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SPYWARE

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK.

// COLIN ROBERTSON_

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Published by Gin & Tonic Press

www.gintonicpress.com

ISBN 978-1-7322010-0-2

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-7322010-1-9

PREFACE

Kurt Vonnegut once said to me* that a story doesn't need to have an ending. I took this one step further and decided to omit the beginning and middle as well. Consequently, I wrote nothing for years. So it goes. I finally realized that my pile of unpublished stories weren't going to publish themselves. I set about dusting them off and rewriting them. This is the third such book. Sadly, I have resorted to the tired motif of including in my books a beginning, a middle and, yes (snore), an end. At the end of this book, you'll find an Afterword that was originally part of this preface, making it a little *Awkword*. It includes important acknowledgements as well as acting as a sort mea culpa for what you will have just read. I moved it there because mea culpas in advance ruin all the fun.

The idea for this book dates back to at least 2003. It began life as a serious sci-fi called *Contagion*, with the same concept and entirely different characters. After shelving it for over a decade and a half, I dusted it off and decided it was more relevant than ever. Time, events and its new incarnation

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as a sci-fi political satirical thriller all demanded a lot of changes. I ascribe to Hofstadter's Law, which states "It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's Law." So finally, it is done, but to what end? For me, writing is largely a process of lobbing paper airplanes off a cliff at night. I do it in the hope that at least one lands at someone's toes. I'm glad it landed at yours, and that you chose to pick it up.

Enjoy.

CJR

* Well, me and the five hundred other people he was giving a lecture to at the time. Robertson Davies was there too, sitting two rows in front of me, while looking very beardy. Anyway, it *felt* like he was saying it to me.

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PRE-RELEASE

“The stuff that memes are made of.” – R. Dawkins

The black Mercedes sped through the bright winter twilight. It glided with swift silent purpose between iridescent fields of snow, beneath an indigo sky. Boston was only an hour away, but here, amid the silent pastures and naked trees that stuck like frayed wires through the drifts, it was another universe. Cold. Empty. Perfect. A few flakes gently fell, steadfastly refusing to be rushed by gravity. It was six pm on a Sunday. Bitter. Crisp. Lifeless. The car had driven a long way. It had passed through the estranged states of America. Its route was efficient. It had come along the arching interstates that had long replaced the meandering byways of the past. The old highway system still cobwebbed the land, but only in the background—a forgotten footprint of another country. Inefficient. Forgotten. Frozen. People romanticized the old roads, but rarely if ever took them. Modern freeways were faster. They were always the shortest distance

between two points. Four lanes wide, they channeled people in just two directions divided by a median, North or South, East or West, left or right. Along the way, the Mercedes had rolled past hundreds of billboards. The signs promised that the place you wanted to be was just ahead. *Keep going*, they said, to the next exit.

The car's hood gleamed. Its plates were dealer's plates. This was a lie. The car, while less than a year old, was not new. There was no such dealer. No such VIN. Its driver was hidden behind a windshield tinted smoke black. Ahead on the road, the driver spotted a sign, *Willie's Pay'n Pump*. Red neon read 'Open'. Black leather driving leather gloves turned the wheel. Tires crunched on gravel. This was one of those rare independent stations, owned by its namesake, Willie Tompkins, since 1979. The building, the sign and the pumps themselves were antiques, but well tended and serviceable. The Mercedes parked under the sign that read 'Full Service Only'. Another anachronism. The driver tapped his horn.

"I'm comin', I'm comin'!" shouted Willie, ducking under the half lifted garage door. He wiped grease from his hands with a rag, and jogged up to the driver-side door. Gap-tooth grin. "What can I do ya for?"

The driver's side window slid down, revealing the car's lone occupant. Willie, who was accustomed to a menagerie of customers from the city, was nonetheless taken aback. In some ways, the man was entirely unremarkable. He was dressed in a smart black business suit and tie. His age? Indeterminate. His hair was slicked back with Brylcreem, not a strand out of place. There was something unsettling about him. Willie couldn't say why, but the devil, he knew, was in the details. The visitor's skin was pale like tallow. It was as if all of the blood had been permanently drained from his face. Most striking were his sunglasses. They were aviator style, but with lenses a hematic shade of red. He looks, thought the gas station owner, like a vampire. Of course, Willie knew there was no such thing. Besides, if there was one thing he'd learned from his niece Chelsea, it was that modern

vampires were handsome, brooding, misunderstood youth. This man was none of these things. His look was old school vampire. He was Bella Lugosi meets Reservoir Dogs, with rose petal eyes.

“Premium, please. All the way,” said the man. The driver spoke with a mid-Atlantic accent, neither here nor there. His intonation was dispassionate and precise.

“Absolutely!” said Willie. The aging pump jockey jogged around to the side of the car and inserted the nozzle. A moment later, Willie returned to the driver side window. The driver was looking at his phone. “Cash or credit? Two dollars more with credit,” said Willie.

Without looking up, the driver pulled out his wallet and reached for his credit card. He hesitated. “Say... you don’t happen to know where I could find the Jim Townsend estate, do you?”

“Senator Jim Townsend? Well sure, everyone knows that! An’ yur goin’ the right way. Just keep on here another ten minutes an’ yu’ll spot the gates. Can’t miss it!”

“Thank-you.”

“Not a problem. Say, you’re not from ‘round here are ya?”

The driver moved his hand away from his credit card and retrieved a different card instead. This card was silver backed. The driver turned it over as he presented it to Willie. “You’ve been most helpful,” said the man, with a flatline smile.

Willie squinted at the odd image. “What the heck kind of credit card is this? Looks like one those magic 3D thingies... We don’t accept Driver’s Club.”

