked down a few of the people who would comment on his GoVidGo streams, finding jazznutspanda3 and ashketchup.

Over Skype call with most, she confirmed that they knew nothing, without revealing what she did know. The Batzinger fans were like Seb and Connor, basically. They seemed like sweet, nerdy guys and she promised them that she'd call them for a quote some time. The other vloggers were so focused on doing their own channels, they didn't really keep up with Batzingers, as she would report back to Seb and the Tibbets.

The only thing that Betty hadn't shared with them yet was how she'd gotten the IP address of the Wifi at Batzinger's house with her phone before leaving. But, so far, she hadn't figured out anything to do with it, and didn't want to get their hopes up. She was, however, proud that she'd picked up on the technique to get at it,

Of course, it just another thing that possibly - or really, probably - wasn't going to get them anywhere. Then, she realized that she wouldn't have been involved if not for a clue that had led the kids to her.

She took a full breath, and watched the young office manager, Caroline, with her big eyes, scurrying about, just above the cubicle line. Clearly, she was trying to be helpful.

Although Betty's cluttered desk in front of her remained no different than when she'd left on Friday, she felt very different sitting in front of it. Her body felt younger. She was again somewhat energized. It was like she'd been refueled and recharged at the start of a level.

She looked over for Renaldo or Teresa, perhaps to socialize, but, as she already knew, their areas sat empty, their computer screens, black. Being alone there in that cell was strange; she felt like a cowboy in an empty dirt street, staring down whatever she faced.

Obviously, something had seemed wrong about Batzinger. If you asked her what she could be sure of, she could be sure of that. Sure of the fact that boy was not speaking freely. He seemed frightened, drowning. His irritation seemed genuine, but not in the way he presented it.

If only she could maybe go back alone, she thought, maybe she could get could somewhere...

Just then, the black phone sitting past her hand began vibrating, ringing a slightly soured rattle. The familiar tone joined the faint chorus floating above the cubicles a few rows over. No one looked up.

“Hel-lo,” she said, picking up before the second round of ringing ended, “Betty. Betty Van Buren here.”

A short silence followed, and then, after a light huff, a gorgeously soft voice responded.

“Hi hey, Betty?” said the light voice. “This is Lucy, from Endeavouright, you have a minute? ‘Cause I’m really hoping you have a minute. I’ve got something to tell you about.”

Clutching the phone to her ear, Betty opened Word and created a New Blank Document. She had a job to do, which she couldn’t ignore.

She presumed that her public relations counterpart would be seeking to use the leverage of her big release to get Betty to cover some of their lesser titles that were also coming out.

Titles like *Basketball Live: Dynasty Reborn*, which was the latest attempt to reboot the bball classic, with a whole new set of controls, and which nobody thought would displace the *2K* series. Or *SimU Late*, a university stimulation that Lucy had been saying would be good in terms of strategy, though it would require being always online, which nobody liked.

“Yeah, of course. What’s up, Lucy?”

“Listen, I wanted to let you know that we’re going to be releasing some eleventh hour CityRiddle 2 teaser footage. And we ARE going to send it to you, right now. Should be on its way to one of your email accounts in the next couple of minutes.”

Betty had been mistaken. This would be an easy post that got tons and tons of clicks. Lucy was hooking her up. Everyone wanted to know more about the game. Betty hoped the YouTubers that she was sure were going to quote from her story, or talk about what she wrote about it, would at least point their audiences toward a link.

“Oh, wow, nice, thanks,” she said into the phone.

“You’re free to write about it and link to it, whenever after we get it get on the website, which we’re planning for

tomorrow afternoon, like probably one p.m. We'll tell you when we send it over. The APIs should get pulled into your site pretty easily with the URL," the women said back from the phone. "But there's something else..."

"Yeah?" Betty said, flinching.

"We want to give you some emojis. Some City Riddle emojis. You'll get an email also with a link to where in the iTunes store you can download the app."

"Oh, thanks?"

"Free. Totally free. You can use them to tweet or text, or, I don't know, email them to yourself. I give everything that I can to you, because I like you, Betty," Liz purred through the phone. "So, just do me a favor and, totally and completely, like the game?"

"Su-ure," Betty responded, knowing that the voice on the other end would get that she didn't really mean it. She thought she saw Renaldo coming in, but then realized what she took to be his bald head was really a woman's tan hat. She was small, but at least not quite as far away as Betty had thought.

"No seriously, this is obviously big for us. Biggest thing this year, maybe."

"I'm calling it: Greatest Game Ever. For you."

"No seriously," Lucy laughed. "You know that...City Riddle, c'mon..."

"I'm calling it: Not a Waste of Your Money," she said, hoping that Lucy could imagine her waving the words across the bright sign hanging off a movie theater. "That's pretty much what you care about right?"

"Girl, I can't even, with you... You're going to be laughing at how ridiculous this gets, sales-wise. It looks awesome, too. The teaser stuff is amazing. You're not going to believe some of it... "

To be honest, Betty thought, the whole launch of the sequel now seemed hugely less consequential to her. Considering the extreme circumstances that she was



sharing with Seb and Connor and Paige. Obviously. What was a video game that was probably at best a little better than what the world already had?

She now understood why they seemed so obsessed, in a slightly nervously unhinged way, with finding Batzinger. When she'd first met them, she hadn't gotten that. She'd been doing her thing, and they'd been in that house already, and he wasn't there. It'd already gotten strange for them.

And, finally they'd found him? But it wasn't really him at all, somehow?

No, it was clearly him. The kid from YouTube, right there in the flesh in front of them. But he wasn't himself. He was off, acting like a jerk, and... ok, frightened maybe? He barely appeared to be, but she didn't know him well enough to know what it looked like when he was afraid.

Of course, wherever she was on the other end of the phone line - and with a quick check of the Google, Betty remembered: Simi Valley, California -- Lucy had no clue about that either. And she would, no seriously, find Betty literally crazy if she tried to explain it. As would Suzy and Elan. As Renaldo probably already did.

In contrast, after hearing the details of their encounter at the front porch two nights earlier, Connor's sister Paige had remained strongly in favor of believing there was something too messed up for the kids to be involved with taking place. She didn't doubt the story in the least.

The way that Connor's sister had jumped off the couch to greet, leaving a fashion vlogger muffled talk of tutus reaching out after her from the sofa, when they'd returned back to Howard and Margaret Tippet's house only helped convince Betty again that she wasn't being trolled by the boys.

By two boys who returned, as they ran into Paige's arms, to being too young to be troll-capable (even while still

qualifying as troll-height) and melted there in her hug, nearly in tears.

Paige had leapt up so fast...

Betty realized that this was the first time that kids confronted an unwilling subject. Probably ever. It wasn't something that kids did. They didn't ride off to slay the dragon. Duh? They were kids.

Such confrontation was somewhat second-hand to Betty, on the other hand. Strange circumstances happened. That's what adults dealt with, or at least ones like her.

"... And just make sure you actually had a good resolution. But, hey, Betty thinking about it, anyway...?" Lucy said, reminding Betty that she was on the phone, and that she had a job to do as well.

"Sure?" Betty responded by instinct.

"You mind if I ask you something? You hearing any rumblings about Near Media selling you guys?"

"Near Media?"

"Yeah, Marshmallow, and a couple of other publications? Probably be a few others that we over here talk with too, at least. Like the local papers and the Bored Baker? Or, who knows, maybe the entire company? Somebody at another studio who I was talking to read something in one of the trade rags last week, I think he said. I thought it was like something you'd know."

"You mean one of those shady industry newsletters?" (Shady tradeys? she thought.) "You can't believe anything you see in them, except the true parts. And you don't know what those parts are. But..."

"But?"

"But, no, I hadn't seen anything about that recently, and haven't heard anything about it around here. But, yeah, who knows, though, right? Maybe we will get sold. Someone would probably want us. You'll let me know if you hear anything? See something say something, right?"

“Of course, Betty. And I do hope you end up enjoying the game. We’re really excited about it. At the end of the day, it’s fun, we think.”

Betty knew she would never know exactly how much Lucy actually was excited. Lucy herself might never know. It was the job. She became in love with the game, the concept of the game, that is. The game became her life and her life became her job, but never, maybe, was her life a game, Betty guessed. Or maybe her life and job were just games to her...

Nice, though, either way.

“I’ll check my email for the emojis. You know where to find me next time something comes up. Hook me up. Talk soon.”

And so, the womanly voice on the other end of the line agreed that she did know, and promised to stay in touch about the final launch date. It’d be soon, or soon-ish. One or the other.

Betty in turn thanked her, and in hanging up the phone, found her area of the office to be relatively tranquil. Barely every other seat was empty and some rows had only a handful of people at the desks. Something about the season turning had emptied the office little by little. It was eerie that it’d be the day that she’d chosen to come in early, and leave in the afternoon.

Betty’s phone buzzed in her pocket, and she got annoyed at herself for not charging it. And then she looked down and saw,

*Anything new?*

Seb. He was probably at recess. Were they still going outside? She imagined him standing in the cold beside Connor, snow collecting slowly in their hair and the laptop around them. But it wasn’t that cold, she realized. Why would she think it was so cold?

*Nothing. Sorry : (*

she replied. The three dots immediately appeared and then,

*What about emailing 44451 again???*

*Did still nothing*

*You don't think it's aliens, do you?*

*Aliens?*

*Connor thinks maybe some sort of weird religious group*

*Like a cult?*

*He doesn't know that word... have u thot about those?*

*No. I guess I will. But listen I need to go and look busy at work*

*K later*

and a few dots appeared and then quickly flickered away.

An hour or so later, Suzy stood, rising above the rows of desks, and cut through the thickening traffic in the aisles toward her.

She looked around at the empty chairs as she approached.

"How come I'm feeling like we the only adults around here?" she said. "However come, I'm glad you were able to make it in. I mean, I understand reporters need to be out of the office, but this isn't a workplace optional kind of employer, especially if you're filing stories like they are. Talkersation was good, but Teresa was barely in last week, and I've got a feeling that Renaldo's in for a dry spell, which we can't afford..."

Betty broke in to greet her flustered boss warmly and, feeling more honest and relaxed as she changed to an adjacent subject, professed great confidence in her upcoming CityRiddle post, based on the things that Lucy had eventually provided. The emojis were unsurprisingly silly but the teaser footage -- soaring urban vistas in amazing fidelity, dramatic cut scenes with lighting and clean and friendly menus -- actually really made the game look good.

Anticipation could be built, Betty explained, by the game studio taking a deliberate approach. Like it was. That's what you'd do with an iconic series like that this game. Build the excitement level. It was classic. You could rely on people being vulnerable to being psyched up. Anyone who'd been alive when the Star Wars prequels were about to come out would know the feeling.

(Though wow, Betty thought to herself, she couldn't believe they were really taking City Riddle there. It never seemed like a game that was meant to have a sequel. Not something headed for a trilogy or series.)

Anyway, she told Suzy, who stood thankfully impatiently before her, that meant that she'd have at least a few stories that readers would be eagerly looking forward to as the release approached. If Endeavourright did a half-decent job at the game, of course.

Getting people tickled with expectation was easier than delivering what they actually wanted, and even that expectation phase would require not completely offending the good senses of consumers with some false step in the game design.

Still, it looked really good and, while any honest woman would tell you it would be more fun if they actually had somehow succeeded in making a good game on top of a good launch experience, she didn't really need both. Strong initial impressions would be great, but well-manufactured hype probably served her better, bringing in even bigger numbers of readers. And for that, she probably needed good marketing more than good development, and it was probably easier to get.

She wouldn't fault the studio if it couldn't top the original with the content. Who could?

It goes without saying that CityRiddle was one of the most beloved games of all time for a certain segment of the gaming population. So there was a large base of players and vloggers who would at least be interested.

She told Suzy that she hoped that she would express similar confidence to Elan, if he inquired. Pass on that she was hard at work, readying some really good stuff. She didn't need to let him know, but Betty just wanted to give Suzy a heads up on her being out of the office meeting with a source toward the later part of the day and might not be back in if it got late. It was uptown...

Thus, once her boss was gone, Betty returned to her ongoing search for clues in the comments to Batzinger's videos. Would Seb have done that? It felt like an obvious thing that they hadn't fully explored - but by the time that she'd finished, going through at least two-dozen videos, if admittedly at a fast pace by end that wasn't meant to be precise, she'd found nothing.

Dejected, she decided she needed to finish up her real work on the teaser video and just get out of there.

She knew that the whole point would be to let people enjoy the images, and to use the comment section to explore their theories about them. Later, maybe eventually they'd go and study YouTube reaction videos to what they'd earlier seen themselves.

So, she crafted a snarky but elegant headline, three paragraphs of wit and a fourth of commerce details. She dropped in an emoji of happy fireworks, and uploaded Endeavourright's commercial for publication at the appropriate time.

She wondered what Elan would have thought, but realized he'd probably be happy with anything that got big readership. Which she thought the post could do, just based on the interest, if she could get attention to it first, before people started sharing other links. There were all sorts of things that she could do, if she'd really cared.

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If you didn't know, it is a fact that in 1675, the King of England banned coffee houses, claiming they were places where people met to conspire against him.

Picked it up from among the inspirational writing in loopy cursive across the table pieces, and in a few places high up on the walls, that was something that Betty learned, for however long that she would remember it, by sitting in that little space that this brewer's business was in.

It was strange: The coffee not only tasted extra bitter but also the whole place reeked of a burnt smell with the same effect. It was a scent lower in bouquet than the normal smell of grounds, but still strong, stronger, maybe stronger even.

Running along at chest-height, a row of coffee-drinkers crammed into the row of small single-person tables, pushed up against a cushioned bench. Shoulder to shoulder, if more than half didn't keep leaning forward over their computers.

At regular intervals, the space between the counter and the seats would fill like a bathtub with bodies as a line formed. Often, the line would slowly devolve into more of a blob, as patrons waiting on orders stepped aside and milled about, before eventually shrinking away and leaving the little room mostly peaceful.

Betty could only grab glimpses of the guy and girl seated to her immediate right and left while she sipped her warm coffee. She could tell that both had headphones in, just like her, and the boy seemed to be in his post-college period and the girl seemed to be right around the same age.

Jimmy's opening weekend had been an unqualified success, which Betty had been ecstatic about. Not that he was mentioned in any of the write-ups, but the reviews in the Sunday and Monday papers were very good and he'd played a part in that. *'Can't Get Enough' of Fat Taft!* one headline screamed across the gray pages of a play journal that she'd bought at a newsstand and shoved into her bag.

He'd been sharing it all over the places on his accounts. So, at least for the time-being, Jimmy would be taken away,

absorbed in it, she allowed.

It was probably better because now that Betty knew that Mike knew her name, she knew that meant that she'd be exposed.

She didn't regret it; it was worth the shot. Still, after thinking about it, she realized that if they - whoever they were -- knew who she was and where she lived, they'd find him too. Assuming he ever spent any time away from the theater and at their apartment.

Missing him, she checked on his Snapchat and Instagram again, proudly liking a few backstage photos. He'd chosen filters with the most saturation for them. In the few that Jimmy himself was in, mostly in full costume and selfie-style, he was beaming, his charmingly wry smile stretching out across his face.

When the coffee shop got full, the air turned warm and it became a little hard to breath. Betty didn't quite choose to take her laptop there, rather than The Arcade, rather than staying home, rather than anywhere else. She just did. It just seemed the right thing to do. It was basically as short of a trip as The Arcade, and, without Jimmy, the apartment seemed too quiet.

She'd stopped in there before, on the way to seeing one of her college friend. She'd left to meet her way too early, and needed to kill time. Which was an expression she thought about that day, and forever associated with the place in her mind.

The store mostly emptied again, aside from the row of enterprising young New Yorkers that Betty was sitting in, whom were each putting in a little work of some kind, because even work on the personal, like choses with the bank websites, counted as work.

A cool breeze blew across them. When the smell returned each time, the whiff of charred bean flooded her nose. The rumble of the coffee shop's easy music muffled by her silent headphones, Betty's typing took her other places anyway.



With almost nothing else left to look into, Betty turned to one of the only things she hadn't fully investigated: Mike's parents, the Powers. She dug more into them, which wasn't hard because they had extensive information available via public records.

It turned out that Mike's father worked as manager at a drug company, making drugs for making people healthy, and his mother worked for the state in the education department. She had earned two graduate degrees, from Brown and Wagner College. Mike's father donated to Democrats and his mother didn't donate at all, likely because of her job.

Betty learned that just from various websites, with a simple Google search. They'd go deeper.

Pausing for just a second at the pop-up, she decided to pay for the records herself. She was only getting more worried about Suzy flipping out about her expense claims. As she typed in her credit card info, she realized how easy it was to go broke, like the kids said.

Based on the information she bought, they seemed to merge as a couple in Bucksville, Pennsylvania, probably at college. The addresses associated with them after that were mostly shared. His mother had moved a lot when she was younger, five or six times, while his dad had stayed in one home, in New Jersey, or just felt out of the records completely, which was always possible.

There were five different addresses following that point -- two in California, and three in New Jersey, including the property where they still lived. The sales prices of the houses started fairly low, in keeping with the years, and then progressed steadily to larger numbers over time. They had no outstanding tax liens or criminal offenses.

Betty also got all the email addresses associated with either of them, an AOL, a Sixdegrees, a Rocketmail, two Hotmails, an RCN, five Gmails, and an Elfster account.

Peggy Powers also had a Facebook page, with about a dozen public postings over the previous three years or so. Several were birthday greetings, and three were new profile photos. In one, she clung to her husband's side, a big smile on her face as he laughed. It was cute.

She also had gotten tagged by her son a few times, sort of as the butt of the joke, and sort of as the one punk-ing him.

Betty felt like she'd eventually need to talk with them, if Batzinger didn't come around on his own. She wanted to give him a few more days. That was the whole point of giving him her name. Maybe things would change with him. She knew he was worried but maybe he just needed a little time. Maybe he'd be ready then.

She felt like it was just like getting something to go from liking only PCs to accepting Apple. You just had to give it time. Eventually it'd happen.

An unexpected wetness in her lap startled Betty. Discombobulated, she looked down to see that her cup had fallen over and she'd spilled enough of her small amount of remaining coffee for it to reach the edge. She lifted her computer and pushed some napkins at it. Not so much to be drenched, but a sizable patch on her leg.

Her table had been jostled this time hard enough by her neighbor, while at the same time she was ignoring the task in front of her. She wanted to yell and curse, but realized that she didn't want to make a scene. She jammed some more napkins onto the spot in her thick pants, and hoped that the rest of the little coffee shop wouldn't start staring at her diaper. No one there seemed to care.

Tipping her head back, Betty tried to empty her mind. Just let it drift. Let the bustle rage on around her. She bopped her shoulders up and down, turned her neck.

What was the last thing that had gotten them there? Gotten them in front of that house, being hectored by that kid.

She decided that she wanted to see one more set of things about that Batzinger video one more thing time. The things around the room that Seb had said that they'd moved. She'd looked before critically, but had she examined that claim critically enough? Or had she been too trusting of what she thought that she saw?

Betty noticed that it'd gotten dark outside, but the street lamps hadn't yet clicked on, so it was especially black out. Exactly down the street, in the frame of the big windows, the glow of the top sliver of a big white ball rose on the horizon. It filled the bottom of the space between the buildings.

Moon-eyed, Betty turned back to her laptop. Her fingers began prancing across the keyboard, in a controlled dance.

The YouTube page flashed up, and she went back to one of his videos just before "BD Day." For Batzinger Disappearance Day, which is what they'd started to call the day that the kids had seen him being allegedly abducted.

Everything was there, like it almost always was. The posters, the bed, the messy dresser. It was a common small room, like her room. Or did she just think that because she'd been watching Batzinger so much?

As he loaded up the game from the start menu in Betty's periphery vision, she could tell there was something different about his face. It was carefree. His cheeks told the story. They laughed with his mustache.

He goofed around, showing a souvenir-flattened penny from some rest area along the way of his last vacation. He looked so different now, she thought again.

As Batzinger waited to connect to the server, she noticed a few squared yellow characters, perhaps runes or symbols, running along the bottom of the menu screen. Looking more closely, she could tell what it was: a short row of threes and twos of numbers, separated by single dots.

"Hey look at that," she said loudly, though not loudly enough for the neighboring tables on each side to turn. Still,

she bent over and with her arms tried to cover more of the screen.

With the tip of her finger, she dragged the little red circle back. The numbers flashed on the screen again, and she recognized them. She jumped back in the video once more, and paused once she caught the quick yellow flash in the corner.

The IP address of the server?

Right? Wasn't that the same numbers? It was, the same digits, in the same arrangement. The same as from his home. She'd never noticed that there before, along the bottom edge of the load menu. She was never aware of any numbers there. The little chickadees lined up in a row.

Fascinating.

At least she knew that she'd used the app correctly.

As she let the video run forward, he logged into the game and started floating through the valleys,

"...Anyway, that's not the funniest joke probably. Luigi would never do that. But where we would be without humor, even bad humor, you know? Where'd we be without trying?"

She'd realized she'd tuned him out for a second. His voice felt so familiar, it lulled her. It was like a comfortable blanket.

"But whatever, right? As you all probably know if you're here, we all call this here GoVidGo stream, 'MarioSpeedRunFails.' And this is episode forty seven and you all know that I said if we got to this point, we'd think about quitting at fifty, so we'll have to talk about that..."

But by then, Betty had come to her senses, and was scrolling through the related videos at the side of her screen.

Somewhere in a distant part of her brain, he said in jovial voice, "Not that I don't love when I've humiliated myself in front of you, ok? Not that I don't know love that it..."

She found one of the most recent videos after the *Show More* and, holding her breath, double-clicked on it (even

though she only needed to give it a single click.)

The same face emerged in its little video cage. But instead of being like the merry child that he'd been, Mike seemed inside his own head as he talked. It was something you might mull only if you knew to look for it. Any of his subscribers from Germany or the UK or Canada or Holland... how would they notice anything was wrong? So many of the words were the same.

His voice didn't quite lull in the same way. In fact, it was a bit drowned out by dance music playing too loudly, "dodododo dodododo... pure and... hararararamlesssss."

As Betty finally removed the damp napkins from her lap, the video hit the point that she'd wanted. The truth would happen; he was loading up the multiplayer. He'd started doing classic games with speedruns, but then moved on to uploaded MarioMaker courses. For a while, that'd brought a lot of subscribers who wanted to see him master their courses.

Batzinger sought to connect to the server and begin his game. Lemon-color squiggles flickered for a few seconds, and Betty made an unsuccessful jab at pausing the video in time.

She backed it up and tried again.

"...ododo dodododo... pure and... hararararam"

Everything stopped, and Betty's hand moved to expand Mike's game and his frozen face to full-screen mode. It stretched across everything, filling her monitor.

She could see that there was the IP address. And it was a new one, different numbers, different arrangement. Something that she hadn't ever seen. Which meant that it was probably important. Just a few digits and super important.

She twisted her right shoulder between the tiny tables at the coffee shop, reached down into her laptop's bag and pulled out a hard clear pen.

From the back of her mind, she finally recognized why she'd come there, to the roast-smelling little hole in the wall. Her own address would show up as this place, as she searched here. She must have felt that she was going to find something.

Using Google once again (for like the googolplex-th time), Betty found a website that you could use to track IPs back to their ultimate routers, or at least toward them.

She decided once more to use her own credit card.

