

Randolph's One Bedroom

Twenty serial shorts

by

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For my loving wife, Naho

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Randolph's One Bedroom

1. The Neighbor

“Mother fucking asshole! Braawk, mother fucking asshole!” Randolph sighed as he closed his apartment door behind him and took off his coat and boots. ‘What a welcome home,’ he thought, regretting yet again having taught his parrot to speak while he was drunk.

“Hey Stan,” Randolph replied, setting down his backpack and stepping into his living room. He walked over to where his parrot's cage was, between his dining table and couch, and gazed wistfully behind it and up through his half window at the snow piled outside, wondering how the floors above ground level saw the same sight. “Braawk, fuck you!” his parrot's continued chirping brought Randolph back to the present and he looked at his pet, muttering, “Stan, man, we need to work on your vocabulary.”

Randolph turned and took a single step to his left, then flopped down on his couch. As he did so he thought he heard a loud THUMP! from his upstairs neighbor's apartment. He paused and sat up straight, listening closely; sure enough, there it was again—THUMP! THUMP!

Randolph scratched his head and tried to remember who lived above him, but then realized that he had never seen the person as his building's split entrance immediately forced those who lived above to ascend into the light and those who lived below down to their hovels. Or, as his landlord put it, "Lovelies up, scum down." As the thumping continued, though, louder and louder, Randolph decided that whomever it was up there, he had to investigate. He grabbed his sheepskin coat off the floor, slid back into his winter boots and headed out the door and down the hallway to his building's back entry.

Stepping out into the cold parking lot Randolph kicked the snow from the doorframe and rubbed his hands together to warm them, getting ready for his climb. He lived on the side of the building—which he enjoyed most of the time as it granted him slightly more window space and sunlight than those in the middle—and the fact worked in his favor again that day as the far end of the building's dumpster was located right outside his kitchen's half window, in the alley between his building and the one immediately to the north. He crossed over to the edge of the parking lot and clambered up onto the dumpster, walking along its length between the two buildings. Arriving at the end of it nearest his kitchen, Randolph leaned over to his left, balancing on his toes so he could just peer into the living room of the apartment above him. He wasn't exactly shocked by what he saw, but neither was he very comforted. The longer he stood there though,

leaning forward and hanging onto the ledge of the first floor's living room window, the more he thought that he should do something other than simply stare.

He tapped on the window and the elderly woman who lived there, engaged in choking and screaming at a large porcelain gnome for some time now, turned viciously to see what was interrupting her from her dirty business. She stared at Randolph's face, half hidden behind the outside wall, then dropped the gnome, marched over to the window, and bellowed in a voice shrill with contempt, "Whaddya want?"

Randolph sniffed back a stream of mucus that the cold was forcing out of his nose, and responded simply, "I live below you."

"Oh, one of the scum, eh?" She retorted, reaching up and adjusting the dainty lace collar of her blue-speckled gray dress. Finishing with that, she patted her frizzled white hair back into its customary place, creating a lopsided mound that gravity managed to just hold together.

"That's right," Randolph said, patiently waiting until she had again made eye contact. "I live in apartment B2N, being the second of two basement apartments on the building's north side. Directly beneath you."

“Well *I* live in apartment 102!” The woman said with evident self-satisfaction. “Now, what is that you want, Mister B2N?”

“Oh, that's not my name,” Randolph informed her, “just the apartment I live in.”

“I don't give a rat's ass what your name is,” the woman replied, her hair falling roughly over her bloodshot eyes. She moved menacingly close to the window and leaned down to stare Randolph dead in the eye, her breath fogging the window between them. “What I want to know is, **WHY THE FUCK ARE YOU STARING AT ME THROUGH MY WINDOW?**”

Randolph leaned slightly back, coughed, and then shivered as he adjusted his stance on the edge of the dumpster to give himself more stability. ‘As soon as you move in this cold you always feel it more,’ he thought, and then said calmly, “I was just wondering what the loud noises were that I heard coming from up here.”

“You wanna know what those noises were?” the woman screeched and stomped back over to where she had dropped the gnome. “They were **THIS!**” She picked the gnome statue up from off her living room floor, lifted it high over her head, and threw it back down violently; exerting all the strength her small frame could muster. Laughing hysterically, she did it again and again, all the while shooting icy daggers over her shoulder at Randolph, who in turn

shook his head sadly and jumped off the dumpster. He had seen enough for one day.

As he stomped the snow off his boots and walked back into his apartment, Randolph heard the thumping noises above him continue. He sighed and sat down heavily on his couch, resting his head in his hands. "Braawk, fucking asshole!" Stan chirped next to him.

"You said it, Stan," Randolph agreed, "you said it."

2. A Missing Small Mocha

Ten months of the year Randolph didn't mind the walk to work. It only took ten to fifteen minutes, and even in winter when the weather turned subzero he found something enjoyable about the crispness of the air. It was only in December and January, the most bitterly cold months of the year, that Randolph felt like he was suffering as he walked to work. During those months, particularly for his early morning shifts, he would invariably arrive with bright red ears, a frozen nose, and eyes that would gush fluids as he entered the heated building, his fingers frozen through his gloves.

Even with those hardships, Randolph felt like he couldn't really complain. After all, how many people lived close enough to their workplaces to actually walk there? So although his commute itself didn't get him down, there were still plenty of things about his job that did.

Randolph worked at the Marmuck's coffee shop on the corner of Staleworth Parkway and Mantonian Avenue, one of the busier intersections in residential Sornsville, and, incidentally, the heart of the largely well-to-do Blightland neighborhood. Randolph himself wasn't wealthy of course, nor were his co-workers, but a great many of their customers were. And the thought often occurred to

Randolph that it was perhaps this socioeconomic difference that was the root of most of their conflicts.

He arrived at work right at 5:30 a.m. on the morning of January 6th, the exact time he was supposed to be there, and was immediately disappointed to see that his supervisor Loreen hadn't arrived yet, meaning he would have to wait until she got there to actually enter the building and escape the minus twenty degree morning. 'Why won't they let me have a set of keys?' he wondered, knowing full well that after his spectacular demotion he was lucky to still have a job, let alone a set of keys to the store.