“It’s not Driver’s Club.”

The gas station proprietor peered more closely. Abruptly, Willie’s eyes opened wide, as if he’d seen a ghost.

Senator Jim Townsend trudged through the six inches of snow that covered his long gravel driveway. He was accompanied by his two dogs, both German Shepherds, who romped happily. They had reached their objective, the mailbox. Jim opened the little metal door and retrieved a small bundle of catalogs and come-ons. “Junk... junk... junk,” he muttered. It didn’t matter. Picking up the evening mail was as much matter of exercise and fresh air as anything else. All of his official mail went to his office in D.C. The seventy-five-year-old man then turned and braced himself for the hundred yard haul back up the hill to the house. At that moment, the two dogs began to snap and snarl at one another.

“Hey! Hey! Trapper, you leave Nicki alone!”

The Senator gave Trapper’s leash a yank. The dogs fell into line. A moment later, their tiff forgotten, they were best friends again.

“Jim, I just put the kettle on!” shouted Jim’s wife, Sarah, from the front door of the house.

Jim silently waved his acknowledgement. Sarah smiled and disappeared inside. The truth was, the Senator was too tired to shout back. He paused a moment to catch his breath. Seventy-five years of life on Earth, the last sixty as a smoker, had left him easily winded. One day, one way or another, he would quit. For now, his laboured breath formed a cumulous cloud in the icy evening air. The yellow wax warm windows of the house beckoned him. He lifted his boot to continue. When he’d left, the kitchen had smelled of ginger snaps. Sarah liked to keep busy with baking and Jim enjoyed eating. They’d been well suited for life, he and her. It was then that Jim heard the distinctive crunch of car tires on new snow. As he turned to see who the visitor was, Trapper and Nicki began to bark.

“Hush, hush!” he admonished and yanked the two dogs to compliance.

The black Mercedes rolled to a stop. The door opened. The driver stepped out. Despite the deepening dusk, the traveller still wore his peculiar

red sunglasses. Behind the lenses, the man's eyes were narrow and focused. "Senator Jim Townsend?"

"That's right," said Jim. He didn't recognize the man and, while he liked to say constituents were always welcome, that didn't mean at his home on a Sunday evening. The man dressed more like an official or a business man. Better not be a bloody lobbyist, the Senator thought to himself, not if he expects anything from me. "What can I do for you?"

"Actually, I have something for you, Senator," said the man.

A courier, thought Jim, well that explains it.

"My card," said the man. The visitor then produced the same silver foil backed card he'd handed the gas station proprietor earlier. As he did so, he turned the card to face the Senator.

Jim squinted at it a moment and frowned. He then transferred both leashes to one hand and fished inside his inside coat pocket. "I think I need my spectacles," he muttered. "Although mine aren't quite as colourful as yours." The Senator donned his half moon reading glasses, and peered once more at the patterned surface. The image appeared to shift and move as he looked at it. He grimaced. "This some kind of joke?"

At that instant, deep inside the Senator's brain, a microscopic array of vermilion energy coalesced. It started to storm. Molecular lightning began to fire amid the neurones of his medulla oblongata, disrupting normal behaviours and activity.

Jim Townsend opened his mouth in surprise. He gripped his chest, as if attempting to clutch the sharp, stabbing pain that had manifested there. The Senator mouthed seven silent syllables, forming a wordless question. He dropped to his knees. He then fell forward, slammed his face into the snow, kicked once, and was still.

Nicki and Trapper whimpered in distress and began frantically nosing and pawing the Senator's lifeless body.

The man in rose-coloured glasses calmly plucked the card from the

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dead Senator's fingers and pocketed it. He then returned to his idling car and drove away, into the gathering night.

POC 0.01

“\$ is the _root of all eval()” – MafiaBoy

Everyone is a product of their childhood. If Sigmund Freud himself were to set Eddy on a couch and ask him about his growing up, he’d have it wrapped up in ten minutes. “Well, zat’s zat,” Freud would say. “No vunder you’re ein radical, und introverted. You’re ein introverted radical! Your Super-Ego und your Ego are making love to one other, and they’re making your id watch.” Eddy simply imagined the fake accent and threw in the only German words he knew. For some reason, he also imagined Freud to look a lot like his father, but he assumed that was just a coincidence. Still, when the three people closest to you take their own lives, albeit years apart and in very different ways, it’s going to leave a mark.

Eddy’s Uncle Russ, was a radical too. Most radicals simply dress the part. Uncle Russ was the real thing—the kind that blew things up. As a boy, Eddy had idolized his uncle. Uncle Russ taught Eddy to scoff at the

government, society, and rules as, well, a rule. He taught Eddy that the world was run by evil people pulling the strings of suckers and trusting fools. “You’re smarter than 99.8% of the people out there,” he said one day. Eddy was eight-years-old. They were walking along the abandoned railroad tracks that ran behind the houses. The chunky wood ties were worn and almost consumed by grass, but the corroded rails still shone like silver streams in the midday sun. “0.1% are the puppeteers.”

“Are you a puppeteer?”

“I’m the remainder, the other 0.1%,” Eddy’s uncle said. Uncle Russ suddenly went wide-eyed with a look of terror. “Train!”

Eddy leapt clear of the tracks and straight into an adjacent juniper bush. His uncle doubled-over in laughter. The trains hadn’t run through Popperville in years, not since the factory had shuttered. The young boy sat in the flattened shrubs, brushing tiny needles from his sleeves. Uncle Russ wiped tears from his eyes. “Damn, that was some good jumping boy.” In spite of himself, Eddy broke into a grin. From her nearby backyard, Mrs. Kilroy looked up from hanging her washing on the line and shook her head. Hers was one of the many yards that backed onto the tracks. Mrs. Kilroy was a remainder too. She was one of the dwindling population of original residents in the small town. Slowly they were being replaced by commuters to the city. Popperville was becoming a bedroom community. The new residents made and spent their money in New York. Even the old town hall was scheduled to be torn down. Its antique steam shovel furnace sold to scrap. It was disorienting.