This particular website unveiled the location slowly, theatrically even, zooming from outer space and bouncing down a bunch of fiber-optic cables across a rising map of the land.

The reveal revealed that the closest nod to the end point was right...

in the middle of Manhattan?

and, well, that didn't seem quite right?

It should be in New Jersey, or one of the other bordering states, she thought. Because Seb and Connor and Paige were all from New Jersey, which is why they lived next to Batzinger, or Mike. The Powers certainly lived in that area, the wide open, greatly populated dot in the middle of a Google map of the state, the dopey guy in the convenience store had made clear. His store's lights had glowed so bright in the night because nothing on her map app reflected the dark highways and canopies of brown leaves.

Betty had literally seen Mike there, of course, right there in New Jersey, what felt like just hours earlier, with her own two eyes. She'd heard his shouts with her own two ears, one more than the other, because of where she was standing. But sometimes you wanted some evidence as backup to your own two eyes and ears.

Why would you want to take Mike from there, and all the way to Manhattan? And then have him keep making videos? Especially if you wanted to keep a low profile? And why wouldn't you be interested in a low profile, if you were

involved in something like this, no matter what it was? Who would be interested and like that, and why, really, would you need him there in the city?

And, knowing that he'd come home, and was there, and inspired by all of the thought of the people all around her, now she had a new question: Why had he come to her? Sure it's a big place, but he could have been around any corner. She felt like two swans, twisted all together, starting at the necks. She'd seen a video clip on Twitter, where that had happened. Then, a human they asked for help untangled them and they waddled away happily.

If he was in New York then...

Clearly, the IP address led there, which only meant one thing: She had something of a clue. Which was good.

The problem, of course, was that Manhattan was a huge. Impossibly huge. You could never simply find someone there because you know they're there, not even if you knew the neighborhood, and she basically didn't. He could really be around the corner, and she'd never had seen him.

In the city, one simply didn't bump into some that they knew unless the fates called for it. Sometimes the fates feeling slightly cheeky would be enough to make it hard for someone even when you knew where they were. She shuddered to think what they did before smart phones. Even in the present, though, you could live in the city for years, even in the same places generally as someone you knew, and never realize it.

Still... a clue is a clue is a clue.

She blinked her eyes and they re-focused like sleeping camera lenses on the map image in front of her. It would be good if she could find a way to remember to save things like that before closing out of individual windows, she reminded herself. She created a new folder to store stuff in.

It was like that saying, you never mourn a dead soldier on the battlefield.

Conditioned, Betty returned her web browser to Google, and dropped the numbers into the search. She checked the clock on the top of her computer, and it was almost an hour later than she'd thought. She looked around to see the shop was mostly empty, half the tables unoccupied.

Noticing she was being watched, Betty smiled again at the tall brown woman at the register. She seemed tired from the day.

Stiffening her back, Betty activated the search, like a commander might launch his starship.

The browser blinked. The WiFi in there was strong.

What would have been the "I'm Feeling Lucky" option from her search was the homepage of a company of some sort, Shiny Time Communications. Betty couldn't tell much about it the site description sitting there amid the barren listings from her search of the IP address,

*Shiny Time Communications uses advance approaches to expand opportunities for you, your business and your clients' businesses. To find out what Shiny Time Communications can do for...*

Betty clicked off from the search result page. She had a curious feeling, like she was looking into a telescope. She landed on a website filled almost completely by a huge picture of a tall stone fountain spilling out water toward a round pool, the water frozen in a sheet.

Hovering above the crystal clear image, a few boxes offered a few scraps of information casually, in the maroon, tan and black theme used by the site.

One announced the company as involved with,  
*Strategic Communications Consulting*  
*Digital Marketing Management*

&

(with the ampersand, which was always a professional touch)

*Outsourced Sales Diligence*



And then, starting a half-a-scroll down, there was a block of text disclaiming:

*Shiny Time Communications uses advance approaches to expand opportunities for you, your business and your clients' businesses. To find out what Shiny Time Communications can do for your unique needs, we will perform a full assessment with experienced professionals. The diverse backgrounds and expertise of our senior staff, who on average have been with the firm for more than ten years, are integral to our firm's ability to help clients successfully manage complex and sensitive situations.*

Another offered a phone number and its addresses, email and physical.

It was located at 84 East 31st, just off Park, in New York, where the IP address said it should be. A quick search of the address revealed just that it was known as the Stratemeyer Tower, and somewhat recently rehabilitated.

Back at the Shiny Time website via another Google search, Betty confirmed that there was no *About Us* page a click away. No *Leadership*. No *Services/Products/Packages*.

Nothing except an *Enter* on the very top right-hand corner of the browser. But when Betty clicked it, a pop-up asked for a username and password.

Betty bounced her fingers on her keyboard lightly, wondering what to put in. She realized there was nothing that would be well-enough informed guess, so used her mouse to 'x' out of the dialogue box.

Most of the other listings down the last search results page consisted of the random topic on the help board of a call center cloud software site, or sites talking about Shiny Time Station, which was a show that served as the U.S. wrapper for Thomas & Friends episodes. Both Ringo Starr of the Beatles and comedian George Carlin had been on it.

She went back and left-click, highlight, right-clicked, so that she could copy-paste the address into an email.

It would be Wednesday in two days, so Jimmy would be free.

She texted him to ask if he really would be free, right then. But it wasn't for another hour that he responded, telling her he would need to see. She texted back that that, truthfully, didn't worry her because she knew that he'd do what she said. He texted her a "thinking" emoji, followed by worried one, and then sent her something crude about one of the other actors backstage with him.

She paused. She would have asked if he would be just home late or super-late but she didn't want to intrude into his god times.

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At some point over the following pair of anxious days, Betty began to suspect that she was being followed. Or at least watched in some way, at some times, by someone. Large-ish figures who never crossed the edges of the places around her where the light couldn't reach. She didn't need to see them to appreciate the nature of the feelings that he stirred in them.

It was never quite the same suspicious shape lingering, just a series of walks down blocks where someone seemed to match all of her turns, for quite a while. She also wandered aisles around two stores, one little and one big, with a tingle on the back of her neck, and whatever was stalking her always at the far end of the row. She truthfully never caught a glimpse of an actual face.

Batzinger had posted a few more videos at this point, in a couple of different series. As far as the kids were concerned, he seemed pretty spaced out, suspiciously numb. You're still innocent until you realize that the things that are presented to you are all made up, in one way or another.

To her -- and mostly Jimmy -- the videos hadn't offered up any other truly abnormal incidents, especially not compared

with when they had met in him, in real life. In fact, he seemed to be much more relaxed. Not actually fully relaxed, you could tell by the veins in the neck, but more so.

And so, straining just slightly, he rattled through his catch phrases and roll call and musings on pop culture on top of his observations about the game. He settled back into his routine, more or less, perhaps only disrupted by his developing focus on City Riddle 2, which he'd gotten fairly obsessive about. If you looked at the boy's profession, you'd have to give him a pass. Seriously, even her own profession was like that. The obsessiveness, obviously.

All of Batzinger's old viewers regularly joined. Jazznutspanda3 and farragogo. Ashketchup. Betty knew their names now well as Seb, and their dim personalities probably better than Connor and Paige.

When it came to her feeling of being followed, Betty hadn't told Seb or any of the others. It wasn't sitting right with her, but she didn't want to worry them. She hadn't even told them anything of what she'd found recently with the information about Shiny Time and all that.

It wouldn't be fair. They were already freaked out enough, she thought. She didn't need for them to completely fall apart.

She remembered again about how screwed up it was that she'd somehow ended up in league with those kids. About how mad Seb's mother would be, if she ever found out that Betty hadn't encouraged them to tell her. Or the police, or the FBI or something more like.

Instead, they'd kept in close touch, essentially holding hands across the cyber-universe held online and over the air. She'd virtually snatched an orphan, in a way. Sure, it'd been Seb and Connor who had come to her, but it did feel really irresponsible. They exchanged phone calls; she counseled them to remain quiet. Seb was holding things together pretty well still but Connor was a bit more anxious to act, in some way, any way.

And, all the while, while she was fretting with the kids, Betty had a secret plan.

She was planning in real life to get back to source of the shadows that she felt watching her.

And that seemed to be Shiny Time Communications.

Even with her discrete inquiries to Tesera, Renaldo, Yosef and finally Suzy, Betty was unable to unearth more than a small amount of further information. Or small at least if you're judging by the standard of needing enough information to know the identity of the key players in your drama.

Using fake names and circumstances each time she'd asked one of them for direction, she was able to learn that the business, Shiny Time Communications LLC, was owned by an Irish limited liability company. That company was owned by a Hungarian investment fund, that was itself owned by a Cayman Island trust. And that trust was attached to one American citizen, Mr. Paul Shinton, via registration with a wet-ink signature on Grand Cayman in 1995.

Betty could find several Paul Shintons through public records and social media across the country, at least eight, though maybe she was under-counting because of accidentally merged files. But none of them seemed to fit any profile.

They were mostly in the Midwest, a couple in Colorado; two were a father and a son. A few more were sprinkled in the West and Southeast. And, yet, those that were of the right ages seemed to be in the wrong places or occupations, and those with the right jobs and the right locations didn't appear to be of the right ages to register anything in the Grand Cayman in 1995.

So Betty didn't know a lot about the "who" or the "what" or the "why." But she had a possible sense of the "where." His lair was well-hidden, this Paul Shinton, but she had

found a way to get there. Or close enough, certainly, close enough.

In meantime, “Fat Taft!” was sold out night after night, and Jimmy’s head was spinning, she could tell from the way he collapsed on the couch. Still, he’d sat up with her once he got home, and tried to get caught up. She could tell his brain would have been more in the mode of discussing new movies or preteen antics.

He passed out both nights in her bed, listening as she talked of the discovery of Shiny Time over busy Batzinger videos that they’d barely even listen to anymore. And of Paul Shinton and her failing efforts to find out anymore, until finally, exhausted, letting Mike ramble on from her phone when she had nothing left to share.

Betty barely tried to sleep, and in fact, the second night drifted back out to the couch, to play video games. The room, in the dark, was not just small but a little cave, tucked away; she could have been anywhere. Because nothing was around her, everything was blackness off-screen. In the wings, as he would say.

She’d sunk into her television, playing Maniac Mansion, a hugely retro game, that’d been rebooted for a second time in a release about eight months back. She’d gotten maybe forty percent done with it, before scribing a quick review and moving on. She’d picked up the game out of the pile hidden inside the cabinets below the TV, and started playing.

The game involved hunting around a cartoon-y colored, cartoon-y spooky mansion, running into strange things in strange rooms with strange items. She met the mad scientist, Nurse Edna, his wife; and their son Weird Ed, and a talking disembodied tentacle, green. The intro cut scene that played until she stopped it showed a meteor crashing twenty years earlier, brainwashing them all.

She played for a bit, until zombie-like, falling back into her room and her bed. Her stomach ached slightly as she

tilted her head to her phone. The softness of the mattress against her back, she let her eyes close. The weight of forcing them having disappeared, her thinking unlocked and drifted only back to the game. She'd advanced confidently, up and down the stairs and into sparsely furnished rooms. The music was familiar, she recalled it. She was not at all uneasy. She'd been regretting something about that? That's right, she remembered, she'd written that she'd had no jump scares, after awhile.

She opened her eyes, and then went to blink, only to descend back into darkness.

The next morning, when she did finally try to prowl for real, instead of feeling ready to duck into corners, ready to navigate through dialogue prompts, she felt like she was choking.

Jimmy had left already, but by the two texts on her phone, she knew where to find him.

Walking down the very block away from her building as she'd walked hundreds and hundreds of times before, the fracturing beams from the rising sun called attention to the fact that you were in a specific place in time. Her tiredness and their sharpness kept her thoughts from fully forming, along with exertion she progressed further through the city, traveling east.

Betty finally found her pulse slowing as she took in the fresh air and stopped thinking. Literally catching her breath at a traffic light, she decided she'd allow her veins to act more as a lazy river until the whole thing with Shiny Time Communications really escalated past her and Jimmy.

They joined up in front of his theater's rehearsal studio - which also served a venue for comedy improv performances -- where he'd needed to attend a brief meeting

Betty found the glare of the sun hanging low in the sky made it hard to read off her phone as Jimmy and her dodged through foot traffic, and sometimes through cars and trucks, and toward their destination. She knew the general

direction, and had passed enough modest stretches of sidewalk with LTE coverage to re-confirm her path on the Mapp app.

She'd made Jimmy skip the subway, which he complained about. She wanted them to walk the whole way because she wasn't sure what was possible with the cameras down there on the car. She wasn't sure what the men and machines watching would see of them. It felt wrong to be boxed in and trapped, underground, or at least that would be a logical conclusion.

She couldn't be paranoid if she was just being careful. And she, personally, couldn't be careful enough without being paranoid, she realized.

As they continued walking up another block, things were generally quiet.

More tall buildings flanked her in every direction, grey quiet beasts in the night. Standing in informal rows, like gentleman.

She checked all of her accounts. Twitter, work email, Facebook. They were generally quiet. She checked Batzinger's GoVidGo. He looked out of the videos she quickly scrolled by, making stupid faces.

As they finally approached the building, the right address, Betty didn't hesitate to stop there to stare wide-eyed from across the street. It hugged the corner like a couple cuddling.

Something strange seemed to be going on with the sounds all around her. They each came in on their frequency; she could hear each quite distinctly, the honking of horns, the calling and blathering, the hum of the lights all around.

A brass revolving door cut into the skyscraper, flanked by the gaping mouth of a parking lot and the long windows of a bank, partially glared over.

They stepped, and pushed round, and stepped out, onto the other side, falling sideways, but making their way out of

the foot-flow and over to the display case hanging on the wall.

Betty eyed the engraved golden plates slid individually into a board, feeling Jimmy at her right shoulder.

*Dutch Shipments 3 ...*

*Drs. Zunger, Kunanmeni & Ross MD, ENT 4*

*Zenith Consulting 4 ...*

*Shiny Time Productions 12*

*Irving Tax Preparation 14 ...*

Before she could look over at him, Jimmy was tugging at her arm, and without pausing stepped back into the chamber of the door. He spun it around, leaving Betty no choice but to follow him.

“So, it’s twelve,” she said upon exiting, and catching up with his pace. “Twelfth floor.”

“We can’t just walk in there,” Jimmy responded, continuing to retreat from the still-revolving door.

“Why not?” Betty asked. “It’s the middle of the day. Tons of people are coming and going.”

An Asian deliveryman with a bag slung across his front and then a black woman in a crisp yellow skirted past them, and looking back, Betty saw them duck inside.

“Because,” Jimmy said. “Because every floor is probably going to have it’s own security. Receptionists. People looking out with their own safety measures.”

“We can make up a story. A better story than I had with that Powers kid.”

“Wouldn’t be hard because it sounds like you didn’t really have any...”

“Exactly. We’ll say we’re supposed to meet a friend.”

“What’s his name?”

“You thought of a name, right?”

“Uh, Bruce.”

“Bruce what?”

“Uh, Bruce Wayne?”



“That’s terrible. I don’t understand how something who is supposed to write for a living comes up with stuff like...”

“No, that’s not the real situation. I’m going to I’ll tell them the truth. That I’m a reporter. That I’m working on a story about communications companies for Marshmallow. That I wanted to ask them about the state of the industry. Mr. Shinton, and associates. About competitive pressures and the regulatory burdens...”

“I’m telling you, I’ve worked in buildings like this, when I was doing temp jobs, and you’re not going to just get away with that strolling into one of these offices. People are totally serious. But since I worked in buildings like this, I also know something you don’t.”

“So you’re saying we’re not screwed.”

“No because, if we come up through the inside elevator, we can just fly through.”

“What?”

“I was thinking about this and I looked it up and, turns out, you can find information about this with a good Google search. A lot of the elevators in these types of buildings are converted freight elevators, from a time that almost no worker bee could afford to have their own car. The times just after slavery. You’d have people at the bottom pulling on ropes. It actually built by Albert Elevatorson.”

“That’s pretty amazing.”

“Init?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, but I actually made that up. All of it. Could be true I guess, but... Honestly, Betty, it was in one of my temporary jobs...”

They crossed the street with the light.

“It was a business office of a company,” he continued, “that did something like make tartar sauce. And I was working there, in a building just like this, and I realized... and, really, I distinctly remember... seeing the elevators to the basement in a totally different place from the normal

elevators. Totally, old-fashioned, like from the fifties. Then, the door groaned open with a ping, and someone pulled a handtruck stacked with papers out and into the hallway. So, then, I was curious, so, once the guy turned the corner, I jumped on and rode it down, which is why I remember. It was just a normal elevator, old and whatever, and big like a warehouse or hospital elevator, but normal-enough. The doors next opened onto a normal garage, with a loading dock slab but there was nothing else unusual there.”

“Ok then,” she said back. “That does seem like some pretty good info.” He looked pretty smug. “In fact, I’m going to have to ‘honestly’ you because... Honestly, you’re a jerk for keeping that to yourself. Any reason you didn’t not mention it before now? Maybe on the way over?”

“I didn’t even realize what the building looked like Betty. This is your thing, remember? And, like, I’m not saying one hundred percent for sure that this will work. It was a while ago, maybe there’s not one of those here... I got a feeling, but...”

“Ah, so you’re going for the double jerk, huh, jerk?”

“What?”

“Bring it up and then yank it away?”

“Honestly, honestly, Betty, honestly...”

Even as he finished saying that, her had face broken into a smile, dimming all of the dramatic stakes but still leaving them unable to turn back.

“Seriously, that made me think, what about the stairs? If they don’t an elevator, we can just get in through the staircase, right?”

“No, they lock those...”

Standing there on the corner, looking into his eyes, Jimmy seemed to Betty like he’d drawn exactly the reaction that he wanted to draw from her, even with it being faked. Somehow his performance had perfectly set her up to lower the tension that had been beginning to boil them. She noticed that she’d let the air out their chests being tight.

He was right. It would only make sense to check out the parking garage. Why not?

She hadn't really given much thought to getting through security on any floor, only whoever was in the lobby. She had a plan for that. She'd sign in as going to the tenant on the list seemed like a business that regularly received visitors, like a law firm or doctor, or a modeling agency. Ha, she thought, that was a joke that she'd made in her head and somehow couldn't avoid repeating again. She'd leave Jimmy in the lobby if needed, and go up if that seemed to make the most sense.

And if no tenant jumped out at her as a good choice, she'd try to sneak along with someone. Or if worst came to worse, attempt to get teary eyed and tell the security desk that there'd been a family tragedy and she'd need to go up to see her father. She just needed to calm her nerves so she could get worked up.

Getting onto to the elevator and eventually rerouting to Shiny Time's floor after riding up a bit seemed easy enough. Getting past a receptionist right on the floor would be different. It was hard to imagine how without having any idea of the vibe and layout.

She had only half-expected to enter the place, and maybe that was still the right idea. Just learning what things generally looked like at Shiny Time would be a fine reason for their hike north and across town. She could just go up with Jimmy and check it out, see what kind of mood the place was in. Would it be business-like or more casual, busy and loud or nearly silent? Would there be people there that would notice them?

If Jimmy's trick with the garage elevator played out, they'd be able to find some bigger answers. Looking at him, looking brave in his tiny man-way beside her, made Betty hope that he was right. Of course, she remembered, he still wasn't over missing Slumber Party Six.

They crossed back across the street at an angle, aiming for the gaping mouth.

As they walked down the wide ramp, their sneakers struggled to grab the sloping concrete. Betty wobbled, gravity pointing in a slightly wrong direction. A stuffy tar smell made the air feel thicker and harder to descend through.

At the bottom, Betty could see straight across the parking lot to what seemed to her like a sign with a box sliced in half, vertically, hovering over a white arrow.

Nearer to them, inside a booth enclosed in glass off to the side by the wall, a fat twenty-something man was playing on his phone while a small television flipped between talking heads.

As they passed by the little compartment, they could hear the soulful rasp of a grade-school singer that was the favorite for America's Got Talent. They smiled at him to acknowledge that they should be there. Once she could see his greasy hair and thin patchy beard, Betty thought he looked like a pretty big nerd. Jimmy tipped an imaginary cap.

"You guys all right?" he called, with a croaky voice through slot through which most of his air snuck in.

"Ye-ah," Jimmy yelled back, and the loud sounds echoed, too loudly.

Betty was worried he was going to start a whole integration but he didn't. Instead, he waved back, not watching. His stare had already returned back on his phone. He could have been using that phone to look at dirty pictures or mathematical debates, she couldn't know. But whatever it was, she appreciated it.

With a crunchy rumble, a tall car pulled by them from the belly of the earth, a SUV in defensive silver, with black trim and fat wheels with floppy rubber hairs that were the size of baby fingers. It slowed and hummed.

The window fell to reveal a maturely innocent woman with big earrings sitting behind the wheel. Betty could see an arm of whoever sat in the other seat, but couldn't tell if it belonged to a boy or a girl, and whether that boy or girl was young or old.

The man in the booth croaked out something that they couldn't make out, since they reached the edge of the car rows, and Betty, dropping back after a brief step toward the interaction to observe, had turned into the twisting labyrinth, and Jimmy had followed suit.

She slowed, trying to watch some more, and let Jimmy take the lead, so she could trail behind. But it was so far to be anonymous. Eventually, the tiny red eyes of the vehicle darkened and shrank, and then were wiped away by transition up by the car, before disappearing.

Betty tried to check her phone, but there was no signal. The handful of Wifi networks seemed locked, and she gave up after trying an obvious password or two, like 'password' and 2222.

Jimmy was leading them forward, Betty realized. And why wouldn't he? He was thrilled by his display of talent, getting them there.

The confidence of his play being a smash hit (he'd seemed to be a real part of the team) had been confirmed and he'd already had his normal upbeat confidence. It was interesting: He'd been flustered, despite his bravado, and she hadn't seen that too often before.

The space felt underground, with the low ceiling hanging down from above. Spelunking, she wanted to say. Subaru and Explorers as stalagmites and stalactites, a cool dewy smell parting as she followed her little friend.

They were almost to the sign for the elevator when Betty saw it, parked there.

"Wait," she said.

She wasn't sure how she did notice it, floating with the rest in her peripheral vision like a tomb. Neurons in her

brain were doing things that she couldn't explain.

"Wait what?" Jimmy responded turning back.

"This," Betty said, walking toward the car. "This is the SUV. The one with the license plate. Dee-dee-nine-ex-for-you."

And there -- hanging onto the large car right to the side of its filthy exhaust pipe -- there was an orange and blue rectangle, with raised mountains across the aluminum spelling out its identification.

"Which one?" Jimmy asked, looking at it. "The one from the Price is Right? Come on down?"

"The one... Paige... the one she saw..." For some reason, Betty kneeled and looked under the truck. "With the others, obviously. She saw the license plates, you remember?"

"Huh?"

"Remember, that's the whole thing with Player44451? How come I even know them?"

"Oh right." He was studying the shiny black car from front to back with his eyes. "But... you don't mean..."

"I don't know if I do..."

Betty fell silent, thinking.

Someone had driven it here, and that meant that she'd somehow gotten them to the right place. Which meant something! So, whoever that someone was... that would help them. Cars didn't just get places by themselves. At least she was getting closer.

Her neurons did something funny again, "but, uh, hold on..." she said, "remember, what about self-driving cars?"

"What about them?"