Randolph stood outside the Marmuck's branch with his gloved hands tucked tightly into his armpits and shuffled his feet as he waited, looking expectantly at every car that passed by the windswept parking lot, hoping each time it would be Loreen's dark green hatchback.

She finally arrived at 5:36, an agonizing six minutes late, and greeted Randolph with an apology. "Sorry Randolph, I had some trouble getting it started today," she called as she stepped out of her warm car. "You must be freezing!" Randolph nodded and looked eagerly at the keys she pulled out of her black tote bag as she approached the door.

"We've got a lot to do before opening at six," Loreen continued, inserting a large brass-colored key into the lock and turning it quickly. She opened

the door to the long awaited warmth and gestured Randolph inside, his eyes and nose immediately starting to run. "And since today's a Sunday, we'll probably be busy from about ten on," she added.

"Okay Loreen, just let me know what you want me to do," Randolph said, moving towards the rear of the store where the employee's room was as he sniffed some snot back into his nose.

"Thanks," Loreen said, starting towards the back room herself. "You take the pastry case and bar, and I'll count the safe and get the tills set up. Oh, and don't forget to brew that special Deluxor blend today, Corporate's trying to promo it."

"Gotcha," Randolph said while he punched the security code into the back room lock and then stepped into the room, taking off his coat, hat and gloves and putting them into one of the lockers. Once he had clocked in with his ten-digit employee number and put on his bright blue Marmuck's apron, he also took the time to choose some music for the day from the pre-approved stack of CDs. Loreen and he had an understanding that as long as Randolph chose from the CDs Corporate sent them he could always pick the music, while on other days Loreen usually chose the store's music herself. Randolph decided to go with the calypso mix that morning, and grooved his way back out to the front to stock the pastry case.

The pastries arrived every morning around 4 a.m., piled neatly in their boxes left just inside the front door. 'I wonder if that pastry guy has some kind of skeleton key,' Randolph thought as he lugged the heavy pile of boxes over to the counter to take the individual pastries out and pile them on trays before putting them into the glass case between the registers. Randolph didn't particularly like any of the pastries they sold, but he did like piling them on the trays. He always tried to stack them as robotically as possible, in perfect squares piled one on top of another like a tower of building blocks. It certainly didn't make for the most appealing display, but it did entertain Randolph briefly as he started his workday.

"Don't forget to start brewing!" Loreen's voiced boomed from the back, shattering Randolph's concentration on the brownie log cabin he was building.

"Oh, right!" Randolph shouted in reply, leaving the pastries for the moment and hurrying to measure out the ground beans and start the large brewing machine working on what was sure to be only the first of many urns of coffee that day.

At 5:58 a.m. the first customer showed up outside, peering out of the dark parking lot through the windows at Randolph, who was still carefully arranging the pastries on their various trays. Just then Loreen came bursting out of the back room carrying the four tills and quickly placed them in

the two registers. "Just in time!" she said triumphantly, moving around from behind the counter and heading to re-unlock the front door.

"But we've still got two minutes," Randolph grumbled, placing the pastry trays in the display case and hurrying to the espresso bar to get the machine ready in case the woman wanted a specialty drink right away. 'Come on lady, what are you doing getting coffee at six in the morning?' he thought as he watched their first customer. 'No wonder we have to open so early.'

"Coffee!" the middle-aged woman in the red overcoat, mittens and winter hat screamed as she burst through the door Loreen had only just opened. "Where's my coffee? Why don't you have my coffee? CoffeEEEE!"

Randolph blinked heavily through his confusion and lingering drowsiness, "I'm sorry ma'am, what kind of coffee would you like?" he asked politely.

"You don't KNOW?!" the woman screamed at him.

"Randolph, this is Deborah," Loreen explained, stepping to the nearest register and coming to the rescue. "She always has a medium brew coffee with just a tad of hot water, exactly at six every morning. She was here last time you opened, remember?"

Randolph had no idea what Loreen was talking about, and he certainly didn't remember this woman,

or any other customer, from the previous week, but he knew he couldn't admit to that. "Yes, of course, Deborah! You're wearing mittens today, that's why I didn't recognize you!" Randolph lied, plastering on his best smile.

"Well, that's true. I sometimes do wear gloves," Deborah said, satisfied that Loreen had smoothed things over with the young Neanderthal behind the counter and was now pouring her drink.

"Here you are, dear, that'll be \$1.57," Loreen cooed, handing Deborah her coffee.

Deborah pulled the exact change out of her purse—thirty-one nickels and two pennies. She didn't tip.

"Thank you!" Loreen said cheerily as Deborah took her coffee over to the table opposite the register and sat down next to the window, staring at her car parked on the other side of the glass. She slurped her drink loudly and occasionally shot accusatory glances at Randolph, who had busied himself cleaning the espresso bar and making whipped cream from the paper cartons of real cream and pure oxygen charges. This was one of his favorite parts of the job—Randolph loved the 'pffffff' sound the oxygen made as it shot into the metal container half filled with cream, and the use of compressed oxygen lent a quasi-scientific feel that somehow endowed his work with a veneer of prestige. To Randolph's mind, at least.

The hours passed and the store got busier and busier, a steady stream of customers constantly coming and going. It was so busy, in fact, that Randolph wasn't able to take his first break until ten a.m. when another co-worker finally started her shift. Randolph was working at the espresso bar when he saw her come in, the lovely Kim. Loreen glanced over from the register and saw her, too. She shot Randolph a smile and said, "Oh good, Kim's here. As soon as she comes on the floor go ahead and take your first ten."