At the tender age of eight, Eddy had begun to realize that the rest of the town didn’t view his Uncle with the same admiration he did. Russ Pending was labeled an ‘eccentric’ by those too kind to call him a ‘joke’. Eddy was forced to this realization one day when he needed to bring something to school for show-and-tell. Uncle Russ gave Eddy his replica medieval two-handed sword. As a bonus, his uncle had explained, it would

also “send a message” to the kids who had been bullying Eddy. Eddy wasn’t sure the sight of an eight-year-old child dragging a six-foot sword along the ground would inspire respect. Uncle Russ assured him it would. Mr. Mould, the principal, confiscated the sword under the school’s zero-tolerance-policy against edged weapons. His uncle raged. “They’re all idiots. See? They know nothing! The two-handed-sword is really more of a crushing weapon. Education system? Re-education is more like it!”

Following the incident, Eddy’s classmates did little to hide their disdain or echo the disdain of their parents. A group of angry local men, unemployed former Fun Factory workers, confronted Eddy’s uncle on the street one day. They called him ‘an embarrassment’. “You embarrass yourselves!” Uncle Russ shouted back defiantly. It was a retort that left the men confused and unsure how to respond. Uncle Russ had no steady work. He lived in a derelict bomb shelter in the Pending family’s backyard. The concrete bunker was a relic of the Cold War that had come with the house. Eddy also began to understand that Uncle Russ’s predilection for army fatigues was not ‘normal’. Other townsfolk wore camouflage for deer or duck hunting, but not at the dinner table and definitely not to bed. Eddy also began to suspect that thinking the moon-landing was faked and that companies were secretly breeding a race of hyper-intelligent GMO grapefruit were not the brilliant insights Uncle Russ claimed them to be. They were crackpot conspiracy theories. Eddy’s mother and father simply referred to Uncle Russ as ‘different’. Eventually, Eddy would realize that this was because his parents were different too. They were different in quieter, less obvious ways. Eddy’s mother was a novelist who hadn’t written a book in eight years. His dad was a world renowned physicist and a largely absentee father, despite working from home. Both brothers had genius IQs. How they applied them, however, couldn’t be more different. Eddy’s mother blamed Russ’s paranoia on Lance Winface. Lance was an AM radio host. Uncle Russ listened to his show every single day. “Lance is the only one out

there who dares speak the truth,” Russ proclaimed while painstakingly removing the raisins from his Raisin Bran cereal. Still, Eddy loved his uncle. Eddy’s parents loved Uncle Russ too. “Family is family,” Eddy’s mother would say, as if this explained everything.

“Delusion is like anything else,” Uncle Russ said while walking his nephew to school one morning, “if you want it done right, you’ve got to do it yourself. Well, goodbye!” Those were the last words Eddy’s uncle ever said to him. Russ died one hour later in a terrorist attack. Uncle Russ was both the sole perpetrator and victim of said attack. It was a life-altering event for Eddy. Even more so for Uncle Russ. His uncle had ranted many times about “something needing to be done”. Despite this and other tirades, neither Eddy nor his parents ever thought Russ would actually commit violence. “We Pendlings are thinkers, not doers,” his father would say. “We come from a long line of inventors.” That much was true. Eddy’s grandfather, Hubert Pending, had been chief engineer at the old town Fun Factory in the 1960s, designing hundreds of novelty items to be sold primarily through the back of comic books. Most famously, Great Grandpa Hubert had patented the Hu-Burp™ belching whoopee cushion. While nowhere near the size of the Sea Monkey empire, the rubber belching toy had employed half the town during its heyday. They were all wrong about Uncle Russ. Despite his harmless demeanour, Russ was a genuine homicidal lunatic. He had decided to put his radical words into radical action by blowing up the local library. The Mulligan Public Library had recently announced its plan to dispose of its microfiche collection. This, Russ wrote in his later-recovered manifesto, was to cover up information about the various nefarious schemes of the Popperville city selectmen.

Three days prior, Uncle Russ had dropped a homemade pipe bomb into the corner mailbox. It was the 1990s, so people weren’t talking terrorism much. No one was worried about ‘suspicious packages’, especially in small towns. Consequently, the package went through the mail completely

undetected. For all of his intelligence, Uncle Russ could still be a complete idiot. Eddy's mother liked to say, "The world is full of oxymorons, people who are brilliant fools." Russ returned home that day to find a package waiting for him. He assumed it to be the Lego Mindstorms he'd ordered weeks before. In his excitement, Russ took the package back to his bomb shelter residence. He tore open the parcel without even looking at it. So it was that Uncle Russ failed to recognize his own pipe-bomb package, returned to him for insufficient postage. 'Russ' Rousseau Pending's last words were, "Say, this looks a lot like—" It turns out that underground bomb shelters offer little in protection when the bomb is detonated *inside*. Quite the opposite, in fact. The force was multiplied inwards and out the trap door in the ceiling. This effectively turned the bomb shelter into a sort giant concrete cannon, with Russ and his various belongings as projectiles. His bed landed on a neighbour's rooftop, black and smoking. His combination stove-top microwave, with burrito still inside, splashed down in the nearby public pool. Thankfully, the swimming pool was empty at the time. Russ himself was mostly reduced to particulate matter. Still, parts of him landed as far as two blocks away. His left hand was found on the sidewalk by a French bulldog named Monsieur Le Bark. M. LeBark then proceeded to run off with the severed limb in his mouth. When the police tried to retrieve the lost limb as evidence, the dog refused. Thinking it was all a game, M. Le Bark eluded pursuit for over an hour up and down Main Street and across lawns, wagging his tail and leaving a trail of traumatized residents behind him. The bomb shelter, being what it was, remained mostly intact. The back of the Pending family home, on the other hand, was obliterated. It had been blown to smithereens by Uncle Russ's briefly airborne sofa. Whatever his other failings, it turned out Uncle Russ was a first-class bomb builder. His Uncle's death left eight-year-old Eddy Pending with a lot of unanswered questions. Questions like, why put a return address on a mail bomb? And, how could someone he'd admired so much turn out to be a madman?