"Would those need license plates?"

"License plates, what?"

"You could need a chip, obviously, that would track you every where but would you need a license plate?"

"Really Betty?" he groaned. "Now?"

"What? It's just because..."

"How would a pedestrian report an accident, like I said?"

“I don’t know,” Betty acknowledged. Did she have a point? She had her normal responses. “With their phone? It was just something that I was wondering now that you...” She looked down at the raised letters in the little square hanging on the big car. “Anyway, it’s here, and, like, you know, how did this get here anyway?” she asked, in a puffed proud tone, giddy from the discovery.

And, then... out of nowhere, a loud slamming noise rang out sharply in their ears, and then existed again as two short echoes that they could perceive. Instinctively, they crouched down, in a flash, next to the nearest wheel. The sound had come from where she’d imagined the elevator vestibule to be, where the white arrow was pointing. It was replaced by a rolling murmur of voices.

They squatted, waiting.

Finally, against her better judgment, Betty stole a look from around their tire, and saw an egg-shaped bald man leading a top-heavy tough guy in turning down their row. Not liking the look of them, Betty ducked back, scooting Jimmy over.

As they huddled together back against the chipped wall, Betty and Jimmy could overhear the two men talking, their voices growing louder. If she lifted her head, it was clearer still. Next to Jimmy and her, the rubbery black bumpers of the cars forming the walls of their hideout all but touched the wall.

“So, anyway...” Betty could make out one of them saying, “like I said, there was this financial crisis, you know, a few years back. When all these families took out these mortgages, loans to buy homes, that they couldn’t afford, and then when the banks couldn’t be paid back...”

“Unhuh,” the other voice responded. “Right.”

“Yeah, when the banks couldn’t be paid back, they used the policy with the printing of money and zero interest rates, all around the planet, so the collateral the banks gave for the loans would go up in value and be worth enough. So

that Wall Street would make the companies more expensive to buy into, for people who didn't have any wealth yet. And that's why you and me, we're not rich yet."

"Didn't know that."

"It's all on the Internet, Youtube, you can learn, you know?"

"I don't really watch much of that."

"You should. Not the really racist stuff, or whatever, the guys that are just all about being against the Jews or the blacks or everyone. Some of those people are just flat-out nuts, my friend."

"Right."

Betty and Jimmy held hands, staying as quiet as possible. She wasn't sure which of them had grabbed the other's.

"But no shit Sherlock, there can be just really smart people doing videos who aren't all bought out by the corporations..."

"Really, though?"

"Really. It's true. I'm always watching good... oh wait..." They fell silent, and for just enough time before the first voice spoke again for Betty to tell that they'd stopped moving. "C'mon," he finally said.

And, when, without any indication of why, the sound of their footsteps turned back toward where they'd come from.

"You got a phone, right? I'll teach you about this stuff. It's good to know..."

Their conversation grew quieter, and then muffled. And then stopped.

Jimmy crept over Betty's body, and looked out past the tire himself, gripping it like a wimp with a shield. After a beat, he stood up, somewhat theatrically.

Betty stood too.

She found herself at the tinted back window of the SUV. Pressing her forehead to the glass, she looked in, but couldn't see much. She slid along the big car's body and



reached her hand out for the door. She gave it a tug, and it lifted.

“Betty,” Jimmy whisper-shouted, standing a few feet from the car already. “What are you doing?”

She stepped up on the frame, and leaned into the car. It was well-cleaned but worn; like a rental car. Black leather covered the inside. The seats showed cracks and the furry parts were matted down. Still, it was immense, three cavernous rows of seat, probably bigger than her living room.

Betty wondered if this was the actual car that they’d seen the girl get into. If Batzinger was safe, where was she? Betty tried to smell if there was a girl’s smell there, but it was a dusty, plastic smell instead.

Suddenly, she could hear the echoes of the men coming back toward the garage from the elevator room, still talking. Jimmy, who’d taken a few steps more away, doubled back and plunged himself down beside the wrong car. Because she knew he was there, she could see his shadow kneeling behind the Volkswagen.

Betty fell back and found herself pinned behind the SUV, watching the men returning through the glass. She had no choice but to duck down. Peeking for a second under the row of vehicles, she realized that she could count four tiny pairs of feet traversing the buried roadway.

They were approaching where she crouched, two at a time.

From under the cars, the voices were slowly legible again.

“So, really, what else do you watch? Or, like, read? You know, books? I can’t believe we never talked about this. Do you at least read interesting things?”

“Don’t really read.”

“You don’t really read?”

“You sound like my mother. Please try not to sound like my mother.”

“Listen, Brucey, there’s good stuff out there, like fantasy and science fiction and even some of the classics. You telling me you can’t find anything worth check out in all of that?”

“It just seemed so stupid to me, you know.”

“Stupid?”

“Yeah, reading. In school. Now. Like it all seems so old fashion, the stories. Like even the ones that I might watch a movie about. Where are their cellphones in these stories, I think? Where are their TVs? Why do they talk so weird?”

“So?”

“So... I know how to use a cellphone, I’m smarter than them. And I don’t talk weird.”

“How could not they not talk weird... Well, here’s a fact for you: Books predicted cell phones. *Podkayne of Mars*, in 1962. Or, for instance...” Betty felt she could feel him fumbling from his phone. The other man stood quietly for a moment, until he continued. “Or *Between Planets*, 1951... or *Space Cadet*, 1948...”

A loud, uplifting bleep-bloop burst through the air, hitting Betty’s ears. The red convertible across from her flashed its headlights. The pair of legs that had been trailing behind pulled past as they drew less than ten yards away.

“You guys,” a rounder voice called out. “You guys are going to the bar later? We might need some help in case any of those fancy boys try to hit on me?”

Betty could see Jimmy’s shadow curling up in the dark corner. She pressed against the stiff side of the car.

“I think that might be the only thing Brucey here is good for...”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. I saw what he did to that dad the other night.”

“You sure did. I remember.”

“It happens,” Bruce said.

“Yeah, my buddy here, he doesn’t always know how to control himself.”

“Good,” a fourth voice responded. “We’ll be seeing you later then.”

Then, their steps began to veer away, and Betty realized they were heading to the convertible. Her heart pumping fast in her chest, she tugged at the door next to her arm, as gently as she could, and crawled in again.

Drawing her legs up behind her, she pulled the door almost closed, and when she heard the roar of the engine, gave it a yank without planning. It was a quick strong pull, and sealed her in.

She scurried on her hands and knees to the floor between the last two rows, willing herself to keep low. She could hear the other men resume talking as the car pulled away. She imagined the smell of its exhaust would sort of just blend in with the dank odor already there.

“I can’t believe those guys.”

“I know Brucey.”

“They didn’t even say anything about giving us a chance to get a taste of the bonus. Why do they think we do this? For my health?”

“Patience, my friend, patience. Trust me, I know about these things, we’re fine. Our numbers are through the roof. I know about things. I knew about the cellphones, right?”

The garage fell silent, like an empty public bathroom, tiled from top to bottom, with nothing dripping.

And then, without warning, the front doors of the SUV each opened, one after the other, and light flooded its interior. The crow black of the fabrics running around the seats and floors and wall absorbed some of it, but it was still bright enough for Betty to bend over blindly until her eyes dilates, and she’d remained covered in shadows.

“Ok whatever I know...” the driver said. “Let’s get back there for now and see what we’re doing next. You sure you don’t want to drive?”

“No, Sam. I don’t care.”

The doors next to the front seats slammed. Seat belts clicked and the motor sprung to life.

“Was that for real?”

“What, Bruce?”

“The cellphone thing.”

Betty, cautiously, tried to maneuver into an even more tucked down position on her belly. She was worried about her reflection. But her knees ended up bumping into obstacles, and she gave up. Instead, as the truck rolled out of its spot, she focused on her breathing, on keeping it calm and slow.

“Yeah, I watched a whole video about it. Sometimes, Bruce, I wonder if you’re trying at all to get ahead in this world at all. It’s not just about numbers, man. Mr. Shinton prefers people who are educated. He’s not afraid to treat people well if he trusts them, but not if they’re dingdongs.”

“All right, Sam, yes,” he responded, turning away, Betty could tell by the slightly muffled sound of his response. “I know, thanks, I guess. Just do me a favor and talk to them about that.”

“I will,” Sam offered back, their voices right next to her head.

After a short silence, one of them coughed, with an empathic roughness. Betty winced. The car carrying them next bounced slightly as it rolled forward, but not because of his cough, she realized. All of them began a short climb upwards and out.

“I should put on a book,” Sam said, the wide vehicle reaching the street.

It was still pretty dark inside there, in the rolling game of hide-and-seek. Turning her head more to look up from where she was, Betty could see charcoal clouds above the tall buildings. They blocked the sun that should have been hovering over the west side. The sounds of the pieces of the car rattling and the wind whooshing and the occasional horn-blowing all seemed so close.

“...or NPR,” he continued.

“Shut up, just put on the Yankees or something.”

As the radio came on, jumping into the middle of wound-up men talking about something, Betty pulled out her phone. She turned it on, and held it close to her belly. Her inhaled shortened and she felt like her heart had grown to be beating loudly enough to be much louder than she wanted it to be.

She gripped the device and, with one finger, pecked out a text to Jimmy, trying to ignore the ach in her shoulder from being pinned there. As the car crossed under an overpass creating an urban canopy, darkening everything around her more, she could feel illumination escaping from beneath her, reaching out over the seat... She smashed the send button...

*Help*

...and clicked off her phone, before the text bubble even finished expanding.

Then, she crumpled back down on it, folding herself over it. Bright spots from her phone's shine hovered in front of her. On a level above her in space, two streams of conversation filled the car, from the men up front, and from the louder talk radio piped in all around them all. The men driving were talking about something business-related, it seemed, but it was heard to hear.

Betty's thoughts swirled between despair and calculation. Where was she being taken? Who was taking her, and since they worked together, what did they do? How much did they know about her? Why hadn't it been Jimmy who was taken, and not her? It wasn't very productive thinking. She let her forehead lean against the back of the row of seats in front of her.

As the car began picking up speed, she could tell she was on the far west side of the city, riding up the highway. The direction was unclear, perhaps the Bronx, if they got off soon, or either upstate New York or New Jersey.

The man driving changed the radio station to jazz music, sending the sounds of muffled trumpets and stumbling cymbals through the car. One thing was for certain: She didn't have much of a choice at the moment, and she was going where that car was going, like a babe floating down the river.

She was stuck there, she thought. The tinkling of pianos from washed over her and the goons up front jabbered on just a short distance away. She could tell from the shine on the windows that they'd found a patch of setting sun in the clouds.

Springing her phone back to life with her thumbprint, a glowing pot of gold appeared. Except that the pot was her phone's screen, and instead of standing over it, she was trying to block it with her shoulders and neck. She didn't know how it would look from the rearview mirror. It felt way too bright for her.

She thought that she could send Jimmy something like, "In the SUV. No idea where I'm going." Or, "Get help!" But she realized that was probably situations of which he was already fully aware.

She blackened her phone again.

She just needed to wait for his response to buzz her pants back, she decided. Even if she could risk texting anymore, she had no idea what to say. You know... She was just bumping along in the back seat of a car driven by two people that she believed to be kidnappers of some type, and who seemed to not really be listening to each other, but to be almost normal in a particularly strange way.

How do you explain all that?

It wasn't the type of story that she could shout over the rock-n-roll of a loud bar to the girl from college whom she wouldn't see again for weeks, let alone put into words that she could jot down in less than three seconds (preferably) before sending off to Jimmy.

And then she remembered... being at the bar, so getting more and more crowded and she hated it... and but finding a way to elbow out some space and check in with GagglePlus...

And in that calm prologue with her sitting in the food-court, when she was waiting for a couple of knights and all she got was three-quarters hobbits, deciding not to take the opportunity to check in again for points. It was shortly before the first talk of the kidnappers. It basically the last time she had for games.

So, that was it, the best idea she had. She tapped on the GagglePlus app, worried that they'd see her casting shadows on the ceiling or something.

The app found several bars and stores that were fairly near, but she didn't see them, since she had the phone pointing down. It was tilted into a little ramp barely off the ground. She worked a finger underneath and tapped on it, aiming blindly toward the center of the glass, and, responsively, the device shook.

She tilted the phone over a little more, and saw a loading bar sweep across the screen. She quickly snapped the phone back down and slid it under the seat in front of her. As the car slowed into another overpass, she pressed it down into the carpet and tried not to move.

If Jimmy saw that she'd posted an update, he'd know where she was, or at least the general vicinity. Not that she was there anymore.

The car wasn't stopping, and so she settled in, slipping her finger under her phone and tapping it every several minutes, or what felt like that often.

She tried to think of Master Smash. Tried to imagine the figure moving from one side to the other of the screen, alone, flipping and punching and running off combinations. An opponent showed up in head and she punched and flipped him before beginning a steady rhythm jump punches that kept that opponent in the air above her.

Once the men up front seemed deeply engaged in conversation, she snuck a few peaks at the app. She'd been somewhat successful in posting check-ins, with a string of yellow circles dotting her map. Not that any of that would mean much until they stopped. It was a trail with no conclusion. And that was making her heart race again.

It wasn't so much how long the whole thing was taking, what made things bad was that they were now speeding down highways. Which meant that they were far away from the city, and headed nowhere she would know even she could somehow figure out a way to escape from her hiding spot.

She turned her phone again upward and, in a blink, gave a firm slap to the unseen screen.



# Chapter Eleven

## The Truth Is

Seb was starting blankly at his science textbook when his mom walked in on him, with an armload of laundry.

He had a test coming up the next day, and needed to get some hardcore studying in, before it got too late. He needed it done before he wanted to watch Batzinger later, after dinner, though he wasn't sure what for. It'd probably be just more of the same, since it'd been days since anything seemed quite so much out of place with him in his little rants on their screen...

Seb had come to realize that while he'd been getting nowhere on that mystery, he'd also been letting schoolwork get away from him. At least that was something that he could do something about.

But, when his mom had opened his door, he'd been thinking about Betty Van Buren, instead of the stiff open book in front of him. This had been part of the problem. BVB was different, different than he thought girls her age would be... or women, or ladies, or whatever she'd preferred to be called.

She was drifting, not preening. If she used an OMG, it was because something really was OMG. She was quick-witted.

She wasn't one to get herself fancied up to go out much, as far he could tell from seeing her those two times, and from some pictures he'd found online, which meant more and more to him after they knew her. She'd been out with

some women, at some sort of restaurant where they'd gotten large colored drinks.

She wasn't normal pretty, he didn't think, not in the way that he'd been made to think about women as being pretty. Her hair was funky; she wasn't thin, nor curvy, really. She didn't look like either the Bettys or Veronicas (from The New New Archie's) and she didn't really look like any of the girls at his school, obviously, none of those type...

But she was cute, even beautiful in some ways, he could see some people saying. She had kind eyes and a warm smile on her soft face. Her coloring was of the type that'd be friendly to the most amounts of people. Holly was prettier, since her smile would give you chills and her eyes enchanted, he thought without meaning to... and, yet, for all that, Betty looked like goodness in a way that not even Holly could... Connor agreed with him on that.

They also agreed that Betty was really quite strange. She wasn't cool but she was sort of cool. Confident, a problem-solver even, but every so often flustered by moving through the world. And based on his only evidence, a much worse driver than most other adults that Seb knew.

He'd taken to reading her Marshmallow.com articles. He found her writer's voice to be open, needy and honest. He didn't understand all of the words that she used, and sometimes her sentences were hard to follow, but he liked it, as a person first picking up some classic writer might.

And so that's what he'd been thinking about instead of studying...

If his mom had walked in a few minutes earlier, she'd have found a boy who was neither thinking of anything nor studying. He'd meant to hit the books earlier - which mostly meant daydreaming, but still... - and then gotten himself distracted by a game on his phone for almost hour after heading up to his room.

It was based on Teen Titans Go, and they played a Pokeman-like game with all the DC super heroes (and

villains.) He could go from battle to battle and not let his mind concentrate on anything else long enough at all to be recognizing it as important.

It was suddenly a quiet and blank time in his life, while he'd lain there on his stomach, leveling up. Before he finally tossed his phone away, and grabbed at the hard paper bag-covered book that he'd already gotten out, he found himself giggling. He realized that he'd been wasting time again.

And that's where she found him, his face catching the gleam off the slightly stylized picture of a deep-blue watery planet, circled by thin black lines. If someone were to quiz him on it then, he wouldn't be completely ready.

"You're not going to be staying up late again," his mother asked as she dropped the pile of clothes on the foot of his bed, "are you Sebastian? You've been up late a lot on school nights, and you're such a pain in the rear when you don't get enough sleep..."

He sat up from where he'd been sprawled out, contemplating his new friend, Betty, and watched as she finished putting away his undershirts and underpants. As she picked up his jeans, he lifted up off the bed.

"You know," she said, handing him the blue stack, "you used to fit into preemie diapers when we first got you. Probably would have given you onesies in that size if we hadn't already given you so many."

"Haven't grown that much," he mumbled, spilling and then tucking the armload into the bottom drawer of his dresser.

"You stop that..." she responded from the closet where she was hanging a sweatshirt. "Your father wasn't a big man either, but he was one of the greatest anyone ever knew."

He knew both to be probably true. But they both didn't love talking about him, not anymore. Nothing much needed to be said between them.

"And anyway, you're still growing, you're not even at the bottom part of the class anymore."

"I know, mom, sorry. Give me those too," he said, taking his socks.

His mother yawned as the fluffy fabric left her hand, then used it to cover her gaping mouth. She began to talk again before it ended.

"Aaauhahu.nnyway, just make sure you don't forget to..."

She yawned another time, wider even.

"... Auh, don't forget to be thankful that somehow I got you to this point. A pretty decent kid, still living, and with clean clothing, even..."

"I know..."

"And everything's still good at school, right?"

"More or less."

"Anything at all interesting?"

He tried to suppress a smirk the best he could. He still wasn't in the mood to tell her, he needed to wait until the right time. He kept telling himself that over and over. Connor had wanted to tell his parents again, but Paige was dead-set against it. Apparently Connor had almost said something, but she stabbed him under the table with a fork.

Seb was glad he wasn't involved even if their decision would affect him - it was a Tippetts matter - but he secretly agreed with her.

"No, really, everything's fine..."

"Fine?"

"Normal. Pretty average," he shrugged. He looked at her again. "Except, hey, I'm happy you're home, Mom? That's been a nice surprise."

"Thanks, buddy. I know that I've been working late but I need to take some of my vacation days in the next couple of weeks before the holidays, or I won't be able to use them next year, because I can't really take any in December."

"You feel refreshed?" Seb asked.

"I've been running around all day. So, no. Not at all. But I got a lot of chores done for you and me..."

"Thanks, Mom. Like what?"

“Like the dentist, and the documents for your passport, in case we do go to Costa Rica this summer...”

“Oh, cool,” he said, thinking of their last real vacation, at a resort in Mexico two years earlier.

“But, you know, let’s not yet say we’re definitely decide, ok, Seb?”

“Definitely, mom. Definitely not.”

He watched as she straightened out a few of the figurines he had stacked across his bookshelf.

“Seb, let me ask you one more thing... seriously, as your mother... have you been ok? You’ve been really hard to get out of bed, and you’re barely telling my anything.”

“No, really everything’s fine,” he said, and he felt like he could really say that if he looked inside himself and asked how he felt. “I’ve been doing well in school. See,” he added, reaching down for the book. “Studying.”

At least he knew Batzinger was home.

At least he knew that Connor and Paige were ok, so whatever mess he’d gotten them wrapped up in, they weren’t in any immediate danger. For the moment, at least. It didn’t matter if it felt more and more like a false memory, like a cut scene from one of his games: It was real, and he’d been more in charge than either of them when it had happened, and so was more to blame.

His mother clutched the empty basket to her hips, the same way as she would if it were full, and again admonished him against missing sleep, invoking the circadian rhythm. She wanted to steal away his devices and locked them up, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She’d been half-way addicted to TV when she was younger. She’d learned many morals to many stories watching those sitcoms.

“That’s thing: They all thought someone else was minding their children – their teachers, babysitters, nannies – and they didn’t realize that the televisions were raising us. But then the televisions started going away, so where does that leave us now?”

Seb could feel her studying him, like a specimen. His own solution was to smile, a family smile. But she'd already started turning away.

"Anyway, dinner's up in half an hour. Spaghetti. I'm about to put the water on"

The smell of his fresh laundry and mother's deodorant fading, he went back to reading, and did a little better at trying to learn.

The chapter was basically all about calories, which were units of energy. He associated calories with food, but the word applied to anything containing energy. He hadn't even known about how a calorie was the same amount of energy as it took to raise the temperature of one gram of water by exactly one degree Celsius. And somehow humans — who needed this energy, these calories, to survive, to breathe, to move, to pump blood, to think — were built to find this energy in food?

But he was more interested in the chemical reactions. Learning about something like this was interesting, actually. He started going over the bolded words in the glossary. Conduction Conservation of energy Energy transfer: Equilibrium: Heat Kinetic energy: Temperature

A buzzing from the other side of his bed interrupted his education.

He grabbed his vibrating phone and picked it up. He didn't have a name programmed in for the number, and one wasn't coming up. The next ring tickled his palm's flesh.

"Hello?" Seb said, answering the call.

"Hi... is... is Sebastian Liddel there?" asked a male voice crackling in a sharp wind. "Seb-as-tian? Ly-dell. Or Lid-el. I'm not sure..."

"Who's this? Who's there?"

"It is," whoever it was said with a broken loudness, "me. Is this Seb? Are you you kid?"

No one called him, so this was peculiar. He thought he recognized the voice, with its peppery chirping crinkling in

his ear. But he couldn't place it. He thought speaking slower might help, he wasn't sure why.

"Yeah... This... is... Seb... Who's this?... Me?"

"C'mon seriously I said it's me." Seb glanced at his closed door. "Betty's roommate..."

"Jimmy? Why do you sound weird? You sound very shouty."

"I'm in a car. You're on speaker phone."

"Why are you in a car?"

"It's kind of hard to explain but Betty's sort of been abducted. Self-abducted really."

"What?"

"I don't know. She's crazy, we went to this huge office building but..."

And, he told her in the briefest possible terms what had happened in the garage, and how he was now freaking out and trying to catch up. Seb felt the uneasy feeling spreading to him.

Jimmy told him about how the check-ins, which had gotten fewer and further between, had stopped not too far from where Jimmy thought their town was. He'd followed them, as they dotted the Thruway, then exited to a highway with chain gas stations and donut shops, then pulling off to a side road, past a church and into a general area that Jimmy felt like couldn't be anything other than a destination. He thought he knew where to go. But he needed their help. Or something.

"I can't just leave. That's crazy, Jimmy. My mom... it's a school-night... Connor's not even..."

"You gotta help me out..."

"That's not what I'm supposed to do," Seb responded, thinking of how he'd had so little to show for his efforts so far, but then started worrying about Betty again. This was real. How it was real, he couldn't understand, but it felt so real.

“You know, that’s the thing, kid. Sometimes you need to choose to follow the path that lays at your left hand, instead of what’s right.”

“What?”

“You know, when you’re standing a vending machine, and looking at it, and there’s an array of candy bars and Pop tarts and strange brands of cookies? Gum? You’re normally best off getting what’s on the right side, because the left side has the weird stuff. But sometimes you need to go for the crumb cake or Cup o’ Noodles.”