Randolph grinned. 'A ten minute break, the sweetest time on earth,' he thought, keeping an eye on the door to the back room to see the exact moment Kim started working. About a minute later she emerged, still pulling the winter issue Marmuck's bright orange hooded sweatshirt over her beautiful body, blue apron in hand. Seeing this, Randolph put one of the oxygen cartridges into his own Marmuck's sweatshirt's hood and felt grateful once again that they were required to wear such wonderful clothes at work. "Taking my ten!" he called to Loreen, who nodded and indicated to Kim that she should replace Randolph on the espresso bar.

"Hi Randolph," Kim said as they passed each other, her voice flowing like melted honey. Kim was Randolph's girlfriend and he had no idea why, but he assumed it was because he was extremely talented at making coffee flavored beverages. "Hey

there kiddo, like your sweatshirt,” he said in response. She smiled and slid by him to the bar.

Randolph sighed as he walked past her, and then around the counter separating the work area from the rest of the store, taking off his apron as he did so. He punched the code into the door lock and headed into the back room again. Once there he pulled his coat and hat out of the locker and tossed in his apron. As he slid into his winter gear he reached into his pocket to make sure the oney he had packed that morning hadn't fallen out, and then walked out into the cold via the store's rear exit that led onto the sidewalk on the building's east side, near the rear parking lot where the store's dumpster was kept. Leaning against the giant blue trash receptacle, Randolph slowly enjoyed his oney, taking it in with deep, punctuated breaths, and twirling the oxygen cartridge between the fingers of his free hand.

Glancing at his watch Randolph noticed that his ten was nearly over. With his break having passed far too quickly, as it always did, Randolph found himself marching across the icy parking lot and around to the front of the store. Much as he would have liked to, he couldn't get back in from the rear exit, it was rigged in such a way to only let people out, never back in.

What he saw at the front of the store was nothing less than a madhouse. In the short time he had been gone, Marmuck's had filled to capacity, the line at the register winding back to the rear of the store and

then doubling around all the way to the front door, where eager customers were knotted tightly together, barely squeezing into the allotted space so the door could remain closed against the elements. Randolph rubbed his eyes in disbelief, and then pushed his way through the mass of irate and caffeine-depraved Sornsvilleites, catching Loreen's eye as he headed to the back room to return his hat and coat to the locker and put his apron back on. She called out to him in a voice that was cut evenly between a high level of stress and relief, "Randolph, I'm going to need you to double bar with Kim!"

"Will do," Randolph called out, and disappeared into the back only to reemerge a moment later, his orange hooded sweatshirt muted behind the bright blue Marmuck's apron once more. He made a beeline for the bar and settled in next to a very addled Kim, who said, "I'll pull the shots, you steam and pour the milk."

Randolph nodded and set to work, glancing at the cups lined up at the top of the espresso bar and quickly steaming four full carafes of milk, three whole and one non-fat. He fell into his rhythm almost immediately, adding the appropriate levels of milk and foam to each drink Kim handed him, fixing a lid on top and then sliding them into a protective cardboard sleeve before calling out, "Triple shot large cappuccino", or, "Extra-hot medium latte", or, "No foam single shot medium non-fat latte". He and Kim made a great team, and it wasn't long before the line had been thinned out

considerably. But Randolph knew that *something* always happened at Marmuck's, and that sooner or later that something would have to happen that Sunday morning as well.

Around fifteen minutes later, when nearly everyone who had been waiting when Randolph returned from his ten had been served, it did. "Medium mocha," Randolph called out, glancing at the man in a brown suit and tie standing directly in front of him on the store side of the espresso bar. The man's face remained blank, so Randolph asked him, with only a touch of stress evident in his voice, "Is this your drink, sir?"

"No, that's not my drink. Where is my drink?" the man retorted in a steely tone. His face began to redden, and it occurred to Randolph that he had wanted to say more but had succeeded in holding his tongue.

"I don't know, sir," Randolph said, still holding the medium mocha in his hand and now looking around the store. "What did you order?"

"I ordered a mocha," the man said, moving his face to meet Randolph's, and with a look that tried very hard to kill.

"Well, this is a mocha," Randolph said, avoiding the man's eyes and focusing on his long single eyebrow instead. "Maybe this is yours?"

“Listen, hippie,” the man began, leaning in close to Randolph and speaking slowly and clearly, the staleness of his breath adding menace to his words, “I ordered a *small* mocha. Is that a *small* mocha or isn't it?”

“No, sir, this is a *medium* mocha,” Randolph said, the hairs tingling on the back of his neck. He stretched his back and shoulders up and, moving his eyes away from the man, called out once more in a booming voice, “Medium mocha!”

A very nice looking woman in her mid-fifties with jet-black hair pulled into a ponytail moved into Randolph's line of sight. “Sorry,” she said, “I was looking at a magazine. That's mine.”

“Have a nice day, ma'am,” Randolph said and handed her the beverage, then returned to pouring the milk for the next few drinks, noticing markedly that none of them had chocolate mixed in with the shots—no mochas to speak of.

Ten minutes later that same uni-browed man was still there, glaring at Randolph with each drink that he handed over to the seemingly endless line of customers. After yet another large latte made its way through the crowd, the man finally appeared to lose it, and announced loudly enough for the whole store to hear, “I want to speak with your manager!”

Loreen, as well as everyone else, heard the man and quietly apologized to the customer at her register

before moving over to stand behind Randolph and try to deal with the situation as well as she could. "I'm the supervisor on duty, sir," she said.

The man skewered her with his laser gaze and said, "I've been waiting for nearly twenty minutes now to get my drink. Where in the name of all things holy is it?" And he stamped his foot to emphasize his point.

"I'm very sorry you've waited so long sir, but as you can see, we are very busy," Loreen said, reaching over to a drawer in the side counter and pulling out a slip of paper. "Now, what did you order?"

"I ordered a SMALL MOCHA!" the man bellowed, blood rushing to his head and sending the veins in his face screaming to the surface.

Loreen looked over at the line of empty cups still sitting on top of the espresso bar and noticed immediately that there were no small cups marked 'mocha'. She took a cup from the pile next to Kim, marked it, and moved it to the front of the line, then smiled pleasantly at the man and handed him the slip of paper she was holding. "Your drink will be next, sir. Once again, I apologize for having kept you waiting so long. Please accept this coupon for a free drink. Your next one will be on us." She nodded at him and returned to her register, where the man left standing there was staring absent-mindedly at the menu.