Amazingly, this was not the event from Eddy's childhood that would affect him most profoundly. The death of his uncle was traumatic, but Eddy felt he could understand it. He had once seen scrawled on a bathroom stall wall, "My karma ran over my dogma." That, Eddy decided, was what had happened to Uncle Russ. They said, his uncle was not 'right in the head'. Mental illness seemed like an easy answer to him. "The brain gives up its secrets when it fails to function," Uncle Russ had once told him. Even at eight-years-old Eddy felt he could understand his Uncle being crazy. It was another event, just two years later that would defy all understanding. It was that event which would shatter Eddy's world.

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//Downtown Los Angeles — now

"Yes!" said Eddy excitedly, "Heck, yes!" Eddy didn't swear. His mother had taught him it was a sign of a weak intellect. People assumed that a twenty-eight-year old man who didn't swear was a boy scout. Eddy was no boy scout. Not even close.

It was originally supposed to be ten thousand pigs charging through Wall Street. Instead, it was chickens, and less than five thousand of them at that. They were going to call it 'Apocalypse Sow'. Blowfish had wanted to call it 'eBay of Pigs', although the online auction giant had nothing to do with it. Now that it was chickens, neither name worked. The change to chickens was a matter of simple necessity. Pig farmers had not embraced networked crate locks, while the chicken farmers had run with it. The poultry industry needed them more, due to the sheer volume of chickens. The ratio of PPP (pigs per person) was lower, despite the popularity of bacon. The operation itself had been planned for months. It had included a test run on a chicken truck in Iowa. There, they were able to make all of the chicken crates unlock automatically, based on a precise time and GPS

location. The event was assumed to be an isolated incident with the new computerized crate locking technology. “A bug in the firmware,” the manufacturer said. It was reported only by the local paper, under the headline, ‘Chickens Run Amok on Highway 5. Some Traffic Delayed.’ No one outside of the industry noticed. The group had known there would be casualties—martyrs to the cause. Three chickens gave their lives that day, squashed flat by a tractor trailer in the eastbound lane. War is Hell.

The event mascot was a deceased celebrity of the poultry scene, ‘Mike the Headless Chicken’. Mike was undoubtedly the most famous nonfictional chicken of all time. In 1945, at a poultry farm in Colorado, the largely unknown and as yet unnamed chicken had his head lopped off. This turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to him. A miracle occurred. Like Jesus of Nazareth before him, the chicken did not die, but found everlasting life. He rose again, ran around and bumped into things a lot. The farmer named him ‘Mike’. Despite his handicap, Mike went on to live life to the fullest, at least in headless chicken terms. He became an instant celebrity, touring the county in sideshows and appearing in both Time and Life magazines. Mike finally met his tragic, if long overdue, demise in 1947. Presaging rockstars to come, he choked to death in a motel room in the middle of the night. As the event mascot, Mike was meant to symbolize the blind greed of Wall Street investors unregulated by the effectively decapitated SEC. As part of the protest, infected computers all over America began to display a black and white photograph of Mike and the words, ‘America: Your Chickens are Coming Home to Roast!’ It was supposed to say ‘roost’ but, despite Ignominious members having an average IQ of 190, somehow the typo had gone through undetected. Roast, they decided, worked just as well and might even be more clever. Chief Wiggum had wanted to animate Mike. He wanted to have blood squirt out of his neck and then sew on the head of Jim Cramer, host of MSNBC’s Mad Money, in its place. He had been voted down. The hacker group was emphatic; the

headless chicken image should be tasteful.

The operation itself was fairly straightforward. They would hack into the invoicing system and alter shipping manifests to divert ten poultry trucks to Manhattan, New York. The trucks arrived at noon, initially causing just minor confusion over who was going to receive the procured chickens. This was followed by growing concern as the drivers realized the magnitude of the situation and began to suspect that *something* was up. Finally, total chaos—five thousand chicken crates opened simultaneously within squawking distance of the Wall Street Bull. All at once, traders and tourists were wading through a sea of panicked poultry. Despite the exploits working perfectly, the protest was not a total success. The hackers had underestimated the astonishing stupidity of chickens. More than half of the pea-brained birds simply stayed in their tiny cages, waiting for someone to kindly close the door. Still, that left over two thousand hens clucking at the feet of alarmed investment bankers and hedge fund managers. A photo of a Goldman Sachs VP trying to fend off the pecks of an overly aggressive Rhode Island Red rooster made the cover of the New York Daily News with the headline ‘All Fowl’ed Up!’. MCNX’s reporter compared the sight of a poop-covered analyst to that of Macy Borders, the ‘Dust Lady of 9/11’. The channel’s pundits then went on to equate the stunt with Islamic terrorism. To Eddy, this was what it was all about—bringing down the 0.1%.