“I don’t know, are you sure?”

“Sometimes you need to do what the moment calls for.”

“Seriously, you’re sure?”

“I’m sure. I just saw this. I wouldn’t be on my way if I wasn’t. That’s why I need your address, so I can pick you up.”

“I could get in a lot of trouble,” Seb said, looking at the dark lacquered knot on the wooden frames of his bed. He thought about how it looked like an angry eye, like he always did. “I don’t even know I could get out of here. My mom made spaghetti.”

“Look, if you can’t, you can’t, but I could use the help. Your friends’ too. I’ve never done this before. I don’t know the script. Like I said, I’m freaking out here. I’m the only one who didn’t sign up for this...”

“You know we’re eleven, Jimmy?”

“I know.”

“Let me ask you something, you know how to drive?”

“Better than Betty, that’s for sure.”

“Hold on for a second...”

Seb strolled over to his door and slowly turned the handle. A vision of an overhead map of his house flashed in his head. He opened it, as silently as he could.

Down the hall, he saw the flickering glow of the television reaching out from under his mother’s door. She sometimes left it on like that when she wasn’t in her bedroom,



especially if she'd been in and out. He imagined her in there later, looking exhausted, her blanket rising and falling with her sweat-smelling breathing.

Over his shoulder down the hall the other way, he could hear the garbage can lid snap shut in the kitchen. Water ran. He gently guided the door closed again and moved away from it.

"Let me message Connor." Seb paused, knowing there was no time to be non-committal but not ready to sign up, "and see what he's doing." He was pretty sure that he knew what Connor would say, but he felt like his friend's opinion was needed. He knew it was. How could it not?

"Ok. But you'll give me the address?"

"I mean, what time could you be there?"

"Six? Ish?"

"Let's see..." Seb said, trying to keep his voice down. "I thought it was going to be a quiet night. I don't even know what they're doing at their house."

But then, he looked at his computer again and thought of Betty, and realized he needed to help.

She was out there, like in the big screen. Batzinger had been out there, they had found him. Betty had been willing to listen and they'd gotten to him, and she got them off the hook. She was that rare good person, tough but curious. And vulnerable, just that little bit vulnerable in her own way, being unafraid of normal things... but that situation that Jimmy was describing was more than that...

And, something that Connor had said held true in his mind: that she seemed destined to get them all into a mess. They'd been texted about that, obviously. Seb couldn't really explain why it never bothered him. But it ended up being right. Or at least, she'd gotten herself into a mess of quite some proportions.

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As Betty learned it later, Jimmy had gotten a notification from GaglePlus that rattled his phone even before noticing her *Help* text.

He'd stayed after they'd left, and looked around for her, thinking she'd squireled herself away somewhere. When he discovered that she wasn't there, he admitted to looking around for hidden cameras, imagining that he'd been set up by a television show, and that someone would soon come rushing out to interview him. Nothing of the sort happened.

Her roommate turned pursuer, he was already well past walking back out of the garage, the way he came in. He'd fled with an extra sneakiness in his step, until he reached sufficiently past the attendant's booth, and then quickened his sprint. He said he'd already chosen that time to look down and pull up his ZapCar app, even though he still had terrible reception, only a single bar.

Jimmy had decided that if the SUV had been involved — like Betty had indicated — in some sort of smuggling, then it would be heading back there, probably, somewhere bad. Once he'd received that the first indication of where she might be, and that she was all right, he knew that he had no choice but to keep tapping at his phone until he'd reserved a car something like six blocks up and two avenues over at the closest Zapp-n-Go station.

Betty also later found out that somehow Jimmy had somehow ended up with Seb's number in his phone. It even had his last name, which Jimmy didn't recall, if he'd even heard before. Betty couldn't remember putting it there, in Jimmy's phone, but she couldn't rule it out either. And then eventually she did remember, it'd been when Jimmy and her were getting pizza after his show. Her battery's percentage was slipping fast through the single digits, but the boys had promised to call if Batzinger had come on, so she'd texted them to try her on Jimmy's phone if he did.

Jimmy would say that he felt ridiculous calling a couple of eleven year olds, but he had no other options worth trying,

no one else who knew, as far as he was aware.

He found most of them at Paige and Connor's house, which was where Paige's friend was also, which would just have to be dealt with. And then they all needed to drive over to pick up Seb at his house.

Connor and Paige had both gone up to get the boy, in a show of normalcy to his mother. They'd made up some story about a school spirit drive, around homecoming preparations. The other girl, Marisa, had waited in the car with Jimmy, who'd been impressed by her knowledge of make-up vloggers.

Jimmy had seen Betty's check-ins slowing down even as he first began navigating his own rented sedan through the city's building traffic. They blinked further and further apart, as the car that she was stuck inside ran away into New Jersey and her optimism faded.

He wasn't really keeping it together too well, either. It made him miserable, thinking about it. He couldn't imagine her, holding her breath beneath the seat. Maybe that was already the most that she could hope for... Maybe they'd discovered her and...

At some point after he picked them up and headed toward the last step in the trail, Betty later learned, Jimmy slipped into offering them fun facts about President Taft to calm his nerves. It was the usual stuff about Taft being the last president with facial hair, or how he threw out the first pitch at a baseball game that was a presidential first pitch, he said. Nothing too deep in policy.

Betty imagined that the kids crammed into his car were fairly mystified by the ritual, especially on top of everything else. She could appreciate that her friend's demeanor would probably not be reassuring. She could even imagined what he must have been like, voice steadily rising in pitch.

And, at that moment in time, Betty's check-ins had long since ceased.

The car that she'd been hiding in had been on an endlessly journey, it seemed. And even after it stopped speeding, it kept going, slowing and turning but not stopping. Until it finally rolled to a halt in front of a tall paneled garage door somewhere in the woods. They paused for it to open and then moved forward into the contained space. Then, they came to a rest inside, and the engine fell quiet.

Betty could barely see anything from her angle, just a concrete ceiling that was dusty but clean, and the bright lights staring down from it.

One of the men gave two short coughs. The other burped.

"Hey, Brucey, one more thing, please... do me a favor and don't let the boss think you don't want to have anything to do with the Rosarios. I don't care if the dad spit in your face. Make us look like a couple of professionals..."

She heard at least one of the car doors open. Their voices took on less of a deep humming pitch. Her heart sped up even further.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Bruce responded.

The remaining front door opened with a quick suction sound.

"I'm serious, though," Sam said. "A reputation is easy to win but much easier to lose. He can think whatever else he wants of us. But we do the job, and don't complain, and that ain't nothing."

The doors slammed shut with the force, one after the other, but the car barely rattled, let alone rocked. She sat up, her head rising like a periscope or an alien's neck above the seat in front of her. She fell back down quickly back into her crouch, to wait for a clearing of the coast.

She could hear them continuing on in a muffled tone. Tipping her body in their direction, she could make out the words if she really concentrated.

“Come look at this,” Bruce said. He paused. A short playful whistle followed. “I guess he won’t mind then, right? A smoke break before we go up, maybe?”

“Ah, ok, sure, you have right?”

“Yeah, I can ‘loan’ you one.”

Another pause. “I’m not looking, are you doing scare-quotes?”

“Yes.”

“Well, thanks for the cigarette then...”

Betty tried to picture them. The one round one, the other bald one. Or was the bald one also the round one? They were never really close enough to see clearly when she’d gotten a chance, in spite of everything, in fact. So they wouldn’t need to kill her if they found her, she thought, since she couldn’t even pick them out in a lineup. Then, she realized that probably wouldn’t make any difference.

The two men had grown quiet, but she could feel them still out there. A couple of time, amid the quiet, they exhaled loud enough for her to hear, no doubt sending the cigarette smoke she was beginning to smell toward her, like a campfire upwind.

A few bursts of muffled conversation began to start up again, grunts more than anything, but mostly they were quiet, lingering out there.

Because she was listening so hard, Betty could hear the sound of a door swinging inward, the white noise in the air seeping out. Then, the gruff gasps of the beefy men, and a shuffling of feet. A new voice, strong and deep, approached them, she figured by where their sounds had been coming from.

“You idiots, I shouldn’t need to tell you this...”

“Mr. Shinton? Sir, how’d you know we’d be here?”

“I didn’t, I was coming to get my other phone out of my car.” There was a pause, brief enough for a look to be exchanged. “Put those out” Another pause. “What is that

anyway, smoking in here... I hope you weren't smoking in my car..."

"Oh, no sorry, Mr. Shinton, we didn't smoke at all in the car. Really, you can smell it..."

"...but, like, we thought we could smoke here, no? Because..."

"You shouldn't be smoking those anywhere."

There was a huff, and a presumed shaking of a head.

Betty, boosted herself up, pushing with much of her weight on one of her elbows, so that she could peak out the window. The cool of the glass touched the very top of her forehead as she looked out, as barely over the car's trimming as possible.

The figures were smallish all the way on the other side of the garage, shrunken. She recognized two of the men by their shapes, finally noticing Bruce's way of smacking his big lips and rubbing his thick eyebrows. (She felt like she could grow to like Brucey, like if he ever did an action show or movie.)

The other guy, Sam, was there, too, bald on top with his oval shape, dressed more slovenly than she'd thought, in jeans and a t-shirt beneath his black leather jacket.

The third man, whom she didn't recognize, looked big even beside those two goons, with high broad shoulders and fit arms, a neck the shape of pyramid. He was balding, but dressed to inspire command in a crisp shirt and tie, with rolled up sleeves, and open eyes. He moved very purposely, his belt cinched tightly around his waste. Even squinting, however, she couldn't make out his face.

As the big man threw up his hands and made his way over to another SUV that was parked there, the other two looked down at their feet, awaiting his return.

Watching them through the dark window felt like watching puppets to Betty, each with its own personality.

He opened the door and stepped up to duck in to retrieve something. He pulled back and returned to the other two,

growing in height to quickly again tower over them, from her vantage point. Betty wondered how close he could come to snapping her in two if he wanted.

She could tell from the way he stopped in front of Sam that he was not pleased with them.

“Look, how many times do I need to tell you this? And a cigar is not a cigarette. A cigar as a once in a while thing, especially, is not the same as the all-the-time every-time of every-day of the week thing. Cigarette smoking is bad. Were you even listening to me the other day?”

“Yes?”

“So, what did I say?”

“Smoking is bad?”

“Right, but what else? About smoking?”

“You said that smoking is bad and smoking is a drug and, that everything is drugs, all medicine is drugs.”

“Good. Thank you. I didn’t expect you to remember.”

“I’ve been listening...”

“All medicine is drugs. Every single one, I said. Aspirin. Chemo. Dopamine. Thiola... you name.”

“But I still don’t get it? Why are they bad drugs?”

“Yeah, like he said, they just make you feel better. They don’t get you high.”

“And why do you get to be the one who feels better? Feeling ok after you haven’t, that is getting high. People barely even appreciate anything anymore. With all the other people out there, you get to be the one to feel better? Our prehistoric aunts and uncle, who lived a life of dirt and pus? They can’t feel better, but you can? Medicine is a drug you take even before you know it. It alters your consciousness.”

“Right, like you said...”

“But that doesn’t mean that all medicine is bad, I just meant to put out the context of how things work, how we need to think about things. I’m sure you understand, right?”

They nodded their heads.

“Smoking is bad either way. At least don’t do it here. Or in my cars, definitely not in my cars.” He paused and looked at them again. “You’re trying to read the things that I told you about?”

“Oh yeah.”

“I know you don’t think I care, if you know or not. But I do. I want everyone who works here to understand what we’re doing. I don’t care if you’re the type of seek only money and never truth. There’s just the thirty of us, but sometimes I feel like even that is too big, for here, on this right now, we all need to know what the world is like to do the things that we do...”

“It’s not too big, Mr. Shinton. And, I read the NakedInfinity post, at least, I don’t know about Bruce, but I read it and I’ve been learning a lot, thank you, thank you...”

“Nah. I read, I read...”

“Ah that post. Well, then at least you know: People are horrible, bad, terrible, no good things, so there’s no accounting for what they’ll do. But that’s not true, of course, that’s just what everyone thinks. People do wild awful things, but they also can be very easy to predict. They might be kind one minute, to thinking of beaches the next, to outright rage in a heartbeat. But they react to stimuli. This is all part of that, too, if you think about it. All of this.”

“You make it sound obvious, sir.”

“I hope enough for you,” Shinton said, and Betty slinked back down, both of her hands stinging with pins and needles. “Now get downstairs, there’s some kid acting up, I heard before coming down. We may need you to help remind him how easy he has it. At least threaten to do it, in the most threatening way possible, like I know you know how.”

Betty heard feet slapping the concrete, and then a door handle jiggle and click.

“He really was wrong, though,” Bruce called back. “I read it.”



“We know you did, don’t be an idiot,” came the response from his coworker.

About twenty seconds after that came the sound of the two sides of a bolt lock slipping into connection. Betty looked again at her phone, super quickly, to see the time was 6:39 p.m. She had twenty nine percent remaining on her battery, and absolutely no signal. She looked at all her useless apps, a candy dish of impotence.

As the screen dimmed to darkness in her hand, Betty focused on her ears. She listened for any hint of another person or people still being present in the garage. Failing to hear anything at all aside from the lights above and a brief gust of wind outside, she let her whole body relax on the floor of the SUV, unsure what to do next.

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Standing just about in the middle of nowhere, in a big cleared away area in a forest, Seb felt like Connor, Paige and her friend Marissa were looking at him, and only him. He didn’t know why, except that he was the only thing separating them from whatever was in the warehouse in front of them.

Did they all really expect to go in together, like one big group? Just go up and knock on one of the big garage doors and wait for it to open? They probably assumed he’d have some better read of the situation, some better plan. He could tell from Connor’s eyes that he expected him to...

He didn’t, so only one thing seemed right. He had to make something up. He looked at the big building past the doors, hidden by the trees from below, but quite apparent from Google Earth. It was very big, the building, though, he could tell even better from down there, a few long concrete rectangles stacked on top of each other, and stretching back into the woods.

“Look, you guys stay here, and Jimmy and I will try to find a way in. And, if we’re not back in an hour...”

“What...? What are they going to do? Call for back-up?” Jimmy asked, shrugging.

Paige shot a look at him, sour enough to make Seb need to stifle a giggle. He saw that she, at least for now, actually was keeping it together, for the most part. Mostly for Marissa, he figured. And then he realized that life was really about keeping yourself sane enough to help the next less sane person next to you.

“No, or, I don’t know, yes?” Connor responded, raising his fat eyebrow. “About the calling somebody.”

“Look, sure, just call somebody, and, Paige... you’re old enough to be learning to drive, right?”

“Second half of the year is driver’s ed. I just have a study hall now. But... my dad let me drive this summer, when we went up to the lake house, and I pretty much know how... Shut up, you stupid monkey,” she added toward Connor.

He looked at Seb and winked. His friend wanted him to do it, he could tell. He wasn’t sure why, but Connor always trusted him, which felt good.

“Well, good,” Jimmy continued, “worst comes to worst and we’re not back in an hour, just drive the car straight back down the road to the highway and wait for us there. We’re just going to look around and see what’s up. If we find her, it may take a little bit longer...”

“Seb?” Marissa broke in. “Are you sure you’re old enough to be walking up to a strange building, with just this little guy. Aren’t you, like, ten?”

On their way there, out of his development and onto the highway, they’d driven past the very pizza restaurant where Seb had celebrated his fifth birthday. A place with animatronic anthropomorphic animals, led by a police captain wolf.

He’d shivered as it approached on the side of the fast-moving road, but Jimmy’s erratic driving once again had

their car swerving to stay out of another lane in a way that caused Seb to grab for the door handle, costing him his train of thought. No one else had noticed.

None of them really know why they were there, not Connor, really, not Paige, and especially not Marissa, a sweet girl with hair cut in bangs meant to be stylish.

"Eleven," he replied after some delay.

"Are you sure this a good idea?"

Paige wrapped her arm around the girl's shoulder, but she looked back with apprehension in her brown eyes and a weak smile on her dry lips. Seb took a step closer to them.

"Listen, Marissa, Paige, none of us are sure any of this is a good idea, but Jimmy here is a Broadway actor..."

"Off-Broadway actually," Connor interrupted to point out.

"...and as an *Off*-Broadway actor, I'm sure he knows how to sneak around. And, I'm sure he's learned that I learned how to at least check things out without arousing suspicion."

"Indeed," he said, stiffening his back and straightening.

"Indeed. Although we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for your..."

"...and, you don't need to be freaked out," Paige butted in to confirm, catching the spirit. "No matter what happens with this guy and my brother's friend, we're going to be ok. You and I are safe, ok? And my brother, he's staying with us. And these guys, they're going to be fine. You know? Fine."

"Really?"

"We'll be fine and they'll be fine. They'll definitely be fine."

Marissa shook her head, and the small rim of hair hanging on her forehead bounced.

"Fine? How do you know?"

Paige's eyeballs titled up, and her pupils bounced around like she was searching for the steps in a math problem. Seb could tell that she was looking for an answer in her head that she felt she must have in her head. And, he felt like she

wouldn't give up until she found something. That's how she was.

"I know because I'm the big sister here. Not just to them, but to you, too. Everything will be fine, and we'll be on the junior varsity basketball team this winter and go to the prom this spring... and everything that we do will be better, because she'd tried doing this, just tried doing something that will be fine, work out just fine, one hundred percent..."

"That's a terrible speech," Connor grunted in a way meant to draw both of their attentions, before turning to Seb and Jimmy. "I'm going with you guys."

"Connor," Seb said, "it's, ugh, fine... you don't need to come... it'd be better," he added, eying the girls, suggestively, "if you stay here..."

"You don't know what's up there. It could be heavily armed. It could be thick with surveillance. There could be booby traps. You don't even have a locksmith in your crew."

Jimmy invited him to walk with him and Seb, over to the edge of the service road, where they could

"We just can't leave the women here alone, Connor," Jimmy said, throwing her thumb over her shoulder. "It's nighttime.."

"C'mon Seb, it's my sister... She's tougher than me..."

"Really, Connor, it won't take long. If we find anything, we'll come back if we can, I promise."

"Promise?"

"Definitely. And I'm sure your sister won't admit it, but it will be good for them to have you here."

He tossed up his stubby arms.

"I'll accept it, then, you got me. I'll stay. Just be careful, ok?"

"We'll be careful."

"Because I'd miss you..."

"I'd miss you a lot too."

Jimmy coughed.

"I don't want to rain on your mutual respect session, but I got a friend, too. And she's trapped in there, maybe hurt, right now... right this minute..."

"Sorry Jimmy, let's go," Seb said. "One hour," he said stepping forward.

"Any later," Jimmy turned to say to the rest of the kids, "and we'll go up to the highway to meet you when we get back. Try to stay there as long as you can so long as it doesn't seem sketchy. But we obviously know at some point you'll have to leave if we don't show up. Definitely call somebody at that point, like the police."

He stepped forward to grab Paige's hand, and holding it, looked down on her. Seb realized as he looked back that was probably an unusual experience for him, with someone who was essentially an adult or older. He seemed unfamiliar with being taller.

"Otherwise, you wait. Ok?"

"Ok," she answered, and then watched as his steely stare broke and he swiveled back on his heels and marched weakly toward the door.

"Oh and, don't forget we're doing this for the best reasons," Jimmy said. "The only reasons. They have my friend, who is a very nice person, in there." Seb caught him staring a bit too long at the rental car that he'd handed them, via the keys. "And we'll be fine and you'll be fine. I know it. "

After they'd taken just a few steps away from the group, Jimmy turned back and called, out a bit too loudly for Seb's taste.

"Oh, and don't post anything here from here, from goodness sakes." Seb watched him eyeing Marissa's hands. "I'm serious."

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Her cell phone was just as good as a seven-inch slab of glass and metal. Except for the clock and the calculator and the music, and the photos that she could scroll through and manipulate to pass the time, if she wasn't trying to preserve battery life.

Every attempt to connect to the outside world timed out or hung up, even when it seemed like for a minute that she at least had 3G. But it never held, never allowed her to even see if Jimmy had been texting. And, without knowing exactly where she was, she wasn't ready to join the sole WiFi network, which was named FFFShinyTimeProd. She didn't want to alert anyone to her presence if she didn't need to help them out like that.

She lifted her arms a bit higher over the seat next to where she was laying on her back, and tried again to reach her carrier. A yellowish glare from the ceiling lights bounced into her eyes. She wanted her phone to connect, LTE, but it wouldn't. No phone would in that place, she was sure. She keep trying every few minutes, even being sure.

Laying there on the cool vinyl of the seats, she thought of her situation like it was a simulation. Like she wasn't really living it. Because of her lack of success with her phone, she thought that meant that she was deep underground, below a mountain's worth of rock. But she knew that wasn't true, since she'd seen their entrance, more or less? There'd been no descent, the doors were a few dozen feet away...

Or, was it possible that there was a manufactured dead zone that covered a wide bubble around the entire building that she was in? Wherever it happened to actually be? All she knew was where she was, a phone was just a thing to trace rectangles with. She'd been able to forget about the games that she'd normally pull up to pass the time — she could even reach back to apps like Angry Birds POP! or Pinball Mania Reverberations — but which would suck her phone's power down, like a filthy elephant at a watering hole.

She wasn't sure how much longer she could stay there. Waiting for a ride back the way that she came seemed like a safe option. Until, as the hours began adding up, time inching by, she felt she needed to start considering other potential escapes.

Finally, there came a point where Betty felt like she'd been there a really really long time, like she hadn't eaten in four days. The truth was it'd been at least twelve hours instead, she realized, since she'd eaten. She hadn't had any appetite at lunch, and she'd basically only had coffee and a muffin for breakfast. Lots of people would find reasons not to eat just before heading out on an adventure... Some people would only want a muffin... she liked muffins and wasn't sure why she didn't have them more often...

Just as staying put with her stomach growling was turning into the least appealing option, a loud set of bangs from two yanks on the door beside the vehicle bay echoed through the garage. Betty rubbed her eyes, and surprised herself with a little burp. From that side of the room, a much quieter version of the same noise followed, then, almost immediately afterward, the sound of glass cracking.

She pulled herself up again and looked out from the car again.

The garage space remained empty, until...

Two figures appeared, waddling in like two cardboard pieces stuffed into plastic anchors on a board. Their arrival forced Betty to duck back down.

She went to take one more quick look before squeezing herself as much as possible under the seat. She'd try again to be as quiet as possible. But she never squeezed down, because that look revealed that she had nothing to fear. The exact opposite, in fact, was the case.

As she looked out the window, she knew the dark tinting meant she could see out but they couldn't see in, that they were the ones who were about to be surprised. She went to open the door.

Stepping out with a slight stumble as her legs started working again, Betty lifted her hand as if she was hailing down a taxi. They immediately saw her and all hurried to embrace each other.

“Oh Betty,” Seb gasped, suddenly smushed between Jimmy and his roommate. “I can’t believe it. I didn’t even know if Jimmy was making any sense... Are you okay?”

Pulling back, Betty saw a dour look on both of their faces, like unwilling neighbors to a punk rock band.

“OMG...” she finally let out as quietly as she could. “Thank you, kid, thank you thank you. And I’m so so sorry Jimmy. I didn’t know that was going to happen, I never wanted to leave there...”

She bit the inside of lower lip a bit, trying to avoid crying. She wasn’t faking that. It wasn’t that she’d been frightened. It was just that it was so sweet of them to come, especially after everything she’d put them through.