Kim pulled an espresso shot and filled the cup with chocolate, and then Randolph poured the milk for the man's mocha. He stirred it, added whipped cream, and then handed it over to him, saying in a voice whose sarcasm was hard to mistake, "Small mocha, sir."

"That's Pastor, hippie," the man with the single eyebrow said curtly. "You'd better learn some respect, it's obvious the devil has your soul." He took a business card out of his pocket and handed it across the counter to Randolph. "Come and see me next Sunday, if you aren't busy blaspheming it by working." And with that, he turned his back on them and marched out into the sunshine.

"I think that guy lives in my neighborhood," Kim said, shaking her head and handing Randolph the next drink. "What an asshole."

"Yeah, too bad he likes Marmuck's," Randolph replied.

Just about three and a half hours later, when Randolph's shift had finally come to a close, he made his way back home in the chilly afternoon sun. Shaking the snow off his boots and letting himself into his building, Randolph jogged down the short flight of stairs to his basement apartment. He walked in and greeted his parrot Stan, who

responded with its typical profanity. Randolph tossed his coat, hat and gloves onto the couch and collapsed next to them. As he leaned back, he thought he heard something moving under him, and craned his neck over his shoulder to see what it was. Nestled there between the back of his couch and his apartment's rear wall was an innocuous looking small mocha.

“Fuck me, it’s a fucking miracle,” Randolph muttered to himself, duly impressed. He shrugged and turned back around, picking up his TV remote from the seat next to him and clicking the power button.

3. Frank

Tom was seated in the middle of the couch, Pierce in the folding chair at the dining table, and Randolph, true to his role as host of their weekly soiree, was on the floor between his coffee table and TV set.

“Have you packed that thing yet?” Tom asked, sliding his lower half forward slightly and sinking deeper into the cheap couch.

“Just about,” Randolph said, wiping a tiny bit of loose actual from the rim of the pipe's bowl. Satisfied, he smiled and picked up the metalwork dragon by the snout, and inserting the beast's tail into his mouth he said, “All right boys, time to ride the dragon!” He held a lighter close over the bowl that made up most of the sculpture's head and took a long, deep breath. Closing his mouth tightly, Randolph sucked more air in through his nose and used it to help him push the smoke he had taken in down deep into his lungs. With the pipe and lighter still in his hands, he held it there as long as he could before exhaling a heavy white cloud across the room. Grinning broadly, Randolph passed the mystical reptile and his lighter over to Tom, who accepted them eagerly, and then gulped down some of the beer resting on the floor next to him.

Pierce took a long gulp of his own beer and leaned back in his chair, content to wait for his turn. "It's too bad Frank couldn't make it this week," he said. He scratched his chin and then added, "I guess he never really smokes the dragon though, anyway."

"Yeah, he just sits in the corner and gets drunk," Randolph said, laughing lightly. He pointed to the half window above the couch and asked, "Remember last week when he got too hot and opened that window? All that snow falling on his face was hilarious!"

Tom burst into a fit of generous laughter and nearly dropped the pipe, adding, "That's right! And then Stan chirped at him, 'Braawk, fuck you!'" He wiped a tear from his eyes and then took another long drag on the dragon. He laughed loudly again a moment later, spraying a stream of white mist out of his mouth, as he passed the pipe over to Pierce and said, "That guy is a riot."

"Totally," Randolph agreed. "Where is he, anyway?"

A long moment of silence followed while Pierce added a little actual to the bowl and then had his own encounter with their magical friend. Half closing his brown eyes, Pierce answered finally, saying, "He's got community service today."

"What for?" Tom asked, pulling his left leg up by the knee and tucking it under his right thigh. He smiled to himself and then asked again, "What?"

“Community service,” Pierce repeated. “He has like four hundred hours to do, I think. I don’t know, maybe it’s only a hundred and fifty. Anyway, it’s a lot.”

“What did he get that for?” Randolph asked as he stood up and headed into the kitchen. Before Pierce could answer he was back with some birdfeed to put into Stan’s cage. “You guys want another beer?” Randolph asked, standing in front of his pet.

“Yeah,” Tom said.

“Sure,” Pierce added, and then asked, “What were we talking about?”

“Frank, I think,” Tom told him. “He’s got five hundred and fifty hours of community service.”

“What! What did he get that for?” Randolph called from the kitchen.

“He busted up old Brownie’s car,” Pierce said. “Smashed the headlights to bits and tried to take out the windshield too, the crazy fucker.”

“You mean our high school Vice Principal?” Randolph asked, emerging from the kitchen again with three tall bottles in his hands. He passed a beer to each of his friends and then popped the cap off his own, before he realized he still had to finish his first beer. He set the new beer down on the table

and picked his old one up off the floor. "I haven't thought about old Brownie for about ten years," he said.

"Neither had I, but Frank still had that grudge," Pierce said. "And believe me, that's more than settled now."

"Really?" Tom asked, running a hand through his short black hair. "You mean from that time Brown caught him smoking and made him clean all the cigarette butts out from under the bleachers?"

"Yeah, I guess," Pierce replied. "As far as I know, that was the only real contact he had ever had with Brownie."

"How did he even know where he lived?" Randolph asked, seated on the floor again with both of his beers now on the table in front of him.

"Phone book," Pierce said. "We were bowling last Friday and in about the seventh frame Frank suddenly said, 'That shit face Brown is in for it tonight!' Then he ran over to the payphone and flipped through the directory, ripping out the page with Brown's name and address. He came marching back to our lane and told me flatly it was Judgment Day, and asked if I wanted to come with."

"So you were there when it happened?" Tom asked, unfolding his left leg and leaning towards Pierce.

“Kind of, I was pretty wasted,” Pierce said, laughing. “Hey Rando, how about another bowl?”