None of the hackers were anywhere near the protest. Eddy watched the event live stream from the safety of his downtown Los Angeles apartment, three time zones away. It was the sight of panicked chickens rushing up the steps of the stock exchange like a barnyard reenactment of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* that made the Diet Dr. Pepper spray out of Eddy’s nose. He was still mopping his keyboard when he heard the knock at the door. Eddy’s heart froze. His rent was paid, so it shouldn’t be the landlord. It couldn’t be a friend come to visit, as Eddy hadn’t any. His first thought was, it’s the FBI! His second thought was, how could they find me

so fast? His third thought was, it's not the FBI. The FBI couldn't find the on-switch on an iPad.

"Hello? Anyone home?"

It was a woman's voice. That was even more odd. Eddy didn't know any women, other than Mrs. Ferguson across the hall. There were a couple of 'women' he knew online, but he suspected they were men. Plus, he didn't know their real names and they didn't know his. "Just a minute," he said. He tapped a hot-key on his computer. This instantly closed his Tor browser window and replaced his desktop image of Mike with golden haystacks in Kansas.

Eddy opened the door. Standing there was Gwen from apartment 402. Gwen was tall and striking with green eyes, red hair and perfect skin. Having her show up at his door was like some sort of fantasy. Not just any fantasy, one he'd specifically imagined more than once. Except, of course, she was dressed. "Hey, um, hi, um... Can I help you?" he asked.

"I hope so. You're really into computers, right?" Gwen was distracted by the sight of something over Eddy's shoulder. He followed her gaze to the misanthropic mess that was his apartment. The living room was a jungle of wires tangled around CPUs stacked on every surface. The curtains were drawn and the lights were off, leaving only the ghostly glow of monitors amid constellations of green and blue LEDs. This gave the decor an air of dystopian future mixed with hints of social outcast.

"I dabble," said Eddy. He tried leaning nonchalantly against the door frame but began over-thinking how exactly to cross his arms. After several failed attempts, he gave up. He decided to shove his hands into his pants pockets instead, only to realize he was wearing sweat pants that had none. Eddy coolly patted his thighs and hoped this looked like a perfectly normal thing to do.

"So, do you remember what you said to me last week?"

"When you moved in?"

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Gwen nodded. “You said that, if I ever needed help with a computer issue, I should ask you.”

“Sure.” That explained it, thought Eddy. Women like Gwen never gave guys like him the time of day unless they needed tech help. This is why I hate beautiful people, he thought. Of course, the reason he’d offered to help was because Gwen was beautiful, but that was beside the point.

“So... I’m asking you,” said Gwen with a smile that briefly rendered Eddy brain-dead.

“Um, okay.”

“Do you know anything about viruses?”

“A little,” said Eddy.

POC 0.02

“Oh, and clowns.” - F. D. Roosevelt

//Downtown Los Angeles — now

“It’s in the den,” said Gwen, pointing down the hallway.

“You have a den?” said Eddy. Gwen’s apartment was considerably nicer than his own. It was both larger and brighter. Keeping his curtains drawn and lights off didn’t help. Eddy liked to work in the dark. It helped him focus. Still, he worried it was hurting his eyesight. As it was, Eddy was blind without his glasses. Before leaving his apartment, he’d made Gwen wait while he put in his contact lenses and sized himself up in the bathroom mirror. He wanted to resent her for being so damn perfect, but then again, she was so... damn... perfect. Eddy liked to think that he looked ‘artistic’ rather than geeky, at least when he took his glasses off. He suspected this was wishful thinking. He once told a girl he liked at school that he was ‘artistic’. She smiled and said that it ‘explained a lot’. It was only later that

he realized she'd misheard him.

He glanced about as Gwen put away her keys. It was a grown-up's apartment, with nice furniture, and art on the walls. Eddy still lived like a college student, and a messy one at that. He figured Gwen for roughly the same age as himself but supposed she'd always lived like an adult, probably since she was four. "It's hard to believe we live in the same building," he said.

"I think you're beneath me," said Gwen.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your apartment? I think it's directly below mine."

"Oh, yes, my apartment, right! Yes."

Gwen looked at Eddy as if trying to decide if he suffered some sort of mental impairment. Eddy tried to smile reassuringly. He wondered at how his IQ seemed to drop around attractive women. It was like some sort of temporal zone created by their aesthetic mass, he decided. The closer he came to them, the slower his synaptic processes. That was how his physicist father might have explained it.

Gwen led Eddy down a narrow hallway past a bedroom and bathroom to the aforementioned den. Eddy was surprised to see a handgun mounted on the wall.

"What's that about?" he asked.

"It's a gun."

"Yes, I... I know it's a gun."

"It was a gift from my Dad," said Gwen.

"Your father gave you a gun?" Eddy had never been comfortable around firearms. As a fiction writer, his mother used to proclaim Chekov's rule. If there's a gun on the wall, she'd say, it has to go off by the end of the story. Eddy preferred his stories full of superfluous irrelevancies.

"Technically he didn't give it to me. I took it. It was his service revolver. He was a cop."

“Doesn’t he want it back?”

“He died trying to stop a liquor store robbery.”

“Oh jeez,” said Eddy, “I’m so sorry.”

Gwen shrugged. “It’s why I became a prosecutor. Locking up bad guys is like therapy for me.”

“You’re a prosecutor? How... nice.” Eddy had never actually asked Gwen what she did for a living. His only previous conversation with her had been after running into her on the stairs while she was moving in. At the time, she was concerned with carrying boxes. He was concerned with how mind-blowingly hot she looked walking up stairs in a pair of jeans. The subject of putting people in jail never came up. Eddy liked to think his pranks as a member of *Ignominious* were just that, pranks. Eddy believed that rerouting the profits from a coal mining company to pay for billboards about the dangers of climate change was an act of social justice. The FBI, on the other hand, saw it as theft, espionage, and possibly even terrorism. Eddy had little fear that the ‘Inept B.I.’ would ever catch him. Still, having law enforcement literally living over his head was unsettling.