“So yeah, we’re here. Took a little effort, but you had a five-and-a-half foot gay Broadway musical extra and a ten-year-old Smurf looking for you. Which meant we were obviously going to crack the cases. Now, if you don’t mind...” Jimmy said, pointing out the door that they broken in, “can we get out of here? I lied to the other kids, I’m really not a good actor in situations like this.”

She turned back to Seb, who looked again like a little boy in the middle of the large room. He was not just young, but undersized. Still, determination covered his face, a scared determination but a determination nonetheless.

“Where are we anyway, Betty?”

So, she told them the gist of the people that she’d spied. Including how she’d caught a glimpse of Paul Shinton himself, a strong man shaped like a triangle on his upper half. He was bigger than the other guys, and she thought the other guys were pretty big. Seb mumbled something about a gym teacher.



“I can’t believe you guys are here,” she finished. “How’d you even get here?”

“Rented a car, followed your check-ins,” Jimmy responded. “On the map, when you got this way, there really was nothing else around. It seemed impossible for it to be anything else. It was just this big box on the map, and a bunch of forests and a lake and solid color. It was just here.”

Betty tried to think about it in terms of CityRiddle. She could imagine a map with just one building site down a road — it was definitely down a road — far from the highways and interstates.

“But what is this place?” Seb asked, beginning to explore the garage more fully with his eyes. “Is it someplace they use to make drugs or something?”

“It looks like some place they’d make drugs.”

Betty thought about what she had overheard. Certainly, it didn’t seem related to digital marketing management. This place looked more like a science building in the game, she’d guess. Not one of the drug dens...

“I don’t think they make drugs here. I don’t know exactly what they’re doing here, but not making drugs, I’m pretty sure.” She paused. “I think they have prisoners...”

“Prisoners, ha!”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“No, really, prisoners. Like you said. Like Batzinger.”

Seb was distracted, barely even there, she noticed. She would have expected him to be much more excited by her revelation. Following his eyes, she saw why.

“Hey, isn’t that... isn’t that the SUV that we saw?”

“It’d be weird if isn’t,” Betty said. “Can’t you see the license plate, after all this?”

“What do you think, I’m Paige...Who’s outside by the way. You realize that? With the car...”

Betty wanted to laugh. It was insane, her bad influence of the kids; she was clearly contributing to their delinquency, and possibly injury.

“You didn’t really bring her, did you?”

“Yeah, and her friend. Cute girl. Honest,” Jimmy said. “Total sweetheart.”

“I can’t believe you fools really decided to show up here for me,” Betty let out, not even minding her words. The invocation of them being fools disturbed both of them, at least a little bit.

“It just worked perfectly in my head,” she said, aloud, not even meaning to say it. “I just said that aloud,” she added, deliberately. “I didn’t mean to.”

Betty felt them examining her. She let down her guard ever so slightly, still broken down by her time in hiding.

“Betty...” Jimmy said.

“Sorry,” she replied curtly, on purpose. “You don’t know how hard it was to stay crouched down and basically hold my breath and not make a peep back there. To be quiet enough not to be heard for a few hours there. I can still smell the ratty smell. I’m a little light-headed.”

Jimmy pulled her in to grip her to the top of his chest.

“I shouldn’t have let you do that, get into the car like that, even if I don’t know why you did that,” he said. “And, logically, honestly, right now, we should be getting out of here...”

She felt like she wanted another chance to plead her case. She wanted to be allowed to say that she wanted to stay as forcefully as she could. But she shouldn’t force them. She probably had that power, but she didn’t want to use it. If she ever made it home alive, she’d try to remember the feeling of empowerment.

As she stepped away from him and launched into her arguments, she could sense him preparing for her pitch.

“So it’s true that I don’t know what’s going on here,” she said. “But I do know that something interesting must be

happening behind those doors right there. Something that probably includes people in trouble. Maybe a lot of people. And if I don't get a peek, I won't ever be able to live with myself. Think about it, and let me ask you, would you?"

"Betty..." Jimmy started. "I don't really..."

"I'm already out way later than I should be," Seb broke in. "What if my mom tries to call..."

"There's no reception here anyway. And, even if there was, you're fine, how late is it yet, not late right? So, what do you say, just a peak? We'll just pop our heads in. And Jimmy, c'mon. What would Taft do?"

"WWTD"

"Guys..."

"Well, shut up, though," Jimmy added, "because that's actually an interesting question, because of his well known love of..."

"Shh... no really, guys, shhh..." Seb abruptly hissed.

Startled, the others ducked their necks into their bodies, before looking around, like a pair of ducks. Frozen in place, it took them all less than a moment to realize that it'd been just the air vents popping and crackling to life.

The machinery settled, and began blowing a speed-cooled sheet of light air down at them that barely felt like anything by the time that it reached them. The menace signaled by the groaning noise wasn't real, but then again, in fact, they were actually, right then, inhabiting somewhere threatening.

She weighed rethinking her decision, but... she didn't do that anymore. Not after her time in solitary confinement. She knew it, that was the problem. She needed to pursue what she knew.

Behind the closed door in front of them could be anything: a lab with lasers, a torture factory, a pool full of sharks...

Or it could be a family, like Seb and the other kids said they saw that first night.

Looking over at him, Betty realized that something along those lines must be what he was thinking, too. He was a nice boy. She wished none of it was happening, though, wow, he was going to have something interesting for show and tell, she thought.

She watched him as, amid their silence, he wandered to the edge of the room and started rummaging through the contents of a shelf against the wall. Both Jimmy and Betty witnessed him finding an object that was laid out on it. And as she raised it, they realized it was a gun. It was a simple handgun, black, stubby. It looked heavy, and huge in his hands. He rotated it, as if to study all of its sides.

“You’re not taking that...”

“What if we need to protect ourselves?” Seb shot back. “I’m really good at shooting games, like at an arcade. With real guns you can hold. Stand up ones, with zombies and deer and ducks and whatnot.”

“I’ll give you three guesses who I think you’d shoot first with a gun. And for a little hint, the right guesses are each of us.”

“So, I’m old enough to sleuth with you, but not old enough to hold a firearm?”

“Precisely.”

Jimmy touched them on their shoulders. They’d been talking a bit loudly, he emphasized by speaking softly.

“We should decide what to do. I still think we should leave, but if you guys want to go in, let’s get it over with,” he said. He signaled with his eyes that he knew about the boy. “And you’re not bringing the gun, I agree. That’s ridiculous. I hope that thing’s not even loaded.”

“I would feel better with the gun.”

“We don’t care how good you are at Aliens Extermination,” Betty said. “And honestly, I could, but I’m not taking that gun either. It’s just asking for trouble.”

Guilty into giving it up, Seb trotted back across the room and let the gun slip out of his hand and onto the desk. As

she began to walk them across the room to the door, she noticed them each checking their phones.

“Seriously, I’ve shot a gun before, I could totally do it,” she said, in a falsely chirpy tone. “Oh and really,” she added, appreciating their noses sniffing their phones, “there’s nothing but that dodgy WiFi and I’m not really interested in pinging their network. Once you do, who knows, they might have an alert for that,” she told them.

As they stuffed away their phones, Seb looked to her, and she could tell his mind was letting go of a pit of tension that’d formed to engage with the device. He blinked his eyes, then pinched down with his brows. As Jimmy’s attention rejoined them as well, Betty felt herself thinking that they were protected, for now, from the hassles of the world, but they still were not safe from reality. It was a weird condition.

The blowing air sputtered to a stop with a few powerful series of thumps.

Betty, stopping completely as they marched, nodded to other two, and once they nodded back, led them forward again. Looking back, she noticed that it appeared that Seb was trying to take a snapshot in his head of where she was at. She wanted to hand him her phone to post something, but remembered that they had only a slightly better than average chance of making it out alive.

# Chapter Twelve

## Rewards Will Come

**Opening the door from the garage toward them** with a yank, they found themselves stepping into a dim and sterile space. It was almost like a hospital or a type of science building, but cooler, without the energy, and more like an office, actually, or maybe a government property.

Only one in every two or three bulbs overhead shone down, a result of either some slight paranoia or overall neglect. The floor was cheap but slick. A slight whiff of paint mixed soap mixed with a slight bit of the mustiness of sawdust.

The truth was that they'd gotten themselves into this mess, each of them, and needed to go deeper to get out of it. Being there didn't seem real, but necessary. Once inside, they couldn't just step back among the black SUVs, and then out of there. They couldn't turn around without quickly wondering again within hours how Batzinger was connected to the place.

He'd returned home but there was no denying that he was different. They'd seen that in his videos, as well as up close. He was off, like he lived through something and was still living through it. So, if he'd been there, and gotten that way, why was that?

All three of them peered down the hallway, which got longer the more you looked at it, thinking of all those things.

The walls stretched out to the horizon, like an endless tunnel in the side of the mountain.

Once they let the door close and their eyes adjusted, they immediately noticed that it was flanked by tall thick glass windows. Each was nearly the size of a big rig trailers.

From where they stood down to the end of the hall, once it was dark, they could see each was glowing, all in green... Off in the distance, it seemed to be favoring certain hues in the green spectrum, surely, but also flashing a rainbow of green palates. Green in a shade of almost black, and green streaked with all different color splashes.

To Seb, the parallel light shows reaching the panels of glass seemed to touch the windows in a second-hand way, almost ghost-like. To Betty, it was like a row of old-fashioned TVs set up to reflect back, in pulsating tones, some exciting events occurring just beyond them.

Damp and mossy colors filled the hallway ahead of them. Suddenly, the ceiling felt lower than it should be, but that was likely only because of its darkness. It was the type of ceiling that had bare iron rafters.

Seb thought hard about their options.

Every step they took forward was a step away from Connor. And the girls, too. Truly, Paige would be appalled, considering everything. That he would even contemplate treading into the verdant and lightly strobing scene. But he wasn't able to get over the feeling that he wasn't in charge of anything at this point anyway.

He couldn't object, he figured. He was there.

No, instead, he decided there was really only possible choice: going forward, so long as Betty wanted.

He could only control the pace.

So, not waiting for Betty's instruction or okay, Seb stepped forward, able with a few scurries to emerge around the other side of them. If they were going to explore what was going on behind those green windows all in a row —

and he expected that he wanted to be first — he would have been the one that had did it.

He'd been there, pushing them at the start, finding his nervousness to be an asset, for a change; for his computers to lead him somewhere on the map; for his silly near-obsession with Batzinger to actually matter. He'd been the one to lead them. Or something.

Seb walked in a broken stroll, noting after a few steps further in that the colors that he'd been seeing hadn't really been colors at all, just shadows, more or less, creating the sense of the colors in the green shapes. And then he discovered that the windows themselves were more screen-like, sheets of translucent green.

As he got close enough to see into that first glass-walled room, on the near right side, he saw that he would need to look around and past the furniture that was pushed up against the glass. But there was a Tetris-like shape, like a level gone wrong, through which he could stare right into the room.

Once he did, his heart jumped toward his left shoulder, and he let out a "Holy..."

Jarred by the site before him, his eyes literally bugged out of his head. Like he'd been the turtle character on MasterSmash taking a punch, that kind of bugging out eyes. He realized that was a joke that Connor would probably appreciate more, but then, he started to ask whether they'd play enough, because he thought they played...

Betty and Jimmy came up, following his lead, after his slight head-start. Clearly alert to the danger that his shouting had signaled, her face showed also a bit of exasperation, until she reached a vantage point close enough in.

In front of them, behind the slightly glowing glass, sat a long somewhat unformed room. It was cut unequally in two by an incomplete wall. A playful blonde girl was plopped



down in the middle of the bigger side, at a desk. She stared at the smaller screen on it, tinted by the green between.

It was like a display you saw while on line for a ride at Disneyland, or a Christmas scene in a yard. So lifelike. There was a desk and a bed and a vanity, each a bit shoddy-looking on closer inspection, but perfectly natural-feeling. They were staring into an almost full-sized dollhouse, or something along those lines.

Then Seb noticed the blond's back bouncing; she was talking to the laptop on her desk. And, as she did, she played with her hair, slowly, clearly by habit. She ran her fingers down and back through the strands, and then fluffed them, before flopping them, from side to side.

And then she did it again, in a small unconscious loop. There was something real about that loop, random each time, but never much different.

They watched without sound. When her hands weren't in her locks, she was using her loose skinny fingers to do some of her speaking for her, gesturing at the empty space in front of her. Her speaking-style seem geared toward the spiritual and expressive, or maybe obsessive and guilty.

Seb couldn't see what was over her shoulder, on the screen. He didn't even think it mattered so much, the more he watched. What mattered was that the person sitting across the glass, she was an actual person. The human held in there had been there for who knows how long, and had never found a way to send a message out, he assumed.

Betty had joined him there in also staring silently, in disbelief, he realized. From over her other shoulder, Jimmy swung his head in disbelief.

"Tell me, is that really a girl in there?" he asked, breaking into a bit of a song. "A blond girl, twenty-something, long, nice hair? I mean, is that girl really in there?"

"Yeah," Seb said, thinking "unless I'm seeing things," before adding to himself, "or dreaming."

Could I be dreaming? was not a question you asked yourself very many times if you were actually dreaming but probably more than you did when you were awake. He didn't know at that point what was real or what could happen, based on everything that had happened.

"You know, if we can't get in there to get her out," Betty said, "let's get things working in the right direction so that we can, ok?"

Jimmy took a chess-move of a step backward.

"Should we be just standing here, right in front of her, like this? You don't think she'll be able to see us, do you? Through that green stuff? Like when she turns around?"

"You had better hope not," said Betty, feeling intrigued by the discovery of something that was really bizarre.

"I do," Seb said. "Does that count?"

"Not really," Betty replied.

The little room there, and the girl in it, were more than she'd imagined that she could possibly find here. The girl was indeed a prisoner, right there in front of them. Again, it was more than she knew what to do with. It was amazing, she thought, like the word amazing was really meant to be used. It felt like a sudden blizzard. Almost too completely world-changing to be true.

She took out her phone, flinching when she saw the red battery symbol. Tilting her phone and stepping up to the glass, she aimed forward and tapped the shutter button.

Betty turned from the wall, and moved somewhat down the hall to where she could study, through the glass, the small space attached to the space in which the girl currently sat. Beside it, separated by a short wall, there was another bed, and a bathroom-looking area toward the back. A small toilet and smaller sink.

Betty had expected the other two to follow her. But, as she stood there past the sectional divide, those two continued to be planted in place, and watching the girl's

silent conversation. They looked to her almost as if they were expecting someone to suddenly un-mute the sound.

Since they were so engrossed, Betty took a few steps back and spun on her rubber heels.

Eager to explore before Seb got the chance to get there first and get them in trouble, Betty stopped her rotation to face the windows across the hall. She started walking, moving further than she intended before she could realize how far she'd gone. She was halfway across the room. She wanted to call over to Jimmy but she felt like something in inside her was mashing the A button.

She needed to see it, whatever it was. That little blond girl was no monster, but what could be behind door number two?

She reached the opposite side of the hallway, and stumbled to a knee immediately upon fixing her gaze. Her chin hung down, as her own eyes bulged out. Straightening back, she gently jammed her face up, griping her jaw with her right hand and inadvertently covering her own gasp.

Taking another looking and choking back a yelp, she listened to their mutterings from the other side about the girl's channel... What exactly would it be like? What was she into to... She was absolutely going to be fairly popular, based on her familiar way with the laptop's forward facing camera, that was clear...

"Hey, you guys," Betty finally rasped, clenching her cheeks together. "Take a look at this. Like now."

Because there it was: Batzinger's room. Or a good part of it at least. The same room that she now knew. Before her, a diorama, a little scene, like she'd made out of shoe boxes when she was young. But of his living space and life-size. Everything was lined up like it should be, a studio version of his home show, trapped behind that green glass.

To the side, where his bed normally sat, his bed sat. The mattress and plain brown covers were really there. Or something that looked like his bed, exactly how it should be.

And next to that was his dresser, frosted with scattered books and game cases and other paper messiness, looking just like his dresser.

Straight ahead, past his chair and his desk, she noticed, instead of his wall, which she never knew, there was a solid block of unadorned steel. Mike's whole situation, his whole room, everything, or enough for a ninety five percent copy of it in a video, was right there, locked in. It was there, bound by the severe gray shine of the back wall, or green-gray as it would be to her, a fact that she felt fit the rest of his sense of shame.

"Seriously, dude, this time, your buddies' minds are going to be blown," Betty called. "Because seriously I never even say 'dude,' you can ask Jimmy, but this is like a 'dude' thing. Dude."

Seb skipped over, and reaching her, just kept going, essentially falling sideways, face first, against the glass. Pressing his cheek against it, he let out a knowing grin. White vapors snapped into existence on the glass, and then shrunk slowly down to rounded blobs; then, they appeared again, only to shrink away, slightly differently.

"That's his room. There. Right?"

She raised her eyebrows at him, as he peeled himself off to stand upright.

They both began laughing, from somewhere in their guts. It hurt Betty's stomach as she tried to hold it in.

"What?" Seb asked, mock-hurt. "Because maybe you're seeing something different, and that's why you're smiling? Like something totally different than me. How am I supposed to know? Like a big pile of money or naked guys. You know, wish fulfillment. No seriously... This situation is unprecedented... I'm not even kidding about that"

"Naked guys?"

"Or whatever... a big juicy steak, a diamond ring? Like wish fulfillment, where it shows whatever you most want to

see. With holograms or pheromones or some greater science.”

“I’m seeing Batzinger’s room too. Relax.”

“Me too,” added Jimmy, who they suddenly realized wasn’t laughing as much. “Although, you know, I haven’t him watched over and over like you guys. But still pretty much a fair amount, I’d say, and I’m pretty sure that’s his room. And... what’s so funny anyway?”

Neither of them would be able to explain as they giggled.

Betty felt bad for the boy standing there next to her, as finished swallowing the strong laughs he pulled up to lighten the scene. His thin face drawn in on itself, and like it was for her, laughing was a defense mechanism for him. And, Seb, it looked like, was beside himself. Jimmy, she could tell, was thinking of his show, and how he might never perform his few lines again. But she didn’t worry as much about him.

She took out her phone, leaned back, and took a dark picture, and then just one more. She didn’t want to run down her batteries further. Seeing her documenting the scene, the other two did too.

“You know what I almost, like, love about my friend Connor?” came Seb’s thin voice, with the rising timbre of animated young speech.

“What?” Betty asked amid the clicking of false shutters, watching him speak out what was on his mind.

“He wouldn’t be freaked out by this. Like, what we’re doing right now. Or, oh... he might be freaked out, totally. I don’t know if I’d say it like that, but he would just keep stumbling forward, in moments like this. Complaining, wildly, but pressing on. Loudly, but loyally. You know? Loyalty. That’s hard to find these days”

Jimmy harrumphed.

“These days? What do you know about these days?” he said. “Anyway, you’re talking nonsense. A friend who’d blindly follow you for no reason shouldn’t be your friend.”

“Look who’s talking,” Seb pointed out.

Jimmy, looking confused for a second, opened his mouth to speak, but let it just hang there, like a meme, unintentionally.

Betty felt her overworked ribs and quickly ceased the start of a further chuckle when she remembered where they were. Naked men? He thought that, instead of games? Or even steak's first? And, that was what he was thinking of, and not the obvious implications of the series of human storage compartments? Something about this Shiny Time place absolutely wasn't good.

She stared into faux room, unsure what to think. But then...

"Wait, guys, look..." she said, finally noticing the computer wasn't where it should. It wasn't anywhere.

Jabbing at the others, she pointed out the lack of the hardware — which should have been apparent from her first second staring there but somehow hadn't been. She began wondering if her below average performance was an issue of her being still dazed from being a stowaway, or something different. She didn't usually get afraid, per se, not with the fear like she'd been feeling, she had to admit.

She thought about Suzy, her boss. As she thought about it, the little glass rooms, except for their tint, reminded Betty of their editor's room that they'd all huddled in, all of the other editors, Suzy, and, for some reason, they were all debating Talkersation, Renaldo's story.

If Suzy had been there in front of the false rooms, she would probably be passed out already, having fainted. Or even dead from a heart attack, Betty thought. But, then, she paused, was that really true? Suzy's stories, she believed, indicated some willingness to adventure, and she believed the stories to mostly true, right?

Maybe everyone ended up doing that now and again, being brave, following the path to the truth. Renaldo never mentioned doubting her, and he'd certainly heard enough of Suzy's stories, too.

What was it about what her stories, anyway? They were supposed to be a good distraction, but she'd somehow used them on Betty, she just knew it. All along, Suzy had been teaching her that there were all sorts of things that you could know, almost like she was a kid learning karate from a wise old karate master.

Those stories made Betty think that really strange things could be accomplished, wild (or mundane) mysteries to be unlocked, if you were willing to ask questions. And only now did she realize that she'd been meant to think that way about the stories. Little parables.

And, wow, she had a lot of questions: How did Batzinger's room end up here? Why green screens behind the furniture, why the big rectangular gap of free space where the door might be? And, if Mike Powers was in there, for days, how did he do it, keep himself sane? Could anyone stay sane in there?

Betty thought that she once heard a Japanese game show like that mentioned, but really wasn't sure who had told her about it.

"Look," Jimmy said, walking toward the little bunk area next to this room. "You're not going to believe me, but the door's open, so to speak."

And, so it was, just crack, by the side with an extra bed and the bathroom. The smooth edge wasn't touching the wall; she noticed the glass beginning to double up where the room split, right on the crease and hard to see.

"I don't know," Seb said, looking like he was feeling hesitant to even consider the thought, "I don't really want to be in there."

"We should keep going," Betty added, eyeing the green-glowing panels down the hall.

"Listen," Jimmy responded, "I really think that we need to consider the importance of..."

But it was already too late, Betty was striding away once again, with her quick short steps. Squeaky steps, Seb

noticed. If there were these two rooms, there would have to be others. And she could clearly see a full row of possibilities. She figured most were relevant in that way, and then how the thought of that involving real people was trull disgusting.

Jogging forward and not stopping for a bit, the next half-room enclosed in glass that Betty encountered was a full-on dark mess, with a green lumpiness to it. The long frizzy haired figure in the middle, sitting on a bed, swayed somewhat roughly. Heavy metal posters hung on the navy blue wall; Betty could tell the young headbanger was talking into a desktop computer, of some sort, beside the bed frame.

He was holding a guitar in his lap, electric. He flipped his hair, and, for a second, turned his face toward them. They saw, through the green film, that he was actually quite handsome, in a pimply, goofy way. Without acknowledging their gaze, he turned back to implore into his computer, with begging hands, before strumming away again. About what? They couldn't know. But he seemed passionate about it.

"Ah, nice," Jimmy said, arriving beside her. "Much respect to the death metal guy."

"I don't think it's death metal," Betty said. "More like just heavy metal."

Seb couldn't tell the difference. There were some kids in school that were really into some hardcore metal stuff — not Lawrence, the bully, and his crowd, but another group of more anti-social troublemakers that was less interested in dominance. One of them once said that one of the metal bands played Mozart or something, but sped up really fast. But Seb wasn't sure about the way it hurt his ears.

What was the difference between heavy metal and death metal, anyway? The guy in the fishbowl would probably know, but Seb didn't want to ask. Not that he even thought that he could, with everything sealed up so tight.