“Sure, sounds good to me,” Randolph said, and reached over to take the pipe from Pierce’s extended hand. He began filling it again while Pierce went on with his story.

“We left the bowling alley after our game, and the whole time Frank kept talking about all those damn butts he had to pick up, how they stank so badly and how Brownie hovered over his shoulder the whole time, saying things like, ‘Hard work makes a man out of a boy’, and ‘Idle hands are the devil’s playthings’, and a bunch of other stuff I can’t remember but Frank sure did. I guess he had to pick up some gum and random garbage down there, too.”

“Yeah, he was pretty pissed about it at the time,” Randolph said, finishing up and raising the pipe to his lips again.

Tom kept an eye on the dragon and asked, “How drunk was Frank?”

“Super,” Pierce told him. “It’s a good thing we were walking because neither of us had any business driving that night. Anyway, he wouldn’t shut up about it, so I went over to Brownie’s place with him, it turned out to be on the way to Yettle Bee’s, which was also good because we were both starving and they have that good pancake plate there.”

“The Triple Hot Plate!” Tom said, taking the pipe from Randolph and adding, “Those are fucking amazing. I once had two stacks of those beauties, *with blueberries*, in one sitting.”

“I remember that,” Pierce said and took a drink of beer. He stared at Randolph's far wall and fell silent, lost in thought.

After a few minutes where no one spoke, Randolph realized they had never heard the end of the story and asked Pierce, “Oh, so what happened after you got to Brownie's place?”

“Huh?” Pierce asked.

“The fucking story, man, Brownie and Frank,” Tom reminded him.

“Oh yeah,” Pierce said, sitting up straighter. “Let me have a go at that thing first.”

Tom nodded and handed him the pipe.

When Pierce had finished, he breathed out contentedly and then took up the story again, saying, “Okay. So like I said, Frank was loaded and kept drinking beers all the way there, but I didn't feel like any so I just walked with him and enjoyed the night. We finally got to Brownie's about twenty minutes later, and Frank was in a real state. He kept muttering all the way there, and nothing I said seemed to calm him down in the least. Well, he

cross-checked the address with the one on his directory page and complained about dancing letters a while before noticing there was a car parked in Brownie's driveway."

"What did he smash it with?" Randolph asked, seeing where the story was going.

"He ran up to the thing and kicked as hard as he could at the trunk's lock," Pierce said. "It was pretty impressive really, considering how drunk he was."

"What did you do?" Tom asked, leaning towards Pierce again.

"I yelled at him, tried to get him to stop," Pierce replied. "But there was no way I was going to try and force him to stop, he would have floored me. So anyway, believe it or not, the trunk popped open and Frank didn't even seem surprised. He reached down and grabbed the tire iron, and then quick as a flash he was around front, bashing the headlights out and going ape shit on the windshield." Pierce took another swig of beer and then continued, "Of course one of his neighbors called the cops right away, but what was really funny, and a bit disturbing, was that Brownie himself came running out of the house right about then. And get this: he was dressed in a tiiiiight leather mini-skirt with a matching leather vest and biker gloves, a fucking pair of leather knee-highs, and a platinum blonde wig. And in full make-up to boot!"

“No fucking way!” Randolph burst out.

Tom was leaning so far over now that he nearly spilled his beer on the floor as he asked, “Brownie was dressed like *that*?”

“I know, I nearly keeled over!” Pierce said, laughing loudly. “Frank was so shocked he dropped the tire iron on the hood of Brownie’s car.”

“Fuck!” Tom said.

“Yeah, about then the cops arrived,” Pierce continued. “Brownie and Frank were just standing there empty handed, staring at each other, but I guess they could tell Frank was the problem because one of them tackled him and shoved his face in the grass while another one sat on his legs. I don’t know, maybe a neighbor had described him or something.”

“How the fuck did he only get away with community service?” Randolph asked.

“Well, after a lot of back and forth, old Brownie agreed not to press charges as long as Frank kept his mouth shut about his, uh, dressing habits. One of the neighbors complained though, and so the cops stuck Frank with a ‘disturbing the peace’ charge,” Pierce said.

“That is absolutely insane,” Randolph said. “Frank’s lucky it wasn’t a lot worse.”

"I wish I could have seen Brownie dressed up like that," Tom said.

"It was something all right," Pierce replied. "I'll tell you one thing though, that Frank needs to reel in the drinking. He's going to get himself in real trouble one of these days."

"You got that right," Randolph agreed.

"Braawk, fucking asshole," Stan squawked, chiming in at just the right moment.

The three of them laughed together at the parrot's perfect timing.

"Ahh Christ, let's order a pizza," Tom said, chuckling.

4. The Progress Review

“Be-be-be-beep, be-be-be-beep!” Loreen reached over to the magnetic timer stuck to the small refrigerator and pushed the clear button firmly. “Okay Randolph,” she said. “It’s 11:52 a.m. on February 2nd, and you know what that means.”

“Has it been another year already?” Randolph asked, looking up at his supervisor’s face from where he had been cleaning and polishing the various parts of the espresso bar.

“Afraid so,” Loreen replied as she moved over to the chest of drawers buried under the work area’s long L-shaped countertop. She pulled the middle drawer open and took out a heavy black binder filled with manila folders, flipping through a few until she found the one she was looking for. “Here we are. You’re set to have your annual Laborer’s Progress Review meeting with both the store manager and the assistant manager this year.”

“What? Why the both of them?” Randolph asked. “And can the assistant manager even do reviews? I mean, he just started here last week.”

“Of course he can do them,” Loreen informed him. “He’s a fully-trained manager, Randolph. And he didn’t just *start* here last week; he was *transferred*

here last week. He's been with the company for some time now. And as for why it's both of them, well, I think you know that."

Randolph returned to working on the mass of chrome plating, stainless steel, rubber, and plastic in front of him and tried to forget about why he had to meet with both managers. It had just been a joke, after all, how seriously did these people take themselves?