“There it is,” said Gwen, pointing to a Dell laptop sitting on a desk. The den was a combination home office and law library. Eddy wondered why, in this digital age, so many trees had to die to print massive law books. “Ugh. I just want to throw it out the window! Can you help?”

“Throw it out the window?”

Gwen looked at Eddy obliquely, as if trying to decide exactly what kind of ‘funny’ he was. Again, Eddy wondered what it was about attractive women that caused his brain to crash. He wondered if it could be studied and utilized to make people stupid on demand. He then realized the advertising industry had been doing this for decades. “With the virus?” said Gwen.

“Yes, yes, of course. Um, sure. Just leave it to me.”

“Do you need anything?”

“I will need your password. Well, technically, I don’t need it, but it

will save me some time,” Eddy added the last bit with bravado. He then realized it might come across as creepy.

Gwen seemed not to notice. “@mmend2. It’s there if you forget it,” she said, pointing to a sticky note on her desk lamp.

“I won’t.”

“So, you’re okay?”

“I’m good. Might take twenty minutes or so, but...” Eddy made a show of cracking his knuckles, “I got this.”

#

Three and a half hours later, Eddy stared at a progress bar that had stalled mere pixels from completion. He hated progress bars. They were notorious liars. They’d say ninety-nine percent done in seconds, then sit on the final one percent forever. What made this worse was, it was a progress bar that he himself had coded. Most of his software was command-line only, but sometimes it helped to have a GUI. In this case, the GUI was helping to annoy him. Gwen had stopped asking if he’d be done soon. She’d gone out twice. Once to pick up her dry cleaning and once to get them frappuccinos from the corner Starbucks. Earlier, Gwen had explained why she thought her PC had a virus. “Out of the blue crashes,” she’d said. There were many explanations for those that didn’t involve viruses. The only interesting detail was when she recounted that her monitor had filled top-to-bottom with red gibberish. That was odd. The standard Windows crash screen was called the ‘*blue* screen of death’ for a reason, and that reason was not for being *red*. Regardless, Eddy was happy to help. Fortune had offered him a chance to play the hero and he was going to take it. Even if it were a virus, worm, or trojan, there was no way he couldn’t handle it. It was just taking longer than expected. At least he was making progress on his other task, straightening out the paper clips he’d found in a box in a drawer. He laid another unbent clip on the desktop. It then occurred to him Gwen might not want her

paperclips straightened. Eddy began re-bending the paperclips. A task which proved to be much more difficult.

Outside, the sun began to set.

What the heck are you? Eddy was feeling oddly unsettled. There were over a hundred thousand types of malware that could infect a Windows PC, and that was ignoring the multitude of variants and obsolete strains. No one, including Eddy, could possibly know all of them. Malware that used a previously unknown means to attack was called a ‘zero-day exploit’. That was relatively rare. The vast majority were variants of existing strains. They were cobbled together out of stolen code, just as some biological viruses were known to steal DNA from their hosts. Eddy had found dozens of references to the red text Gwen had experienced, but no clear answers as to its cause. It was the Loch Ness Monster of malware; lots of sightings, but no actual evidence. Other than the crashes, there was no apparent damage done, and the crashes never occurred more than once. Most postings suspected an obscure OS bug. Eddy did not. Absence of proof is not proof of absence, he thought. The best kinds of viruses were the hardest to detect. The most famous virus of all, Stuxnet, had been both hard to detect and seemingly harmless. It had been built by US and Israeli intelligence to infiltrate and sabotage the Iranian weapons program by spinning nuclear centrifuges to the point of self-destruction. Another classic was, sKyWIper, aka Flame, also designed to target the Middle East and likely by the same state authors. The North Koreans and the Russians had their own. Eddy’s personal favourite was Uroboros. No one had proven the worm was created by the Russians, but the Ruskies had a ‘tell’. They authored code that specifically avoided going after machines in Russia. The Russians played hide and seek by standing in the middle of the room and saying, “I’m not here.” This did not look Russian, American, Chinese, North Korean or any of the usual suspects. It had the sophistication of nationstate code, but none of the calling cards. Eddy shuddered. He felt as though he’d glimpsed behind a curtain and

Spyware

worried that something might be glimpsing back.

“Apple?”

Eddy jumped in his seat.

“I’m sorry,” said Gwen, “I didn’t mean to surprise you.” She was holding out a bowl of ripe red apples.

“Oh, granny smith, no thanks.”

“They’re gala.”

“Oh right. I mix those up. Anyway, no thanks. I’m on a junk food only diet.”

“I see. Almost done?”

As if on queue, the progress bar ticked to the end. *No infection found*, said the report. “Done now,” said Eddy.

“You killed it?”

“More or less.” The truth was, Eddy hadn’t killed it. The virus had deleted itself. It had done so in reaction to being found. That was part of what was fascinating about it and explained why no one else had detected it. It was scanning for anti-virus activity. It had taken the malware a nanosecond longer to recognize Eddy’s custom code as a threat. This allowed Eddy to snatch a tiny fragment of its binary before it could zero itself out. Just enough to prove he hadn’t imagined it. “I did get a bit of it here,” he said, holding up a small silver thumb drive.

“Why?”

“Um, uh...” Eddy stammered, “...to, um, study it. It’s important I warn people, so they can stop it.”

Gwen nodded. “Those people make me so mad.”