“You don’t think that he can hear us, do you?” he asked. “Because she couldn’t, right? So he can’t, too?”

“I don’t know...” Betty cleared her throat, and Seb noticed the backs of her cheeks clenching. “Let’s see: Hey man,” she said, raising her voice two steps louder than they’d been talking. “Hey. There. You. Can? You? Hear? Us?”

His hair hanging down over his eyes as he strummed and shook his hand, he wasn’t interrupted.

“If you can,” Seb followed up, “hear us, that is, you think that you could do me a favor? And answer a question?”

Betty looked quizzically at him.

“Just some trivia.”

But the shaggy rock enthusiast sitting in the middle of the room just continued on with whatever his silent rant song was about. His big open hands danced back and forth. Seb knew that if they’d been in there, the sound would be out of control, it’s own living energy. Outside, it was just a silent rock-n-roll snow globe.

Jimmy tried pounding on the glass, hard, with the fleshy part of his fist.

“Do you want to build a snowman?”

And even with that, this YouTuber paid no attention to his live audience.

With their entreaties unanswered, the three moved on, Betty and Seb taking turns leading, Jimmy lingering the longest at each stop.

At the first remaining enclosure, a thin black girl was flaying out her elbows as she displayed beauty products, like lipstick, bright red like Snow White, eyeshadow and blush. The next room held a quite heavy man, older; he leaning back almost completely and spilling out over the side of his chair and his arms flicked up on each side, in succession, sporadically. Beyond him, in another a glass cage, was a gamer girl in a baseball hat and tight Tron shirt bouncing in place.

And then almost another half dozen more, so many that they couldn't keep track anymore. A Middle Eastern prankster, a handsome young teen with shiny brown hair, a woman with painted fingernails opening boxes of toys. All of them, of course, tinted green inside their bubbles from the outside vantage point that they were observed.

Also, along the way, bounding up to each in an accelerating hurry, they caught several glimpses of their own reflections in the glass.

There they were, and the only explanation was the obvious one: The people in those little rooms were shooting videos, ready to upload to YouTube or GoVidGo or Snapchat or whatever... for some reason. That piece, the reason, was still not apparent. That issue was unresolved. They seemed to forced to be doing the normal things that they did because... Money? Revenge? Love?

Also pending resolution was how could the three of them possibly get these guys out of there?

It couldn't be the fault of all these people that they were in there. No matter what link Batzinger clicked on, he obviously wasn't prepared to be absconded with. He seemed an absolutely unwilling participant, if what Seb and his friends had said was true.

Then, they ended up having seen them all and at the end of the hall, where there was a door. It had a gray metal handle, ready to push. Betty did, leaning her shoulder into the chipped paint, and it gave way with a creak.

Pushing pass her, Seb stepped first into what turned out to be the floor's entrance to a dark staircase. Within a heartbeat, Betty and Jimmy stepped out after him, brushing against each other as they were compelled to follow.

Glancing around, she was surprised to see that the stairwell went both up and down, but leaning over the side, she saw just one half-floor more below. They moved quickly, and Jimmy again needed to catch up as they ascended to the next level. Betty bent over, hands on knees, waiting, but

quickly bounced up when Jimmy reached them before the next door.

Betty asked Seb if they should continue, and there was mild disagreement over whether the boy should stay back. He shook his little head, firmly, and pushed himself again the door jam. A smile crossed his mouth, and then he arched his back backward, like a little sprite. With the soft motion, he opened the door up by just a crack to see through.

He peered in, and, with Betty's head atop of his, saw a nearly blindingly white environment. As their eyes adjusted, the white remained dominant, even as they caught some small green and red flashes, and then the solid contours of walls and halls.

No one was visible there. A high whirring sound poured out of the crack to fill their ears, making them each better sense the low hum in the stairwell, halfway between a whoosh and a frustrated grind.

Jimmy asked what they saw as Betty stepped aside to give him a look. It was too bright, too exposed, he said, too easy to be seen. He had reached his limit. No way could they sneak around in there.

They were much better off with lower lighting, like they'd had blessed with until then. Like there next to the stairs. It was better when the lighting was more for a confessional monologue or passionate love scene, rather than some over-the-top song-and-dance number.

Wasn't it getting to be time for them to back out anyway, just based on how late it was getting?

Betty studied Seb's face in the glow from the slender opening as he stuck his rear half-back from the crack, to give Jimmy some space.

The boy was awkward, she thought again. His face was too tiny or weak in most places, but also too big in a few others, like his eyes and ears. He definitely had no idea how

to groom himself, and his hair was a mess. His body had no muscle definition.

Nevertheless, Betty was pretty sure that he'd qualify as good-looking when he got older and grew up. His earnest eyes and thin lips would match the tortured-soul look that she expected him to be trying on for a few years. Starting somewhat soon, once Seb started to get some height and began to seem gaunt by choice in pursuit of chic.

Or, at least, Betty felt like, he'd end up with enough appeal to the types of girls that she'd known in college, who were all pretty good catches. She felt an urge to look them up that she probably wouldn't if she'd had the ability to check in. Not that Seb would actually be the right age for them, in particular, but she realized she needed to check in with things like that, like her wild speculations or thoughts about this kid.

Not that they'd find him cute, at that point. He was a rare and flighty little guy, a nerd, and a strangely shaped one, and all over the place when it came to his attitude toward things. Of course, that was made him endearing, he was simple, innocent, in the way that his emotions guided him.

The beam of light slicing his face in two only enhanced that effect. His noise, lined up with the crack in the door, reflected his heavy breathing.

As she watched him peek through the slender gap, her own ears began to notice low rumblings, coming from above them. And then the rumblings became mumblings, like the sounds that played for citizens talking in CityRiddle; a slowed down and better tuned version of the grown-ups voices on Charlie Brown. And, they were growing louder, and descending. Which meant an immediate threat.

Betty grabbed at Seb's arm, but he was already straining his neck up as he pushed by her. They needed to move. A grimace spread across Jimmy's face as he closed the door gently, checking that it settled into the frame as lightly as possible.

Already moving slowly back down stairs, Betty could tell the voices weren't the same as the ones that she'd heard before. She wasn't waiting to see. One was younger, crisper, at least. Then, after a few tougher sounding men filled the stairwell, a female voice joined in, deep but with a gravelly femininity. They were coming down the stairs at a faster pace than Betty could lead her group, but were still a floor away.

"...and you know what else I was thinking? How amazing is it that we stop bleeding? Generally."

"You were thinking that?"

"Well, I saw this video about it on..."

"Oh, must be one of the Shiny Time picks that I haven't gotten to yet, huh? When do you even have so much time, you're so way far ahead of me always."

"Paul says sleep is time."

"So you don't sleep?"

"Ha, almost."

The now heavy footsteps above all briefly joined on the landing, before starting to slap against the stairs again. So many feet, multiplying in footsteps. The sounds of their conversation reached the door holding back the flood of white that they'd just found. Betty, frustrated, passed below back through the door into the first floor. She stopped just inside, her foot propping the threshold open.

"But bleeding?" came the energetic voice. "That's what you were thinking about? You were really thinking about just bleeding?"

"Yeah, it was a quite intelligent production, don't you know. That we just stop bleeding? It's more than that, a lot goes into it. And you know, it makes you think. Is it your brain stopping the blood, or just your body?"

"Right..."

"It was another fascinating pick by Paul."

"I just hope," the chipper voice said, in a way that seemed to signal knowing sarcasm to Betty, "we continue

to not see any blood around here, if you know what I mean. Pull-through rates on our ad pool can't take another day off and still meet targets..."

"Relax. Mr. Shinton brought in some muscle, and frankly I don't think any of them are as troublesome as their charts made them seem. I've been in with them; they always settle down."

"What if they never..." came the female voice, "...like never do that. What if they don't go along with it?"

"He has ways. There's ways with everyone, that's how he does it. 'Fear,' of course, but that's only part of it."

"That's a big part of it," came the response, as the discussion disappeared.

Betty withdrew her shoe, and joined the others in re-entering the greenish monkey house of the floor. They fled down the hall, trying not to look at the boys and girls and men and women trapped in those boxes along the way.

Still, it was hard not to notice that many were no longer at their desks, performing or just surfing the web, but rather lying or sitting on their beds, or pacing. Earlier had been prime time, in some way. Now, it was almost late, mostly restful, or at least it was inside the glass, more or less. There were still a few videos being shot, a few streams being streamed.

As Betty trailed the others running down the hallway, their footsteps slapping loudly against the floor, she thought of what her mom had once said about wearing baggy pants. By the time, they reached the door to the garage, she was grunting as much as the others.

But then, Betty thought, looking around her as she pulled up stumbling, we were behind the glass in a way, too. The hallway was flanked by it, like a hall of mirrors, and none of the other people trapped in there could hear them.

And that's when she noticed Jimmy yanking violently at the door.

They hadn't considered the possibility that it would lock from the inside. And, yet, it was locked.

Betty began consider all sorts of possibilities about what would happen next.

None were very nice.

None were story choices that she would pick in game.

And so, as Seb studied her looking for answers, he felt her studying him back.

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Once again, Betty was ducking down. How had her life recently ended up in a place that made that so common, she wondered?

She could only imagine what Renaldo would say, about her poorly formed approach to the situation, about her tactical errors, about her misjudging of the opportunity to sneak a peak and choice of companions. Or Elan, oh and... that was a whole other story. He'd be proud. Ecstatic even. He liked when she screwed up, only to come out ahead in the end.

If she was still alive tomorrow to tell him, that was. Hovering above the ground, she kept coming back to that part.

Batzinger, too, she thought, would need to answer for this, if she got out of there, at some point. How he'd denied knowing about everything, hadn't even given them a hint of what happened. And, yet, she had no doubt now that he'd used that toilet they were crouching against. Or, that he had inhabited that space next to them, that right there had been where he'd been broadcasting from.

It was the weirdest thing, sure, but that was what had happened. She had pictures, so it did happen.

She looked with pursed lips to Seb as the sounds grew, approaching the section of the hallway past the green wall nearest to them.

Seb focused on those voices, instead of all of the familiar furniture just past the wall that he was pressed against. He knew everything was there. They'd seen enough before fleeing to that dark nook to confirm its attempt at authenticity.

Crouching down, Jimmy's shoulder pushed into his own, helping make Seb smaller, which he appreciated. He gasped slightly for breath, as the maleness of the young man's smell surrounded him. Seb didn't really think about that, though, as the further sounds of insane conversation reached his ear. Or, as best as he could imagine, no matter how hard he strained, it sounded insane to him. Looking up to her, he could tell that Betty seemed to be following along, but to him, nothing they said made sense to Seb. It was like a poorly translated Japanese game. A handful of voices saying words without meaning.

Not pausing their illusive conversation, the workers walked past their hiding spot. Seb heard them discussing hi-vi (?) and brand auras (?), and then the door into the garage open and close. Workers or whoever they were, but he figured they must be, because he didn't think they'd had too much company in visiting.

After a moment, Betty volunteered to test the way out in a somehow steady tone. As she snuck out to see whether the exit of the small group had made any difference, Seb checked his phone. It was still without connection of any type.

It was really turning into a long amount of time to be without availability. If his mother called, she'd definitely start to worry, he realized. His stomach clenching. There was nothing he could do about it. What if she'd been leaving message as they sat there? He was either going to be lucky with her already asleep, or in really deep trouble like the kind where you lose everything that could remotely be construed as a privilege.



To Seb's disappointment, Betty soon returned, wearing an unhappy expression. Her thumb turned down.

"It was locked again."

"Aren't they going to find the broken window?" Jimmy asked, easing off Seb's back

"Not unless they happen to look." Betty shrugged. "If they're driving off somewhere, they'd just drive off. If not, I'm pretty sure that we'd know already if they'd found anything."

As Jimmy continued to fret, Seb thought he heard a hissing clicking. But then the crunchy noise of his hushed worrying interrupted his conversation.

"If it's not going to open, how are we going to get out of here? Ok, never mind. But..." he said, his shoulder slumping, "how are we going to get out of here if that door's not going to open?"

"Jimmy, cut it out," Seb said, with a bit of bite. "If we knew that, we'd be out of here already."

"Don't talk to me like you're my best friend, kid. This has gotten to be a very serious situation that the adults need to talk about. Not the kiddies..."

A warm anger filled Seb's chest, the light bleach smell of their area hurting his brain. As he opened his mouth to respond in kind, the hissing clicking sound started again.

With a dry crack, a speaker been barking out a man's voice, grainy with the airwaves. It recalled riding in a car, listening to the radio, to Seb. To Betty, it sounded like a public announcement in a post-apocalyptic movie. She reached out her hand and found Seb's.

"I see that we have some visitors. And to what do I owe the pleasure?"

The lights sprung on, and the slightly overlapping green screens reflected the illumination in their own shade.

The sliding door that they'd entered through still sat clearly ajar, but they didn't have anywhere to go.

"You can hear us?" Betty finally asked in response. "Should we assume that?"

"I can. Interesting, right?" the disembodied sarcasm replied. "This is kind of my whole situation, my place of business. I'm supposed to hear you in there. I'd send down some ear buds so you could hear me better, but I don't expect you'll be staying as long as my normal guests."

"Look," Seb said, and Betty dreaded again having left her fate to the whims of an eleven year-old. "We just got a little confused, and we want to go now. How about that? We were just trying to do the right thing... We didn't mean to cause any harm..."

The sound of a door opening sent shivers through their little room.

"Why?"

"Why what?" Seb replied at a faster tempo.

"Do the right thing?"

"Because it's the right thing."

"Do the right thing because it is the right thing to do? And then rewards will come to you, or you'll be a good person?" the voice barked out. "Ha!"

The three of them huddled together, like orphans in the rain. The floating voice continued.

"It's always like that, people looking for the path to being considered a good person. But there is no path to that, that's a crapshoot; during bad times, a lot of good people always fail to be good. If you get lucky, you get to be good. There is only one path and that is the path of Power. Doing the right thing doesn't even exist, anyway. It's all an illusion."

Betty began thinking of what she would tell her parents, if she died. Only it couldn't be her, but she wished it could be. She'd break it to them the best. But probably not if she was dead. That would be incredibly shocking.

"Do you even have any idea where you are?"

Betty looked up at the ceiling. All of it was more real than she wanted, but she was several hours past the point of being able to claim confusion at it actually being real.

As much she couldn't imagine what good would come of it, she wanted to confess that she knew something. Being prepared with some sense of what was going on was their only advantage in a situation in which they were cornered in almost every other way. She realized that the others most likely wouldn't be happy, this wasn't even their story.

"We know we're at Shiny Time Productions, and looking for Paul Shinton," she said. "Who I'm guessing we're talking to now. Or will soon be, if not."

She looked ahead, unwilling to face their judgment of her choice.

"Bring them to me," came his answer.

Which Seb couldn't help but find ridiculous. Until four big men — two of whom Betty would later identify as Sam and Brucey — appeared outside their little fake room, and began gesturing for them to come out.

He thought about Connor, Holly, Mr. D., Lawrence Johnson, Cordell, his simpler kid's life at school. Each of these men were like four of his own friends put together. So, when one grabbed Betty, and then Jimmy, and then him, he no longer saw much sense in looking anymore for weak spots. The smelly fat hand grabbing his collar helped convince him of that being a useless endeavor. They were frankly just too big.

Being lead away ahead of him with a little more shuffling of her feet, Betty similarly felt that she had no choice in the matter.

They were paraded back out to the stairwell, and then up to the third floor, which was not nearly as bright as the second.

Almost immediately, they saw the series of little glassed-in rooms on that floor as well. Fewer, but still more than a handful were occupied. Their glass was clear. Instead of the

array of decors that they'd seen below, they were uniform, white, with a bed or two, a small desk, a sink and a toilet.

In each, older and chunkier and grayer people in ones and twos, seemed relegated to being stuck, most often sitting, sullen, waiting. Most wore long faces and hunched over. The circles under their eyes were dark, almost black-and-blue in some cases.

One of them, however, had taken to standing on his head — or head and hands, really — and balancing almost perfectly where he was. It wasn't clear why he'd chosen to adopt that pose; none of the others could see him from their own pens.

Still, Seb began to notice that their march down the hall was visible to the adults in their barless jails, but they mostly kept their heads down, not looking. Just the occasional white of a stray eye caught provided evidence of them being conscious of their moving huddle's presence passing by. But he caught enough to feel confident that they were seen.

At the end of the hall, the goons led them threw another door, and pushed them through. Seb saw that on the other side of the floor, they'd arranged four desks in little squares on each side, each with several monitors, screens showing what was happening across the compound.

On the walls on each side, humongous flat screens hung, with the names of companies that Seb knew, and last names, and strange words, with ticking clocks.

At the far end of the floor from where they were being dragged into the room was another wall, with a reddish wooden door.

The building had looked big from the outside, but Seb hadn't realized exactly how big it really was. Or maybe he just didn't know what big was in-person.

That room was tall enough and wide enough to give each of their L-shaped desks plenty of space. No, he did know places, and what big was, and he'd based his expectations

on the size of the building at the construction site they'd been too; he'd thought that they were comparable. But looking now at everything going on there in that room, he also blamed that failing appreciation on the darkness outside and lack of scale in the photorealistic map.

The room was buzzing with chatter even though it looked like half of the chairs were empty. Most of them had stopped to look at the newbies in the room, but continued talking amongst themselves. Betty only caught a "ad-load" and "unfortunately." Seb heard nothing but more gobbledegook.

In the middle of the room, stood a tall bald man, crossing his arms. As they were lead to him, Seb realized that he was not just tall but, especially tall, and especially large, surprisingly big like someone in a character costume, his bare forearms the size of Seb's legs.

As Betty looked up to him, she saw that he was even bigger than she'd believed. And no puppet. She tried to come up with a witty way to address him but she couldn't even...The goons who they'd forgotten were beside them pushed them all forward, and the oversized man reached out to put his also large hand on Seb's shoulder.

"No need to worry, little boy, right?"

"No sir?"

"And you two," he said, rotating Seb to face them, "you aren't to worry about anything either right? I bet he's the one who wanted to do the right thing, and you just found out some things along the way. I can respect that."

"Thank you?" Betty replied, feeling a responsibility to take charge.

"Yes. Now, if you don't mind, please pass your wallets to me," he added.

They saw little choice but to comply. As Betty withdrew hers from a big pocket that zipped up and down in her coat, Seb worked his out of his back pocket and presented his. He grabbed Jimmy's last. The man opened each, withdrew a

form of identification and then tossed the billfold down in front of him, with a loud slapping thump.

"We don't need to be here," Seb blurted out, playing the kid card as well as he could. "We can leave now, and let this be a lesson to us. We could get out of your hair and save you the trouble."

"You don't have the power to say that, boy, what's your name..." he said, looking down at his laminated library card, "Sebastian. Definitely not enough power to say that at this point. And not just because you're here — which is something, by the way, that I'm quite amazed about, because usually it takes me great effort to bring people here. But that's not the source of your lack of power, anyway."

His lips curled slightly upward on one side..

"Don't you understand? Power is something that I have but you don't because power is everywhere but only obtained through everyone. And, clearly where you have almost none, I have obtained plenty."

"Not by doing the right thing, huh?" Betty said, eyeing how his fat fingers were almost covering the top of Seb's chest.

"No, not that way. Not with the right thing. No, you infect their minds, you twist their 'likes,' and they lose any ability to push back. With power, they buy how you want them to, vote how you want them to... even how they love, their 'types' and visions of romance... Am I talking over your heads?"

They felt obligated to shake them.

"Good. You know that's what this is about, right? Power, control. I can tell, there's something clever about the way you look, in your own little roly polly way."

Betty felt her cheeks go flush. As much as what he was saying made sense, with her assumptions, she still wasn't sure what was going there. They were building a small army

of online influencers, but to what end? How had they been chosen? What were they spreading?

"Why?" Seb interjected. "Because we know your name? We'll forget it."

"No one forgets anything anymore. I bet you even have some selfies in your phone about this."

"No, we don't," Betty bluffed, feeling out who this tree-sized man really was as he looked down at them .

"Well then, perhaps some unposted Snaps or something else that I should be worried about," he said, lifting his hand from Seb's shoulder. "But whatever it is," he continued, "I don't have time to deal. I'm about to be in the middle of something, if you don't mind, it's almost noon in Sydney and I was supposed to call in the a.m., an oversight that I will admit is mostly my fault. Sam, would you please take these goobers away, I'll need to just get them enrolled in the programs later..."

And as he said that, the big men — who looked almost medium-sized next in Shinton's shadow — stepped forward again, close enough to feel their breath on your neck. Seeing the look of hatred in his eyes, Betty realized that Brucey wouldn't hesitate to hurt them.

"... and, Banger, by the way, be sure to prepare us for additional visitors, just in case," he called to one of the men with dark bags under their eyes sitting at the desks.

They watched him begin to walk away back toward the closed door.

"I guess, we're supposed to go now," Jimmy said before he could be grabbed roughly like the others. "You don't want to hear anything else. About what we know..."

"Yes, you do need to go," the brawny man responded, "but maybe you could tell me one more thing..."

Shinton examined them, his sharp eyes reaching out from under his rocky brows to catalog everything about them. Or at least it felt like that, that he was taking an inventory of what each part of their bodies said about them.

“Tell me who you watch, like vloggers or YouTubers or whatever...”

“I can’t think of anyone...” Betty began to mutter, until Jimmy broke in.

“Uh, Slumber Party Six, hello?”

“Who? I’ve never heard, of them. Or she? Or he? Or it?”

“Them actually, and they’re actually really funny... sweet girls, I mean seriously...”

“Jim...” Betty chuffed at him. “Just let it...”

“Go ahead,” Shinton said over Betty. “Funny? They aren’t that popular already, huh, subscriber-wise? You think they’re gaining a good amount more every day still?”

“I don’t really know but, last I looked, they’d gone up a lot since I first...”

“Uh, Jimmy?” Seb also butted in.

“What?”

“Don’t you think you should probably stop telling him all that?”

“Why? He’s going to kidnap all of them?” Jimmy’s expression was bewildering — halfway between a grimace and bemusement. For a second, he was trying to leaning on the familiar, the dramatic. “That’s what you do, right? But all of them would be a little much, right?”

Their giant host signaled for them to be taken away, and as they were, he shouted after them.

“All of them would be a challenge, I suppose, but we’ve been doing things for awhile now — all in the name of a higher cause, of course — and... I... I wouldn’t say it’s an impossibility.” He laughed. “But, damn, six? That’d be something.”

They were marched back right back out of the way that they’d come, past the adult exhibits and down the dark staircase. Betty concentrated her stare on the back of Seb’s neck to try and calm him as they trooped along at the pace dictated to them by their garrison of robust bodies that had been tasked with locking them up.



And before they knew it, they were back in Batzinger's room, the proper part, where he had sat at his computer and entertained. Only they weren't in his actual room. And they weren't entertained.

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They took turns sitting on the real bed in Batzinger's fake room and pacing around it for what soon became hours.

For how long was it that Batzinger had been there? A few weeks, Seb figured? That pretty much depended on how you defined a "few." It couldn't have been much more than two... Which was still a plenty long time. And even however many days his parents about been upstairs, though shorter, had been way too long, too.

Seb checked his phone probably a thousand times, tempted each time to fall into a game and use up his battery — dropping only once, into a snake game — but there was never any connection except for FFFShinyTimeProd. And now that they felt completely free to try to use it, none of their password guesses could get them on. Betty's phone had powered down, and Jimmy's was at three percent.