A minute later the back room door swung open and Randolph's manager, and new assistant manager, marched out. Walking briskly to the work area, Lucas, the store's manager, pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket as he approached Loreen. Completely in step with his boss, the assistant manager followed closely behind Lucas and copied his movements, taking a pen out of his own shirt pocket seconds after Lucas had.

"I will take that, Loreen," Lucas said crisply, and extended a razor-thin arm, palm up.

Loreen set the binder down in his hand and tried not to smile when she saw Lucas nearly drop the heavy load of papers. Dave, the much taller assistant manager, standing so close behind Lucas that his crotch was nearly pressed against the man's middle back, reached over quickly to help carry the load.

Lucas shot him a withering look and said simply, "I can handle this, Dave." He then took the files in

both hands and moved over to the nearest table, setting the papers down, tucking in his white shirt again, and then adjusting his bright red tie before seating himself. Once he was settled he called to the forlorn Dave, who remained standing by the countertop next to the glass pastry case, saying, "Dave, you may join me at the table here, on my left, please. And Randolph," and Lucas raised his voice noticeably in an effort to force Randolph to stop cleaning and acknowledge him, "Randolph! It is time for your L.P.R. You are required to join us at this table. Take a chair from another table and pull it up directly across from me."

Randolph moved away from the espresso bar and slowly made his way out from the work area. Feeling naked and vulnerable without the protection of the counter between him and his bosses, Randolph did as he was told and pulled a chair over from the next table to the one where Lucas and Dave were already seated. He took off his bright blue Marmuck's apron and sat down across from the two men, noting what an unusual pairing they were. Lucas was sitting stock upright with his heavily starched white shirt perfectly fitted into his equally stiff black pants, his red tie done in a flawless double Windsor without a fraction of shirt showing beneath the knot. Every one of his black hairs was greased and held heavily in place, parted sharply exactly down the middle of his scalp. Dave, on the other hand, although dressed identically with Lucas in their official managerial uniforms, was as close as possible to being his opposite. His own

shirt was wrinkled and covered in coffee stains, hanging half in and half out of his shabby black pants, and his red tie was so loose at the collar that it was nearly falling off. His tousled brown hair was all over his head, and had he not been balding noticeably it would clearly be draping over his generous face and down beyond his eyes.

“You know our new assistant manager Dave, of course,” Lucas said to Randolph. “He will be sitting in on our review today. His presence will not affect my ultimate decision regarding your job performance, of course, but I will be taking his thoughts into consideration.”

“Okay Lucas,” Randolph said, and turning to look at Dave he continued, “It’s nice to have you here, though you and Lucas sure are an odd couple.”

“Oh, we’re not dating,” Dave assured him with a broad smile. “I like the ladies! Wooh!” And he suddenly raised his arms above his head and pumped both his fists in the air repeatedly.

Lucas gave him a scathing look before returning his attention to Randolph and went on, “Decisions made by Corporate as to who works with whom will not be questioned, Randolph. This is neither the time nor the place for it.”

“Yeah, sorry Lucas,” Randolph said, trying hard not to roll his eyes. He thought he might as well try to stretch out the meeting since it was such a slow day

anyway, and asked Dave, "How long have you been with the company, Dave? And how did you get to be an assistant manager?"

Dave smiled again, happy to have the opportunity to talk about himself, and told Randolph proudly, "I've been with Marmuck's for twenty-seven years now. And seven of those have been as an A.M. My dream is to be a full manager one day, and if I'm lucky I'll get to be one the same way I got to be an A.M."

"How was that?" Randolph asked before Lucas could cut into their conversation.

"Oh, I slept with the district manager," Dave said happily. "Wooh!" And he pumped his fists in the air again before continuing, "And she was great about it, too. Even promised me a raise if I kept up the good work." He leaned over and winked at Randolph before whispering, "Let's just hope Lucas isn't game for that!"

Lucas slapped the table and stood up, shouting at Dave far too loudly for the empty store, "Shut up, Dave! You are not to tell employees how you were promoted! You know that!" He sat back down and breathed heavily, letting the color drain out of his face before he returned his attention to Randolph and said, "Now, Randolph, let us have no more of this chit-chat. Our purpose here today is to discuss your execution of your duties in the year

since the unpleasantness and your subsequent demotion.”

Dave, sitting now with his broad shoulders slumped and looking rather like a scolded child, opened his mouth to say something but at a sideways look from Lucas stopped himself and lowered his eyes even further down into his lap.

“In the past year, I would rate your overall work ethic as adequate,” Lucas went on, opening the folder that Loreen had been looking at earlier and ticking off a box near the top of Randolph's L.P.R. report form. “Would you like to argue that judgment?”

“No,” Randolph said. He had been through these reports before and hated the way Lucas conducted them. “You don't have to ask me that for every box you check, Lucas.”

“In fact I do, Randolph,” Lucas told him. “Laborer verification of management's judgments is a required part of the L.P.R. After your years with our company I would expect you to know that.”

“Fine,” Randolph said, reaching behind him and adjusting how his Marmuck's sweatshirt's hood hung over his shoulders. “Let's get this over with, okay? I haven't finished cleaning the espresso bar yet.”

“Your dedication to the espresso machine is noted,” Lucas said and jotted down a memo in the report’s margin. “Moving on, I rate your customer service over the past year as adequate as well. Would you like to argue that judgment?”

“No, Lucas,” Randolph said absently.

“Very well. I would furthermore rate your behavior towards fellow laborers as being overall professional but occasionally too casual. I was not pleased to hear that you and Kim spend a great a deal of time engaged in banter when you are working together. If that trend persists I will be forced to reduce the amount of shifts in which you two are scheduled together. Would you like to argue that judgment?”

“For fuck’s sake, Lucas, no already,” Randolph said, a mild irritation creeping up on him.

“The laborer will refrain from using profanity in front of management,” Lucas said quickly, but too late. Something about what Randolph had said seemed to snap Dave back to himself, and he looked up at them with shining eyes as he said, “For fuck’s sake! For fuck’s sake! Ha ha ha ha! That’s funny. Randolph, you’re a funny guy. What’d you get demoted for? You used to be a supervisor, right?”