“Who?”

“Hackers. The people who make viruses.”

“Well...” Eddy shifted uncomfortably. “They’re not *all* bad. I mean the ones that steal credit cards and stuff are, I guess.”

“They’re all scum. They’re just a bunch of losers sitting huddled in

their dark little apartments, like angry trolls. They think they're smart, but really they're just petty crooks. I'd love to put one of them away. Let's see them hack their way out of prison."

"Yeah, that would be great."

"Did you see what happened on Wall Street today? Chickens everywhere. Pathetic."

"You don't think it was to make a point?"

"The point is, it scared people! It cost the chicken owners and other businesses thousands of dollars. It..." Gwen having worked herself up, took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and held out her hands as if she'd misplaced her zen in the dark and was now trying to find it. She exhaled, opened her eyes again and smiled. "Anyway, you're my hero, Eddy. Thank-you."

"Sure." For a moment, Eddy was lost in Gwen's bright green eyes. He imagined sweeping her into his arms as she whispered her gratitude. He imagined pulling her close for a passionate— Gwen's cell phone began to play *Little Pink Houses*.

"Hey there," Gwen answered eagerly, brushing back a lock of ginger hair. She turned and walked away. "Sure, I'll buzz you in."

Eddy felt forgotten. It was not an unfamiliar sensation for him. He packed up his equipment and trudged to the living room. There he found Gwen straightening up the already straight sofa. "Well, time for me to go, I guess," he said.

"Oh, great. Thank-you again, Eddy, you've been—" There was a loud knock at the door. "One sec!"

Gwen went to answer. Eddy pretended to study a framed print of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* hung above the sofa. The original painting had been firebombed by the allies in a German museum during World War II. This was a copy of one of the two painted copies made by the artist. Eddy had learned all of this from his Uncle Russ. Russ had been

convinced that one of the fakes was real. Eddy's dead uncle had seen the world as a series of lies. From the corner of his eye, Eddy saw Gwen open the door to let in a tall lean man in a business suit. The man was annoyingly good looking. Gwen gave the man a deep, passionate kiss. Great, thought Eddy, she's dating a GQ model.

"Dan, I'd like you to meet Eddy."

"Nice to meet you, guy," said Dan. The GQ model flashed a peroxide perfect smile and shook Eddy's hand firmly. Despite Dan's looking directly at him, Eddy had the distinct feeling of not being seen.

"Eddy saved my life today, Dan. I had a virus on my computer and he killed it. He's a computer genius."

"Wow, great," said Dan. "Thanks, guy."

"It was a nasty one too," said Eddy, "something totally new that..." Both Gwen and Dan were staring at him. They wore the look of people politely waiting for someone to stop talking and go away. "Um, so... how long have you guys been dating?" Eddy didn't know why he even asked this. He didn't want to know. Sometimes, it seemed as if his mouth liked to wander off on its own when his brain wasn't looking.

"Six weeks. People said I shouldn't date a fellow lawyer, but..." Gwen turned to admire the handsome attorney. "...what can you do?"

"What can you do?" said Dan.

They gazed longingly into each others' eyes. Eddy rolled his. If only women like Gwen could be programmed to like someone like him, he thought. "Well, I suppose I better go," he said. "No, no, don't bother trying to talk me into staying. I'll just see myself out." Eddy started to leave, then realized Dan and Gwen were blocking the way. "Um..."

"Oh—sorry!" said Gwen. She pushed Dan away enough to allow Eddy to pass awkwardly between them. "And thank-you again, Eddy, so, so much! Seriously, if there's anyway I can help you. Legal advice stuff, whatever, just ask."

“Sure. No problem.”

If he did find himself in legal trouble, Eddy couldn't imagine Gwen keeping that promise. He forced a smile and pulled the door shut behind him. He felt glad to be alone in the empty stairwell. Empty, that is, except for the sound of barking. Eddy recognized the high pitched yips of Mrs. Ferguson's dog, Finster. After taking a moment to breathe, Eddy sighed and shuffled downstairs to the floor below.

On the landing, he found his neighbour, Mrs. Ferguson, trying to calm the small Yorkshire Terrier. For a moment, the dog grew more agitated and growled at him. “Finny stop it! Hush!” said Mrs. Ferguson. Upon recognizing Eddy, the Yorkie calmed and wagged its tail.

“Good boy!” said Eddy.

“It was the other man who got him worked up,” said Mrs. Ferguson. “You know Finny, he only barks at strangers.”

“Oh yeah,” said Eddy. He stooped to scratch behind Finster's ear. “I remember. He barked at me for weeks.”

“Not once he got to know you.”

“Nope. We're best friends now, aren't we, Fin-boy?”

The dog eagerly licked Eddy's hand with a darting pink tongue.

“He's finally decided the postman's okay,” said Mrs. Ferguson. She looked at Eddy with a warm, motherly smile. She was the oldest resident in the building. She had crinkly eyes and a kind face. Mrs. Ferguson had adopted Eddy as a surrogate son almost as soon as he'd moved in. This status came with perks, including fresh baked cookies and an occasional home cooked supper. In return, Eddy helped her with her groceries and any other heavy lifting. He'd also given her free television by running a cable across to her apartment from his own. “She's a pretty girl.”

“Who?”

“You know who!” said Mrs. Ferguson.

Eddy shrugged. “Doesn't matter. She has a boyfriend.”

Spyware

“The tall, good-looking guy with perfect teeth?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t like him.”

Eddy grinned. “Either did Finster apparently.”

The old woman wagged her finger at Eddy. “You just wait. When girls get older, they get smarter.”

“You mean, they stop caring about looks so much?”