That darn little lock icon, Seb thought, clenching his teeth in lieu of clenching his fist, never finding anything else whenever he went to check for other signals.

He grew sure that Connor and the girls had retreated to the highway. So what? Had he really expected him to rescue them? Connor? Paige, maybe. But, he still wasn't sure if she'd forgiven him for the last time he'd had led them to a strange building in the middle of nowhere. At least Paige could probably find a way to bust them. Connor's rescue skills were limited when they played KDO; he couldn't imagine his friend sneaking in through the garage door, finding them and finding a way to release them.

If the others called the police or their parents, they might have a shot of being saved. But they also weren't exactly sure what would happen to them, or any of the other of the prisoners, if the authorities came knocking. Their captors didn't seem very sympathetic. It was very possible, Betty pointed out, that gas would fall down or the air dry up in an instant. Shiny Time was in control of the location, and Shinton seemed willing to protect his interests.

So, they feared the point at which Paige or Marisa might make a call like that, which they knew, despite their earlier conversation, wouldn't be a quick step that they took. They'd surely feel silly or scared even thinking about calling anyone, worried that they'd be found irresponsible and hoping that it was all working itself out.

He could imagine them doing something like watching one of Paige's beauty YouTubers, trying to let the chirps from the little phone they were huddling over soothe them as the time passed.

Hence, waiting for that kind of rescue wasn't really an option either, if they wanted to be sure of being safe. It would probably be almost morning by the time they others alert some authority, and Betty had been left with the sense that whatever programs there were to be enrolled in, they'd be getting started before then.

Instead, the three of them there hatched a plan, after abandoning many other plans, incredulous when Betty proposed it at how much it better sense it made as plan in comparison to all their other plans. Why shouldn't they try it? At least they had a shot of making it work, or maybe even soon enough.

And then they needed to wait for longer, not knowing if they'd ever get out of that room alive. It was like waiting the longest line in an amusement park with nothing to do, except that they weren't looking forward to the ride.

For awhile, Jimmy stared into the green screens filling the walls behind the furniture and hiding the hallway. As far as

the others could tell, he remained as unable to see through the glass as any of them, even as they all knew it was in some way somehow transparent, a green-tinted window as clear as green cellophane. But Jimmy eventually swore that he could see dark shadows moving past, while acknowledging that he was quite unsure of it.

Inside of her, Betty felt hungry, then embarrassed that she was about to be the first person to complain about it. Her stomach croaked, making the type of rumbling noises that clicked, growly sounding, almost like a disaffected girl's low cracking voice.

She began to worry, like a parent about a child, about what would happen when the others got hungry, too. It was getting later and later and probably late. She wasn't quite sure what time without asking Seb. Her habit of glancing at her phone for the time of day went unrewarded, the black mirror in her hand offering her only a reflection of her own frazzled face. Onetime, she rolled her eyes into the glass at herself, before asking Seb for a time check on his phone.

How long they ended up stuck there before being confronted with him again, and hence how able to resist desperation while deploying their plot, could make a big difference in how well they could find a way out of there. They could lose focus and, hunger gnawing at their hearts, let go of their grip on their own cause.

The waiting could be a type of conditioning, like Skinner and his rats, she thought. She wished she could remember why he'd made his rats wait. Google's absence from her life was a great handicap.

She wished she knew a better way, a faster way, a way that she could do for them now with a cheat code. They'd tried again to rip the door open, attempting to wedge the covers of fake books and a toilet paper roll into the sealed crack. Nothing they did made any difference. They weren't getting out of that fishbowl without some outside

assistance, and most likely not without Shiny Time letting them.

Jimmy at one point seemed to be breaking, crawling under Batzinger's desk and pulling his knees. As he muttered about finally being headed to Broadway, Betty whispered calmly to him about some movie they'd seen, about a team of immigrant cross country runners in high school finding a way to come out ahead in the end.

Seb could hear her clearly, but was distracted by the scene itself, and a bit disoriented. No matter how long he was in there, it felt a real place, like his own room, like the room down the basement stairs that they'd found. The green across the wall at his back barely registered inside there, absorbed by the lived-in feeling so unlike the stark hallway behind them.

Finally, Jimmy came out from under the desk, and a few moment later as he finished wiping his eyes with his sleeve, the door began sliding open behind Seb. He hadn't noticed anyone there approaching. One of the big guys that had thrown them in there was now beckoning them out, his hand reaching in close enough to grab him if Seb didn't follow the instruction.

He felt like a game case being taken down from a shelf out of nowhere.

A few of the other captives were stirring again, sitting in front of their phony computers, doing their little routines for the cameras, preening and jerking and slamming their hands. Seb noticed one was holding a PS4 controller. As he leaned back in his puffy leather chair, he left his screen uncovered, and it was clear he was playing some kind of space game where you landed on a brightly color planet with furry haired creatures.

Instead of going up, they went down. A door was tucked beside the stairs. It was opened and they were pushed through first.

The funny thing, he thought, was that this floor looked nothing like the others. Rather than their sterile, glass-cooled tunnels, tall and deep, this floor rolled itself out along a carpeted floor, flanked by a series of closed doors like a hotel. With none of the little embellishments, gold signs and unnecessary glossy wood trim.

When they finally reached the last one on the left, they were led inside. Each shuffled in, and when they all came to a stop, it felt like they were pausing just before being forced by a scroll from the left to enter the final room of a level.

They saw Shinton, sitting there amid a crisply decorated little apartment, like you'd see in Brooklyn or the city. His legs crossed, he was sitting comfortably on a long sectional couch, in a long L-shape, under shiny skinny lamps on the tables at the ends. A few tiny sculptures sat behind him, gnarled dusty things resting on the console table. All of it there was things you would see in a furniture catalog, and not know how to decide. A fairly huge television was spread across the wall, as well, Betty had noticed almost immediately.

Their sentries stepped back, and Shinton waved with his thick arm for them to sit down across from him. They dropped, exhausted, into the cushions. The pillowed fabric was firm (they might be able to sit there forever and not make a depression) but rejuvenative, no matter how much being this close made the man before them seem an even larger monster.

She noticed the apartment opened up to another room, where huge dumbbells with sharp geometric corners sat on the floor. Another wide screen hung on the wall.

A silence fell, for just a thought or two worth of time for each of them, but long enough to be noticeable.

"So," Shinton started presently, measuring his words, "let's say, that you were me, and I was you... or any one of you... Let me ask you, would you or would you not wonder why one of us was a reporter, like felt uncomfortable with

them having broken in and snooping around here? Here, where you live, where you've built something... Wouldn't you wonder?"

He fell quiet, like everything was chess and he'd just drawn his hand away from the table, and Betty met his stare. Again, she could tell he wasn't prepared for the move, or rather, wasn't expecting it. Even though he seemed to acknowledge the possibility all at once, his lips dipped at the corners. She loosened her jaw to soften her tone before responding.

"I would no doubt find it interesting," she said, "since this is obviously not meant to be a place that welcomes visitors. So how could we have popped up in here. And you?"

"I do, find it interesting, as well... So maybe you can tell me why you've been poking all around here with your nose? Because, it's true, now I know your name, Miss Betty Van Buren, as well as you know mine. What did you think I'm up to, that you needed to come calling all the way out here? You don't seem to be normally on the unwelcoming-properties-in-the-middle-of-nowhere beat."

She realized that he was prodding her for a purpose, not just trifling with them anymore. They'd been brought there on his order... He needed to confirm that their sudden appearance wasn't a reason for concern, that his base hadn't been infiltrated, that's why he wanted to talk with them. He'd summoned them for his own sake.

It seemed fortuitous to Betty, his curiosity. Seb had similar feelings. And, from the edge of the couch, Jimmy eyed them, offering each a silent bob of his head. He was making it clear that he was hanging back. She wished she'd had a script. They were basically winging it. Why couldn't she just be somewhere else, with Jimmy telling them how William Howard Taft would be handling the situation?

"Ok," she began, "here's the deal, since I think you're going to want to know, let me tell you the entire situation..."

The ceiling amplified her shouting cadence. She took a breath and tried to capture the sound of prepared determination that she needed.

“We know more than enough about what you’ve been up to, Paul. About how you’ve caused all sorts of trouble, with all these people here. Kids and their parents that you’ve rushed in and taken. I know you’re wondering, ‘What happened? How someone could know about me,’ right? But I know how to snoop around, talk to people who sometimes can’t officially talk to me, that’s what I do. You were right about this kid here getting me involved, but I’m a real reporter.”

It was true, even if he sighed, heavily, bemused.

“I saw what was going on, I know I needed to get the dirt. And... I mean, if you just saw with your twenty minutes of research what I’ve been writing recently, you probably don’t get that, but it’s true. I knew what I was getting into here, we’d pretty much figured Shiny Time out...”

“It’s true...” Seb added.

“That seems unlikely,” he said, looking just slightly uneasy. Betty and Seb, at least, handled themselves well enough so far to sow doubt. It hadn’t been their goal, but through just sort of being who they were, babbling fools, a couple of loons and Jimmy’s melodramatic honesty, they’d earned his respect in a way.

“Really. I think you know that. And so here’s the offer that I want you to accept: We don’t say anything, to anyone ever, and you let all the people you’ve got locked up here go. Because we could say something, let the world know. And then your whole enterprise, Shiny Time Communications, all of this,” she said with a swoop of her hands, “is not just over, it’s exposed.”

Betty knew that she couldn’t wonder if that was true.

“What you’re doing is insane and perverse, you know that, they’ll come swarming in. You may not lose everything if people start to look into it, but you’ll be at least incredibly

inconvenienced, and probably lose a lot and maybe really find yourself losing everything. Take this way out, and shut it up the right way.”

He paused, and then chuckled, accidentally tapping the table with his foot. He called forth a high pitched groan, as he turned to lean in.

“You couldn't have found yourself much evidence. Yes, Shiny Time exists, and I registered the company publicly, I'm sure you saw that, that's not hard to find. But, that was a legacy mistake, something that happened a long time ago. We don't leave a big footprint now. And when it comes to me... I've been able to erase myself, for the most part, from the Internet, because I realized it was needed years and years and years ago. Before there was all this information out there as a matter of norms and convention. I've never created a profile on a job site, or signed up for spam to win a free trip in a contest.”

He stood up, rising high, growing taller and taller.

“Before the 2000s, even, I started. I doubt it's even possible now. Even as a kid, you're starting to build up a very permanent record. Forget about maintaining a good enough relationship with your services that store all that information now, forget about even understanding what they're collecting under their terms and conditions. But you can avoid that stuff, if you're careful. You change some of it, where you need to, too. Not all, so it's better to avoid having files on you in the first place. But it's not necessarily hacking into the CIA or anything. You talk about my business as if I didn't know someone like you would be showing up at my door.”

“But we could expose this at least. Something will lead back to you, if people start looking, or are you sure it won't? And all of your clients probably eventually. Can you really live up to the scrutiny if we drew the spotlight on you? Can your business?”



Shinton stepped around the table, re-rolling one of his sleeves. He kept getting bigger the closer he drew.

“So, you assume that you will be getting out of here, like the others. You don’t really seem to know who I am at all, anyway.”

He motioned to one of the men who had escorted them in. A gun was pulled from the thug’s hip, and passed into Shinton’s hands lightly. He turned it over and then passed it back. The man lingered, then, without a sound or signal, stepped back.

“Anyone who does business with me does business through intermediaries, like fourteen different layers of them. We are the contractors who get contracted through contractors’ contractors. Sometimes, each is in a different country, speaking a different language. We prefer that. No one could possibly find their way back to whoever has asked us to do what we’re doing. And we have nothing that would incriminate them, everything gets destroyed if anyone tries to pry into our computers, those ones at least without doubt. Except what we’ve already put up on YouTube and SnapChat and GoVidGo... not that SnapChat last long...”

He suddenly glanced down at his phone, holding up a finger in the air, before continuing.

“But who can know what that’s been exactly? I guess you know that we’ve got some of these clowns working on our behalf. But you hear kids sitting in front of their computers and complaining about how much a season pass for a game’s multiplayer mode costs but how much it’s worth it, and: Are they big shills or legitimately upset?”

“We found out,” Seb said, standing too. “People will find out. Especially if they know to look.”

“I can only imagine those people are in the seventh grade or something? Your memorial page on Facebook groups will be probably great, I have to admit that, but I’m sure they’ll see my like. But listen,” he continued, his bicep closing in on Seb's face as he stepped to him, “there are

others out there who have a different sort of control over these kids, not just these ones here, through us, for us. You wouldn't want to them to need to end this, would you? You know it's not just us that you're threatening here, so if you really knew anything, you'd know that..."

He looked down at them like the undertaker at a resting body.

"What kind of control?" Betty asked, rising and stiffening her back.

"The kind that gives us ultimate control over you. The kind that you can't ignore. Tiny bombs in their bloodstreams. Little itty bitty microscopic bombs that ride along in their veins that I can use at any time to make them die in what appears to be very natural way. I'm sure you'll appreciate that more than immediate death, won't you?"

So, that was how he kept them in line.

"Don't even..." Betty responded in a steady voice. "Because I think you're making that up. Blood bombs, nice one..."

Seb started at Betty in awe, then started to chime in offering support, but she stopped him with a look over and a nod. He realized it was part of the performance. He needed to give her the space, she wasn't forcing him to step in when he wasn't ready.

"You can't kill of us, or break us, or try to convince us that you have any made-up thing like that."

"Why is that?"

Seb's heart braced itself against the front of his chest.

"Because I have emails set to go out, if we're not around to stop them. They're pretty simple emails, and they'll go to my editor and to the police and to YouTubers, like StevenEven and Larry Legendary. And even if none of them believe me, I still have lots of other friends at Marshmallow and friends at ThumbLords who'll be getting it, and this kid here... he isn't old, but his buddies can be really convincing, trust me. And they'll all be reading all about Shiny Time

Communications. It could hopefully trend, unless," she said, "we check in and hit snooze on the timer every..."

She felt like she'd let loose an arrow at a giant.

"Well, I won't tell you exactly how often we need to do reset it."

"Classic dead man's switch," Seb joined in.

"I set it up where you can't find them, so many different places."

"There should be a website," Seb added.

She shot him a look, but she couldn't complain.

"So, the plan is," Betty continued, "that you do what we say, let everyone go, or end up exposing everything, and you're on the run without any time to prepare."

In response, Shinton stepped forward with a giant's step and without warning punched down and out, hitting Jimmy squarely in the face with a fleshy crunch. Their friend stumbled twice, falling lower with both, and finally doubled over to the floor with a thump, out of site beyond the couch corner.

After a brief pause, his moaning gave them relief. Before he'd even pulled himself to his elbows and knees, Shinton was stomping over to Seb and Betty, nostrils flaring in quick breaths, the muscles in his neck red with tension.

"You realize," Shinton asked, rubbing his hand, "that I'm never going to fall for that, right?"

The guards around them had barely moved an inch. They were aligned upright like pawns, rocking slightly, as a black leather picket gate before the door,

"You can't even get a connection here. You've got no evidence of what we're doing here, nothing that's proof, except what's on that phone. And I guess in those heads of yours. Both of those are right here..."

"Exactly," Betty shot back. He was still probing them, she told herself. "We don't have evidence of what we thought we'd find here from before. But you think we'd come all the way out here on our own without a lot of interesting stuff?"

We've got enough to cause you all sorts of trouble, like, don't you think? Especially if we suddenly disappear?"

He looked her up and down again. She'd been treating him almost like a boss, she realized, but he was a monster. The parental shape in his face, like a dad or a teacher, couldn't hide that. If Paul Shinton crossed passed with you, you'd likely be facing trouble.

She watched Jimmy, tears streaming down his face, pulling himself onto the couch.

Seb wanted to go over and help him but everything was happening so fast. He was all right, Seb told himself. His crying meant he wasn't screaming, broken in pieces. The beating hadn't continued like it could have. It could have been long enough to destroy him, Seb thought.

He turned to watch Betty, with some more quick wobbles of her head, ready to dispatch with his attentions to dull their threat, by projecting confidence and sass. Looking back up to Shinton, Seb saw that his anger had not subsided, reminded of his angriest teachers, and he realized that he'd seem some angry ones, kids could make that happen.

"How did you know the bombs aren't real?" Shinton asked through clenched teeth. "How'd you know about the bombs?"

She hadn't, of course, just responded by instinct. What was instinct, she thought? Just doing what was right by lucking into it, or something else? Or of course something else but what? She didn't have the time to know right then and there.

Seb looked at her, hopeful for an answer as well.

"I'm assuming they didn't need to be real," she responded. "Maybe I'm old fashioned, but I would think that blood bombs would be redundant and expensive. And I'd already figured out that you're a liar..."

"So you didn't know before? I didn't think so. They've worked just as good as if they were real, so you know. With

the added bonus of not needing to be invented. But you're right, they can be redundant when I can just kill people, more or less, without consequence..."

By the time he finished, Seb was sure that he was contemplating another punch by the way he hung his head and drew in his shoulders. Jimmy pulled himself into a tighter ball, but had at least stopped crying. Seb noticed Betty flinch, without any real move by Shinton toward them.

"Listen, stop hitting us or you're going to ruin this," she said upon gaining her balance.

"I can show you here," Seb heard himself announcing, lifting his phone above his shoulders and facing it outward. He'd decided he would follow Betty's lead, try to sell their story. It was what Connor would do, he'd been himself. Just blurted things out. "If you give me your Wifi password, I'll show you one of the addresses, that we've set it up to send from. I mean, that Betty has, I can give it to her..."

Then, as his mitt of a hand reached out, Seb pulled the phone back to his chest, and clutched it like a teddy bear.

"But you can't see what she's doing to pull it up when I do. I'll show it to you, you can see what it says. That means you can probably stop it. But it'll probably be pretty hard for you to figure out the rest of the addresses that she's sending from... right?... Impossible? Probably impossible."

"And look," Betty added, closing the gap between them and stepping to Seb's side, "we know that you're pretending it won't even be an inconvenience if we unmask you. But it will be... would be... a big one. You'll either need to run, probably, far away from the US, or end up in jail maybe, right? Or something like that? Something not good... There will be all sorts of bad outcomes for you possible."

"Right?" Seb concurred.

"And obviously, I'm sure you have money that you think is hidden that they'll find," Betty said, "at least some of it, and they'll freeze a lot of that, and probably seize it

eventually. It's called civil forfeiture. I'm sure you've heard of it?"

Rather than answering, he tugged at his rolled cuffs.

Seb put his phone back in his pocket, intending it to look both causal and defiant but knowing that they'd be screwed if Shinton actually took him up on his offer. He'd lied to himself to say that they could pull anything up on an email, in order to lie aloud, but it wasn't a lie that he could hold onto much past its saying.

Shinto's cuffs were pulled perfect.

"You'd be surprised by the bombs," he said. "I can't say exactly how many of them believe it, but it's certainly made things easier with more than a few of our friends and guests here. Anyway, you assume I'm more naïve than I am, but... fine, fine, fine, you win, let's say. Let's say I'm at that point, where I'd accept the premise of your proposition. I acknowledge your advantage. What exactly do you want?"

"First, we want you to let everyone go."

"That's too much," he growled.

"You know what's too much? Me going back out there, and calling back all those emails. It's against my code of ethics, you know?" She thought of her mom, the lawyer. "Look, I didn't know it was going to be like this, exactly, but we talked about it, and we need you to shut this down, fess up to them about the blood bombs, and move away, again preferably to another country."

She felt like a super-woman.

"Do what you want, whatever you want, after that. If you keep up your side of the bargain and leave these ones alone, I won't publish anything. And, they'll keep their mouths shut, too," she added, in reference to the boys to her side. She felt like he knew that he could trust her to be able to handle them, at the end of the day.

Shinton walked back to the couch and sat down, not defeated, but ready to change the tone, and suggested they

do the same beside Jimmy. They swung their heads against the idea and remained standing across from him.

"You know I don't know if you know how long I've known it would happen. Someone like you, of course," he said, shaking his head. "So," he added, "if I do you let everyone go, how can I trust that you won't just double screw me over?"

"We do fear you, that's why."

Both Seb and Betty could feel it right there in that moment. They had him, because that was true.

"You should."

"We do, and that's why we won't press our luck," Betty said. "None of these people want to. We don't want away whammies."

"Really," Seb said, with squeak, "I'm just a kid. I just want to get those people upstairs home, and for you to release anyone else you have under your power. It's the right thing."

"Look, we'll keep it quiet," Betty said, "and do whatever you want -- we know we can't change that -- so long as we can feel like we didn't turn a blind eye and that you won't come after us later. It's a pretty fair trade off to save you some trouble, I think."

"Save me some trouble? It's insulting that you can say that."

"I don't get it," Connor would always butt in during later discussions to say. "Why would we want that? To let the bastard insult us on his way to walking away. Shouldn't he go to jail, don't you think? Why negotiate?"

"Like we told him, because," Betty said. "Because his people could hurt those people if we didn't. These kids were terrified of him for a reason. We needed his help to get them free. To shut it down and let them go, let them be no longer his chat-bots. He in the end had a lot on his line, apparently, as they'd hoped."

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A small herd of charismatic people spilled out of the garage, which turned out to be the only way in or out of the complex. As they walked down the road inside the forest, the moonlight hit them strongly enough that they glowed like a pack of jellyfish.

Three big black cars had pulled by already. In their headlights, the walkers cast huge shadows that melted together. As the last SUV passed, behind the glare of the window in the passenger seat, Betty saw Brucey, rubbing his eyebrows between his thumb and finger.

And then he was gone.

All three of them — Betty, Seb and Jimmy, stumbling — were making their way slowly behind the mob. A group of parents had taken the lead, with a few other grown ups, and no thoughts of resisting the leadership effort flocked to Betty's head. They were moving the right way, the lot of them.

Seb looked back, and Betty knew it was in appreciation of how there probably was still a fairly large crew there, breaking down the entire operation. It had been such a whole business place, full of professionals, in the middle of their days and quite productive in their evil. The agreement that they'd struck with Shinton meant that most of the staff would be losing their jobs, at least for now.

To be fair, she thought, they'd been ready to kill her and the kids, if the situation had been different. (That, plus the evil-doing, meant that she wouldn't shed a tear for them.)

Yet, they'd somehow succeeded in getting his furious handshake. Maybe it was based on having nothing left to lose. Maybe they'd been free to play whatever hand they'd been dealt with vigor. It was that freedom that somehow undercut the big man's whole investment in maintaining his meme factory.



The group together walked down the long dark road, to where Seb and Jimmy knew the highway to be. Betty kept expecting a mob of Shinton's minions would come flying out of the building after them, shooting to kill. He pictured himself swiveling to fire back, like at a carnival, except in virtual reality, like that time he'd tried a game at his rich cousins who he'd never seen again, after his mom had forced him into the basement to make friends.

Even just getting started, Seb felt like the journey trudging back was proving much longer than he'd anticipated, much longer than the journey there had felt. From the woods beside them came the cracking sounds of squirrels bounding between branching and dropping nuts, and owls hooted occasionally.

As their trio entered the enthusiastic mass, the smell of repeated scrubbing with soaps and shampoos overcame them.

Everyone needed to get home. He needed to get home.

Was it over? Seb felt pretty confident that they'd be able to believe that it really was, but Betty wasn't so sure.