Lucas glared at Randolph and said, “Do you see what you have done?” He turned back to Dave and nearly growled, “Dave, please be quiet. The past is

the past and should not be discussed during an L.P.R.”

“Actually,” Randolph began, leaning forward and smiling at Dave, “the whole purpose of the L.P.R. is to talk about my work during the last year. That’s definitely the past. If Dave wants to know why I was demoted, we should tell him. It was just a joke, you know.”

“I do not consider the inappropriate handling of mammalian life to be a joke,” Lucas said, clearly realizing he was losing control of the situation and beginning to appear frazzled.

“What’s a mammalian life?” Dave asked.

“A mammal is a warm-blooded animal that gives birth to live young,” Randolph said. “What happened, Dave, was that I was out back near the dumpster on a ten minute break last winter and...”

“This story will not be told!” Lucas said loudly, jumping up from the table and running quickly to the rear of the store. He fumbled repeatedly at the lock on the back room door, and finally punching in the right series of digits he burst through it and slammed the door behind him.

“Oh great, Randolph,” Loreen said from where she stood behind the cash register. “It’s going to take me a good twenty minutes to get him calmed down

again. You're lucky we're not busy today," she chided as she chased after Lucas into the back room.

Dave gave Randolph a shocked look and said, "What's going on? Why is Lucas acting so crazy?"

Randolph laughed and stood up. Chuckling all the way back to the work area, he pushed through the swinging door and went back to polishing and cleaning the espresso bar. Keeping his gaze focused on what he was doing, he filled Dave in on what he had missed. "Lucas' weakness is animals. Nature, actually. Anyway, like I said, I was on a ten last winter and hanging out near the dumpster out back. I happened to see a small squirrel out there, frozen stiff from the cold, its tail sticking out of a snowdrift. Well, I was nearly done for the day, and knew that Loreen was just about to come on shift, and so I thought it would be funny to play a little joke on her. I took the squirrel out of the snow bank and snuck it into the store, plunking it down in an urn. I knew she'd see it right away, because the first thing Loreen always does is brew a fresh batch of the day's coffee. But what I didn't know was that the squirrel was still alive somehow, despite being frozen solid. Some kind of cryogenic deal, I guess. Anyway, so the squirrel got revived from the hot coffee pretty quickly, and started squirming around in there like a fly in an anthill. Well, Lucas had just come out from the back room around then, and he went straight to the urn to check it out. When he pulled the lid off, the squirrel burst out of there and landed on his head, dripping coffee all over the

place. Lucas went nuts. He screeched like a little kid, running all over the store in tight little circles, which of course only scared the poor squirrel more, and it must have dug its claws into his head and tried to hold on, because he started squealing even louder and instantly wet and soiled his pants. Customers still give him shit about it, and for about six months after that everyone who came to the store called him, 'Stinky'. He hasn't been the same since."

5. The Tip Jar

“Welcome to Marmuck’s sir, how can I enrich your Marmuck’s experience today?” Randolph muttered, glancing at his register’s clock and avoiding eye contact with the customer in front of him. ‘Nearly one, only another hour to go,’ he told himself.

“Well, let’s see now,” the man began uncertainly, “I guess I’ll have a, umm, maybe a mocharino. Does that have chocolate in it?” he asked as he leaned forward to get a better look at the menu posted on the wall above and behind Randolph.

“Yes sir, mochas have chocolate in them,” Randolph replied, glancing at the clock again.

“Is that right? Chocolate in a mocharino... What’ll they think of next: peppermint syrup? Ha ha ha!” the man boomed, looking hopefully at Randolph to see how his joke had gone over.

“We have peppermint syrup too, sir,” Randolph said dryly, meeting the man’s eyes for the first time. He was impeccably dressed in a full-length camel hair’s coat, under which was a designer pin striped suit topped off with a matching, and very expensive looking, fedora hat. Standing in stark contrast to the man’s clothes, however, was his unshaven and dirt-smearred face.

The man looked disappointed that he hadn't gotten a laugh and leaned over the counter again, tipping his black, wide-brimmed hat back and squinting his eyes at the menu. He was now leaning so far forward that Randolph was forced to take a step back to avoid getting the man's long, sharp nose in his eye.

"We also have a menu on the countertop here, sir, if you're having trouble seeing that one," Randolph said, pointing to the menu under a layer of clear plastic on the counter next to the register.

"Oh, so you do," the man said, taking a step back and now lowering his head to just above the counter, bumping the brim of his hat against the surface as he did so. "Guess I'll have to take off old blacky here," he said and reached up to remove his hat.

As the man took the fedora off his head, revealing a knotted bunch of dark brown hair matted beneath it, a stench like old sewage drifted off of him and towards Randolph, who immediately had to put down an involuntary gag reflex.

"Maybe I could suggest something, sir?" Randolph asked, carefully breathing through his mouth but still overwhelmed by the horrible smell. 'What the fuck is wrong with this guy?' he wondered, glancing once more at the man's clothes and then back to his face.

“Well now, I want something with coffee, but not with chocolate or peppermint,” the man said, still staring at the menu just millimeters from the tip of his nose.

“How about something with steamed milk in it?” Randolph asked, holding his arm to his face now and breathing through his sleeve.

“Milk? Milk is for cows!” the man retorted, snorting loudly. “Do I look like a cow? I mean, I know I’m not as trim as I used to be... Ha ha ha!” He set his hat down on the register and looked up at Randolph again, who didn’t even bother moving his arm away from his face, that same glint of hope in the man’s eyes. Disappointed once more by Randolph’s lack of laughter, the man returned his attention to the menu and asked, “What’s your tap coffee today?”

“Our coffee of the day is the Thrillenator blend, sir,” Randolph said and moved towards the urn behind him, grateful for the excuse to put some distance between himself and the stench coming off the man.