The old woman opened her mouth to object.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Ferguson, I know that’s not what you meant. I’m just tired of waiting for girls to get around to noticing me. I’ve done it before. Turns out, I’m not next in line.”

Mr. Ferguson looked at him sadly.

“I’m fine,” Eddy assured her. He unlocked the door to his apartment. “I promise.”

“Just wait,” she said. “People change.”

“Uh-huh.”

POC 0.03

Define 'lie'. – G. Washington

//Office of Rep. A. Flatwood, Washington, DC — now

The cherry trees were frozen. Winter had long stripped them of their leaves. Their barren branches waited for a thaw that never seemed to come. The icy atmosphere mirrored the frigid politics that divided the district. It seemed as if the entire city were stuck waist deep in ice, the three faces of government snarling at one another through the sleet. Congresswoman Annabelle Flatwood had once, in a speech at the Federal Trade Commission, compared relations between the Administration, the Senate, and Congress to that of conjoined triplets, sharing vital organs, each trying to mortally wound the other. It was a dangerous time for America's body politic.

The DC office of Congresswoman Flatwood was a pocket of cheerful warmth amid the chill. She'd rented space in an old walkup that dated back to 1850. The landlord claimed it had once been a secret residence

of former President McKinley. No one could prove this, but that's what made it secret. When you have nothing to offer, offer nothing. Anne's office included a working fireplace. It was her favourite feature. She'd had her assistant Janet fire it up every day since the deep freeze began. Efforts to insulate and modernize the old building had done little. The fire made the difference. The Congresswoman had even been able to shed her cable knit sweater as she worked behind the large oak desk. Now, it was time to leave for her lunch with Senator Ted D'Arcy. They were dining at *Le Diplomate*. "I hate the French, but I love their food," Ted had said. It didn't hurt that the DC fixture was also the perfect place to run into *everyone*. Anne called to Janet through the open office door, "If Tom Barclay rings, tell him it'll have to wait until next week. Oh, and you need to change the Chinese Ambassador's seating number at the dinner."

Janet who was working her way through the stack of morning mail, looked up in surprise. "I put him next to Lucas Corey. You told me they were friends."

"They are. It's not his neighbour. It's the seat number."

"The seat number?"

"Forty-four. It sounds like death in Chinese. Twice."

"Oh."

"See if you can swap him with whomever we have at eighty-eight."

"That's further back."

"Trust me." Anne pulled on her heavy winter coat and began to button up. She'd been to Xi Chen's residence on more than one occasion and knew well the quotation inscribed on a plaque behind his desk. It was from Napoleon Bonaparte. 'I do not want a good general, I want a lucky one.' Anne believed in making her own luck.

"There's an email from Senator Cassius," said Janet.

"Another one? Hmm, let me guess..." With a wry grin, Anne tented her fingers on her temple and hummed, feigning psychic powers. "He wants

me to... change my position on the bill?”

Janet laughed. “You’re amazing! How ever did you know?”

Anne walked around behind Janet’s desk and leaned over her to read the open email on her assistant’s screen. “Blah, blah, blah... we don’t feel that you have properly considered the full ramifications of failing to support this legislation... standing in the way of progress. Yadda, yadda, yadda... outdated principals, etc., etc.”

“Can you use blah, blah, blah and yadda, yadda, yadda in the same sentence?”

“They were separate sentences. Okay, so it’s the same nonsense as his last three emails...”

“Four.”

“I don’t know why he thinks I’m suddenly going to buy it.”

“Maybe he think it ages. Like wine?”

“It doesn’t.”

“He does get points for being persistent.”

“That’s a nice word for it. Email him back and tell him I’ll support his precious bill, when he starts representing the people in his constituency, instead of the companies funding his campaign. Specifically, instead of *you-know-who*.” Anne turned and headed towards the door. She paused to tighten her scarf snugly around her neck. She’d alway been prone to chills but, since turning fifty, her bones seemed to freeze the moment the mercury fell. The Congresswoman braced herself and reached for the brass door handle. Janet began to type. Anne halted. “You do know not to really email him that, right?”

Janet looked up, then began to laugh. “No! I mean, yes, of course not. I was just going to copy-paste your last response. Janet read from the screen, “Thank-you for your concern. My position has not changed... yadda, yadda, yadda, blah, blah, blah...” She then added, “I’ll reword it just enough so it doesn’t look copy-pasted.”

Spyware

“Don’t.”

“Don’t reword it?”

“Send it exactly as is. He’ll get the message.”

“You think?”

“Hmm, probably not.” Anne turned to leave once more, and again halted. Her face grew somber. “Did you send those flowers to Jim Townsend’s family?”

Janet nodded. “Such a shame. They say he had no history of heart trouble.”

Anne shook her head sadly. She suddenly felt a deep chill coalesce inside her bones despite the crackling fire just feet away. “A good man and a good ally,” she said. “We’re on our own now, Janet.” Anne then turned and pulled open the heavy oak front door, letting the outdoors in. Congresswoman Annabelle Flatwood braced herself, then plunged silently into the storm.

POC 0.04

“No pain, no gain.” – Prometheus

//Downtown Los Angeles — now

Eddy sat in front of his three main computer monitors. He was watching a triptych of meaningless gibberish scroll past. The scrolling was automatic, at just the right speed for him to scan for something recognizable. Eddy’s software had snagged a single file and stuck it in *Amber*. It was software written by fellow hacker, Billabong, for just this purpose. He’d already had software scan the text for dictionary words. Now, he was using retinal technology, ie. his own eyes.

/<!////344 -* G3PPETTO ///%? //

G3ppetto...? Geppetto? thought Eddy, what the heck is Geppetto?

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