Ultimately, it'd been simple. They'd agreed to never tell anyone, not a soul, and Shiny Time would disappear.

Like she'd said, that was against Betty's code of ethics — not writing anything on what she'd learned, not publishing then all that she knew. But they needed to give their word, and breaking her word was against her ethics as well. And she had a plan.

Which was why, in a way, it was good that they didn't have the best beans to spill. It'd be a heck of an article, but who would really believe it, at this point? Apart from any threat Shinton posed to them, they lacked really any proof or evidence, had nothing to which they could attribute their claims, now that Shiny Time had started to strip clean the lab/prison down the road behind them. They would probably soon wash it down, so it'd be liked they'd never occupied it.

So, yes, she could give up the “story,” while still working on the story.

In terms of witnesses, as far as she knew, Shinton could reach out to terrorize everyone he was now letting go. Once he’d reestablished his bank accounts and network, he could come after them. Whatever remaining brainwashed web of Manchurian personalities scattered across YouTube that he had, it could foment hate mobs and death threats, send pizzas and SWAT teams.

Moreover, walking beside his former prisoners there, Betty realized that they weren’t quite free of his grip in their own heads and probably many would never be. They were fearful, skittish and scared. Betty and the boys hadn’t seen what he could really do, she knew.

The whole time, he’d been respectful of the element of risk that they’d introduced. She could sense it when he’d turned back to them after clocking Jimmy.

About halfway up the road, Seb’s phone rattled in his pocket. He armed himself with it and began trying to orient himself with the alerts. He’d regained his LTE connection. He had eighteen new emails, and nine texts from Connor all along the lines of

*Hey*

*You there*

*Text back*

None of them, obviously, had shown up while Betty and him and Jimmy were still inside. Not that Connor really could have helped. Where was he, she wondered? But the good thing was that he had phone messages. He rebooted his phone to double check, and still, to his great relief, his mother had not left her frantic pleadings for him to call her.

After hesitating for a couple of steps more, he remembered how little battery life he had left, and put his phone away again. The games where you didn’t have unlimited resources were always the toughest games, but also the most gratifying.

Betty tried to joke with a few people, sort of interview them on what had happened, as they walked. Almost all of them barely responded, and instead shook in the wind like sheared sheep, from the once-bouncy young girls to the slumped over middle aged men. So she pivoted her mutterings to reassuring platitudes, things like, "It'll be all right," and, "Don't worry, we'll get there, we're doing our best." Some seemed to appreciate it.

As much as the rest of the plodding group beside her, Betty knew Shinton wouldn't give up everything, she explained once they'd finally reached the car to Connor, Paige and Marissa, shortly after running through the key events.

As the crowd began filling the blacktop, Betty paused Connor's attempt to interrupt her by waiving her arms at him, and shouting. A decent number of them looked back, then a few more, and then a few more. She shoed them off the road, recalling her mother from the front door, and into the forest beside it. They got it. They were escaping, and it would be better than not escaping.

The road would eventually lead to a train station, and a whole little town. And Betty had given them the large amount of cash that she'd had with her, a few hundred dollars tucked in her wallet because she'd been near one of her bank's ATMs and didn't know when she'd see one again.

Back in the real world, Shinton might simply avoid all of them, of course, because of what they knew. (And they definitely planned to set up a deadman's switch when they got home.) But he would no doubt be in business again before long, with some holdovers from his current operation, better prepared with security.

Once he'd safely erased this trail, and probably identity itself, for good, he would get back to doing whatever it was he did. Online propaganda? Subliminal messaging? Psychological marketing? Fake news?

But at least he'd been disrupted. At least he'd need to retrench. At least they were getting those people out of there now.

Connor excitedly explained how the rest of them had done essentially nothing except sit there, talking about everything and anything for distraction.

First, they'd sat in the car near the entrance and then, at around eleven, with Paige perched uncomfortably in the driver's seat, they slowly crawled down the road, and parked where it met the big vein.

At around midnight, they'd finally run out of things to talk about, but didn't want to leave and also didn't want to go in. Marisa, having switched into the back from the passenger's seat, and sitting with her legs curled under her, started quietly watching a video on her phone. Once again, the glow lit her face. Then, the other two did, and then, after a few episodes, after they'd watched some videos apiece...

Connor looked hard at Seb. Seb felt like his friend could tell that something had changed in him. Connor wasn't jealous or angry at him for taking the risk. He was nervous about his well-being. Connor wished he could have been there; he'd never been so relieved.

As his friend rushed at him, Seb could hear waves of murmuring coming from the crowd as the people drifted away.

"Buddy..." he said, gripping Seb. "Are you ok? Like seriously, how is it even possible that you're not like" and he pulled back to performed an act of drawing his outstretched fingers away from his head in imitation of a gif.

"I don't know man... It was..."

"What, like out of a video game?"

"No..." Seb thought of the green aura. But it wasn't just that, he realized. "More like... a movie."

"What made it like that?" Connor asked. "Or do you mean, like a video, like a YouTube vi..."

“No,” he said. “Like a movie, like a montage, like I was part of that, it was one thing and then another and then...”

His friend hugged him again, pulling him even closer.

“You’re truly crazy now...”

“No seriously, I don’t even know how to describe it.”

While they turned back, Jimmy and the girls were already getting ready to leave. They’d opened the car’s doors and were waiting for the rest of the others.

Seb wondered what Betty had told Paige about what they’d seen. If she tried to soften its danger, would she leave out the part about where Jimmy had been punched. No, they’d already told her that... or did she?

“But there’s one more thing, at least, that I knew I didn’t mention before,” she said, to all of them. “One more thing that I’m curious about.” She paused, and Seb could tell she wanted to work up some emphasis. “You see?”

He shook his head no, but before Betty could react Connor was smacking him from behind.

“Have some respect. She’s asking a question.”

Rubbing his head, Seb laughed to himself.

“Whatever, punk.”

Betty continued, “So, each of you, ask yourself the only, number one, most important question if you’re a reporter and you don’t have the story nailed down.”

Unsure, Seb looked to Paige and Marisa, who shook her head daintily at him. Paige stood up straight.

“Who, what, when, where, why and how?” Seb asked. “Sometimes wh...”

“No,” Jimmy joined in. “That not it. It’s where’s the money... follow the money... right?”

“You live with me, so that’s kind of cheating, though,” she said, “but, right: Everything that happens, it usually happens because of money. Show me the money and I’ll show the world. We’ll find and follow it. There are better people than me that can help?”

The others looked at her, shaking their heads at her dramatic pause. What was the question again?

“Remember, he mentioned that he had clients. Real clients. Shiny Time clients. People and companies and I don’t know what... They would have records. What are they doing hiring him. We could find that out.”

“We? How are we going to do that? First of all, all of us need to get home first. And, secondly, he could be going anyway, operating under any new name, with anybody we saw here or not. Or, who may or may not know themselves until there’s no way we can find them?”

“They could be brainwashed,” Connor said. “Seeing those people who walked out with you, I feel like everybody’s brainwashed...”

Seb was glad that he’d been waiting there.

“I don’t know even if we want to find him,” he added, “you wouldn’t be able to.”

“Yes, but my hope is that as he’s scrubbing his Internet presence right now, while packing up to leave, he makes a mistake... just one little mistake... That he leaves one little thing behind that he shouldn’t, since he’s leaving everything behind, the identity... or, if not... I don’t know, we can just like try a lot of other stuff until some opportunity comes up. We found him here didn’t we?”

Betty knew that she probably couldn’t ever find Shinton, of course, unless he wanted her to find him. She wasn’t sure it would be such of a good idea, but she had to try. Maybe he would slip up. What was it that they’d said at ThumbLords? If you can play it, you can beat it, or something like that.

“And until then?” Seb asked. “What will we do?”

“I don’t know. Do you really think I need to know at this point?” she asked, letting her muscles go flat. “But, look, let’s get in already and get out of here. How late is it even? Don’t you guys have school in, like, a few hours. What kind of parents do you have anyway?”

Seb looked at Betty and realized that she was right. It was time to go.

“Obviously ones that don’t where we are right now,” Seb said, satisfied.

And, so, they got into the car, squeezing four into the back, with Seb sitting on Connor’s lap and Marisa at the other end, looking still unclear why she was there. Seb felt bad for her.

Honestly, Seb tried his best to stay on their side, with some help from Paige’s pushing grip, as they bumped along. Less than ten minutes later, Seb realized that he wished that Jimmy was driving. Betty focused on the road ahead, free of traffic at that hour, and predicted that she’d probably need to stop for gas along the way.

She gunned the rented getaway car, sinking back in the driver’s seat, until finally, cruising down the highway, she let out a wild whoop. After a short silence, just long enough to sneeze, the rest began whooping as well. Seb’s ear bore the impact of Connor’s happy yell, and put down the phone that had somehow ended up back in his hand in front of him. He would need to charge it anyway.

# Epilogue

## All Ends Well

**Each of them noticed the blocky white letters** at about the same time in the shimmering window of the GamerPerch store that was nestled into the strip mall. The sign was almost calling out to them.

Then, with a drop of their heads, they simultaneously looked down at their phones, their faces warmed by both the glow in their hands and the sun bouncing back from the red, black and blue rectangle that had caught their attention.

On his screen, Seb pulled up a recent email, hit reply to find the send date and then tapped back out of his mail app. It was the way that he could most easily find the particular day of the month, his own technique.

He looked up to find Betty already grinning back, her hair-framed face beaming, perhaps a frost forming in her breath? He blushed, remembering how annoyed he was at Connor for not being able to make it.



Despite the uncomfortable crispness to the air, made worse whenever the wind picked up, they'd each left their homes that day and headed to a coffee shop in the strip mall there in Middleville by Highway Fifteen. It was probably the third-most popular one in the town. She had chosen it to off of the map, on her computer, from her own coffee shop.

"Ah, that's funny," Seb said, turning from glancing at her phone to the sign surrounding the text announcement. "I didn't realize it," he stuttered. "I mean, it's really funny..."

"You mean that CityRiddle 2 is out today? What... you look confused? I thought you knew? How come couldn't know?"

"Yeah, like, I thought... I thought it was going to be late? Weren't they were talking about the twenty six or twenty seventh, or something like that?"

Instead, the sign said the twenty second, a big two and two, the current date. CityRiddle 2, on sale.

"Nah, Endeavoright changed it. Didn't you read what I wrote about that, like two weeks ago?" she asked. "Or watch the video?"

Seb felt his head shaking. What could he say?

"You seriously didn't get that's why I told you to tell your mom to drop you off here, so you could check out a new game with Connor?"

"I've... we've... Well, we've been trying not to look at anything online really. Nothing about the outside world, at least for now. I mean, we've been on a bit," which was true, for most of the time, "but mostly we're just trying to do games, you know, KDO, local stuff. Not really wondering about the news for

YouTube. Doing MMOs and online multiplayer is fine because it's not about all of... you know... all of that stuff..."

"I get it."

"You know, it's your fault for never mentioning the date had changed in your texts, what do we have to follow you on Twitter to see what you're up to?"

"You do follow me on Twitter, I thought? Anyway, it's out," Betty added, with a subtle nod of her round head.

It was a good game, as much as Seb pretended to not be excited. He had to be.

"But I guess Batzinger won't be doing a video on it for awhile," she continued, "so if you're not going to be reading what I put out, you'll just have to see yourself if you'll like it. I'm sure Connor will actually... But, you know, I know he'd also prefer to hear about it from BZ123."

Mike Powers hadn't posted a video for several weeks. With bittersweet emotions, they eventually stopped religiously checking at least seven times a day to see if he had. It took until the week after the first, but then since Batzinger123 hadn't come on again at all, the habit let go of their forearms.

He hadn't appeared anywhere since the last night that they'd seen him, the night before they somehow had broke into and then broken Shiny Time... For weeks on GoVidGo, there was just a simple message posted,

**BE BACK SOON**

## THANKS

-BZ123

And nothing more, no updates, except for the timestamp reflecting someone logging in to the account every few days.

“At least we’ve been checking with his cousin, and he’s basically fine, it seems,” Seb decided to note, before remembering to add a “for what’s that worth.” But he knew that it was actually somewhat meaningful.

Of course, Lisa, his cousin, had been more focused on her fast-approaching winter dance recital, even though it was almost two months away still. But they’d gotten her, in passing comments, to offer them several updates on Batzinger.

He was no longer picking her up to shuttle her to lessons, but he was sometimes driving her home. And, he continued to be someone discussed by her parents fairly regularly, it appeared, which for some reason annoyed her. It was mostly about how his parents had been spoiling him, including by paying off his car lease. On another day she’d revealed that he’d been fairly low-key about the whole thing as he drove her in it.

So, somehow he existed, but not as Batzinger.

“Lots of channels have been out, for a few weeks now,” Betty responded. “Maybe it’ll be a few months, or forever for some of them. It’d suck if you subscribed to a few. You’re probably way too bored right now, or totally overdosing on one or two other

channels. Or, I don't know, reading something... like a blog..."

As the stubby pair stepped to the plate glass, their dim reflections joined the store's signs in parting the glare from the morning sun and shielding the carpet inside. The edges of the darkness all enjoyed crisp straight lines.

Only a few paces into the store, past the glass, they could see a pop-up of a super-enlarged game box atop a painted display. (It was between three and four times the normal size.) Leaning back slightly into a metal frame, its shape rested in a place where it was being cut in half by shadows, at that time.

The yin-and-yanged cereal box clearly bore the distinct title font and cover art style that you'd expect from the game. It was a legend, after all, and its design sense was iconic.

In less than an hour, Betty would have a mostly positive review posted on Marshmallow. A well formed one, in her opinion. The video with it showed everything it'd needed to show, she thought. It wasn't hard: At least in the first fifteen hours in, the game play was mostly what you'd expect from the original, though with a few twists that really impressed. But she still wished that Lucy had given her more of a heads-up.

She'd been sweet as pie while Betty had building up her hype, but nowhere to be found when the revised release date approached. What a freaking waste of time sucking up to that company; she under up only getting the game two days before its release,

after a series of exclusive reviews appeared across different mediums.

Betty knew that it didn't matter in the grand scheme of things, but it was a good reminder of how things worked. And it certainly was not helpful in those circumstances for her, at all, getting emailed question from Elon directly for some reason, after he saw a *60 Minutes* segment on it, of all things. Someone had emailed it to him, or maybe he saw on Facebook or something.

One car then another blew past on the highway. Woken by the whooshes, Betty took a step back, and inspected Seb's condition. The wind began to gust, like it didn't want her to, but Betty, knowing that that wasn't the real reason it was gusting, didn't care.

His doggy eyes looked even more droopy in the cold as he squinted. It was chilly enough to redden his nose, and his eyelashes looked hard and dramatic. Still, she would say that she observed him seeming to be able to hang in there. Not in the same way that she was, but more or less...

Though it wasn't exactly necessary, she pulled her coat tight, wrapping the fluffy faux fur lining around the collar around her face. That left mostly just her eyes peeking out, like puppet eyes.

With a wiggle, she pinched her elbows in, and looked ahead at the locked door. A row of white tens : zero-zeroes hung on a black square in the lower panel of the glass, except for the one row in the middle with additional small white letters.

Signs hanging down from the rooftop showed that the row of storefronts that stretched out against

the flow of traffic also housed: a bagel place, a barber shop, a bakery and a loan store.

Betty and Seb needed to go to the Juan Valdez Coffee on the end, but a solid range of cars had left it pretty full in the lot over there. Some of the vehicles must have belonged to the baristas and Mexican bakers, Betty thought, since she didn't expect a coffee shop to be so full at that hour.

Down the sidewalk from the GamerPerch, a handful of sparrows hopped around a garbage can, just off the grass, nibbling at some crumbs. As Betty and Seb passed by, the birds fluttered their wings wildly, but barely moved, before settling back into their routine. It was almost exactly like humans, returning to their phones, after someone new stepped into a room or a subway car or something like that.

Above the letters and graphics of the signs above them, the sky's deep blue stretched out in all direction. Only a few large clouds far in the distance disturbed the paint fill, looking like they could blot out the sun, and they were all too far away to be really threatening.

Betty realized that they'd both fallen quiet as the strolled under the overhang from the rooftop. CityRiddle was big for Seb, she remembered. It would still be on his mind.

"Did you know," she said to him, "that I almost got the first CityRiddle early, like a beta? Almost six months early. I'd heard about it in a comment section, when I was freelancing, just submitting stuff all over the place and looking for ideas."

His gait slowed.

“Except I couldn’t because my hardware wasn’t compatible, and I threw a fit but it was only my fault for getting my hopes up? It was obviously a while ago, and I was young and stupid. I wasn’t as young as you, but... definitely stupid.”

“What does that mean? That I’m stupid because I’m young?”

He wriggled his nose, mockingly. She did like to see him like that. Feisty.

“When you get involved with something like this you just hope all ends well,” she snarked back, “but you never know. You could end up not being compatible. But...”

“But, you’re going to tell me that’s why it’s fun, aren’t you?”

“No. No, I’m not going to tell you that,” she said. She paused. “I’d tell Connor that, but not you.”

“Thanks, I guess,” he said, before adding, “You’re almost as impossible as him, you know that?”

But she wasn’t, and she knew he knew that, because she also knew him well enough to know that he knew he himself was also actually impossible. Furthermore, she additionally knew that he knew that she was doing her best.

For instance, at the end of the night they’d shut down Shiny Town — as they’d come to call it — they’d arranged, while getting dropped off, to meet up as soon as they could, with Betty and Jimmy coming out to see the others. Whenever they wanted. Or as least Betty would, since the curtain would be going up on Jimmy’s play each night and as a Sunday matinee.

“As soon as they could” turned out to be a few days later, when they’d fulfilled their promise in the easiest possible way, coming again in the afternoon and meeting once more at the mall. Jimmy finally got his Uncle Lemon trip in. Betty paid.

There wasn’t much to talk about, but for a good reason, ultimately. They’d been texting so often already, with Betty keeping the boys — and Paige, through them — apprised of the lack of developments. Not giving up, Betty was still working on finding new threads to pull on. And, apparently she’d be trying to get some of her colleagues involved, but without letting them know too much.

But they knew all that, so by the time they began making loud noises in their cups with their straws, the conversation drew to a quick end. After that, they walked around the mall a bit more aimless, just soaking in the people walking in the same direction on each side of the loop around the building.

It’d rained heavily the following weekend, and then Halloween came during the next, so they just Skyped for a few hours, instead of meeting up for all that time. Also without really hashing anything new up, despite everything that Betty was doing to trace down the bad man that they knew was lurking out there.

Finally, Betty insisted on seeing the rest of them, but only Seb could find a way to be there.

Somehow, Seb’s mom had never even suspected that he’d been almost forty five minutes away that night, battling against dark forces or



whatever, he didn't think. She never assumed for a second that he wasn't with Connor, somewhere safe, like Connor's house, or some other friend's.

That was because she'd trusted him. Didn't even think about where he might be, so long as he was with Connor, whom she may have never truly thought highly of, but with whom she felt a certain connection because of their strong feelings about Seb's safety. Or, so he figured.

Still, after their encounter with Paul Shinton and his minions, Seb felt a lot less confident about trying to sneak around without getting caught.

He could really get himself in trouble, he realized, having gotten himself in trouble. What would his mom do if he'd never found his way out? Would Connor have had to tell her?

So, once he'd finally made it home, the afternoon after they'd almost been imprisoned permanently (or worse), since he'd slept over Connor's, he washed his face and changed his clothes and heaved a sigh of relief.

He did his best to be relaxing out on the couch, with his phone out in his lap, for when she came in from work. He grunted a few times at her after she sat down later, and she pestered him with questions about really small things. Like what the school lunch had been that day and whether he remembered a movie that they'd seen while on vacation a few years back.

He realized that he'd slipped back into normalcy.

He didn't want his mother becoming suspicious of him, so over from then on, he would act in a way that was as boring as possible, probably suspiciously boring.

And then there was school, which was happening for most of the time, what a blur that had been...

He saw Holly a few times, saw her friendly eyes darting around; she probably saw him less, since she was so frequently halfway into her next interaction. Cordell definitely again showed up in gym class, over and over, like a level boss, he vaguely remembered. Still, Seb could never later recall the conversations, if he'd had any.

He knew he'd mumbled through his classes when called upon by his teacher. And then, at recess, hung close to Connor, who barely understood, but did more than anyone. Seb knew that Connor should be angry at him; he'd probably be super-annoyed if his friend had done all of that to them. But, ever since they'd rejoined Connor, his sister and her friend at the car, he'd gotten only good vibes.

So, with Connor's help, he just blundered through school. Of, course, when no one was watching, he mainly snuck himself into two games on his phone, Jumbo-Tetris and PinballPinball. At one point, Seb began alternating each day, making it as if one of the games could only be played on that day, even or odd, or like a MWF/TT school schedule. If he didn't feel like playing that game, he'd just not play so much on his phone.

Instead, he'd started coloring, geometric shapes that were beginning to resemble living beings, in his notebooks.

Certainly, in seeking to remain in good standing, Seb's efforts to be home before his mother, every night, came at the expense of seeing Connor less at the Tippet's house, and other places of trouble. But they'd never been as close, finding each other in the hallways in school with even more commitment, and messaging constantly once at home when they weren't chat during games.

Connor's view of the whole thing was that Shiny Time was done, that they'd gotten off a fatal shot across the bow by showing up on Shinton's doorstep, and being the ones to push back. When your whole operation is built around making people like things by using YouTubers, encountering a real-life example of a critical comment could be jarring. It could lead to awe at their sudden loss of ability to manipulate.

Shinton and his company's employees seemed smart, but Connor said he thought that it sounded like they'd been ready to unravel. Especially since they hadn't shown up again. Seb still wanted to confirm it.

Betty was trying to.

She'd reached out again, twice in some cases, to a number of the YouTubers that Batzinger had collaborated with. Over Skype, she learned from MisssterMassster that he had responded to a few of the German's attempts to reach to out by saying that he was busy with some stuff. MisssterMassster found it strange that he wasn't doing videos, but he was so

focused on his own stuff that he didn't have the time to investigate any more.

She knew she could stop by again. She could easily insist that he spill his guts to her. If he was as free as he seemed, he owed that to her. But she didn't need to do it. It was clear that there were also others. And she needed to focus on finding them, to see if she could get to those who remained under Shinton's control and figured out how he was communicating with them.

Betty had asked MisssterMassster if he'd noticed any other YouTubers disappearing for long stretches, but he couldn't recall anything of the sort. None of the others that she'd talked with had any better ideas.

Somehow, though, Seb trusted that she'd find what she was looking for, with enough time.

"You want to wait around until they open?"

They were back outside, in front of the GamerPerch, like a mother and her son in front of a butcher's. He looked over at Betty; there were sparkles in her look at him. He could tell: She knew that the only way to get through is to start to do it. She mentioned that she'd been playing less games, to make time for being serious about her search.

"I can't afford it. My mom's going to kill me already. I spent all of my money chasing Batzinger, so I've been charging a fair amount on her card at school."

Betty chuckled.

"I don't actually make money, you know. I just get what my grandparents and people send on my

birthdays and stuff, that my mom doesn't hold onto."

"So... what... you're trying to get me to buy a game for you..."

"I hadn't thought of that, but I like it. Nice thinking. PS4 and not Xbox, please."

"You wish. But seriously. It's pretty good. You should get it."