“Well, give me a big-ass mug of that, I guess,” the man said. He scratched at the thick layer of grey-speckled stubble on his cheek and continued, “And do you have a public washroom here? I’d like to do some bathing.”

Randolph glanced over from where he was pouring the black coffee and said, “I’m afraid our restroom

is rather cramped, sir. There is a shelter a few blocks west of here, though.”

“Oh, I’m not homeless,” the man said quickly. “I have plenty of money, believe me. I just refuse to pay those water barons. My heating bill is bad enough as it is.”

“Winter can be pricey here,” Randolph said sympathetically, setting the full mug down on the counter and gratefully noting that the man had returned his hat to his head. “I suppose if you’re not in there too long it’ll be all right. Our restroom is just there in the corner.”

“Thanks,” the man said. “Now, how much do I owe you?”

“That will be \$2.35, sir,” Randolph said.

“\$2.35, eh? Mind if I just take it out of this jar of coins here?” the man asked, pointing to the large glass container on the counter filled with pennies, nickels, dimes, the odd quarter, and one or two bills.

Randolph grimaced and said, “Oh no, sir, you can’t do that. That’s our tip jar. If you don’t want to pay I’m afraid I won’t be able to serve you today.”

The man nodded and said, “I see. Well, what if I were to find some money on the floor? Could I use that?”

“If you can find \$2.35 on the floor, then by all means be my guest,” Randolph said, starting to feel a little irritated by the man. ‘This kind of bullshit always happens at the end of my shifts,’ Randolph thought, glancing at his register’s clock again.

Seeing that Randolph’s eyes were averted, the man suddenly darted his hand out and pulled the tip jar towards him, sending it’s contents cascading over the counter and raining down on the floor in a noisy barrage.

Randolph turned and immediately grabbed the jar and righted it, trying to scoop as many coins as possible back into it while the man crouched on the floor and greedily grabbed up handfuls of the spilled money.

Just then the door to the back room burst open and Dave came shooting out of it like a cannonball, screaming, “MONEY! I heard money!” He took in the scene at the register as he ran, his eyes locking first on the tip jar and Randolph’s shocked expression, then on the man kneeling there lapping up the coins. Dave instantly understood what had happened and dove at the man in a full body tackle, pinning him to the floor. “MONEYYYYY!” Dave screamed and pummeled his fists into the man trapped beneath him in a fit of primal fury.

Seconds later the back room door flew open again and Lucas came jogging out, doing up his belt as he ran, and threw himself at Dave. Bouncing off the

much bigger man's back he fell to the floor and whined, "Dave! You are not permitted to beat customers!"

Dave stopped mid-swing, the look of rage on his face melting to one of confusion, and asked, "Really? Not even if they're stealing from the tip jar?"

"Not even then," Lucas said, standing up and brushing himself off.

Dave shrugged and stood too, leaving the bruised and bloodied man crying softly to himself, curled up in the fetal position and surrounded by the mixed coins.

"Give this man two free drink coupons, Randolph," Lucas said, pointing to the man on the floor. He then knelt down to pick up the rest of the change and said, "Our apologies, sir. On behalf of the management, we hope your next visit to Marmuck's will be a more pleasant one." Handing Randolph the coins he had gathered, Lucas marched stiffly back to the door he had come out of, with Dave obediently following him.

Randolph returned the coins to the tip jar and placed it in its customary spot on the counter before taking two drink coupons out of his register's drawer. He stamped one of the coupons with the day's date and returned it to his drawer, then dropped the other one onto the man's now dirtied and torn camel hair coat.

As the coupon floated down in a soft arc, Randolph remarked, "Looks like this one's on us after all, sir. Enjoy your day."

6. Buntle's

Randolph had most Tuesday's off, and he usually put these to good use by stocking up on his weekly groceries. His local supermarket, Buntle's, was only a few blocks from his one bedroom, a fact of convenience that outweighed the stores' slightly higher than average costs, particularly on dairy products.

This Tuesday was no exception to Randolph's routine, and after a leisurely paced morning of coffee and computer games, he slid into his winter boots, buttoned up his sheepskin coat, and headed out his door. Walking briskly up the steps of his building's split entry, Randolph was surprised to see his upstairs neighbor there on the landing. She was peering intently into the grated section of one of the mail slots in the long row of steel boxes, and muttering excitedly to herself. As he approached, Randolph realized it was his mailbox that had caught her attention, and he paused on his way out the building to ask what she was doing.

"None of your business," the woman shot back, then glanced up to see Randolph standing there with one hand on the door. "Oh, it's you, Mister B2N," she said, a hint of venom on her tongue.

“My name’s actually Randolph,” Randolph said, suddenly feeling suspicious and now trying to look past her to his mailbox to see if she had put something in there.

“Well, Ran-B2N-dolph,” the woman sneered, “looks like you haven’t got any mail again today. Ha! I’ve gotten three letters, two fliers, and five postcards in the past week. Guess how much you’ve got? Fuck all!” She shot him a triumphant look and then turned to climb the stairs to her floor, cackling to herself all the way up.

‘That’s true, I haven’t gotten any mail,’ Randolph thought sadly, taking out his keys and quickly checking the contents of his slot. Finding it indeed empty, he sighed and moved slowly out into the cold.

Just over fifteen minutes later Randolph arrived at Buntle’s’ automatic doors and quickly ducked into the store and out of the frigid air. He instinctively wiped at his eyes and sniffed back the snot that always started dripping from the abrupt change in temperatures, then picked up a plastic basket from the pile next to the doors and set about his shopping. As he walked along down the aisles, the thought occurred to Randolph that there was something fundamentally different about the place, but he couldn’t quite figure out just what. The items on the shelves were placed a bit more haphazardly than usual, but that wasn’t in itself all that strange. He thought he heard random shrieks now and then, but

they could have been coming from any one of the children that were probably in the store with him. There did seem to be a new, husky, smell about the place; but again, that could have been coming from anywhere and in itself wasn't all that noteworthy. It was only when Randolph finally approached the check out lanes that he realized what was so different. The store was staffed entirely by chimpanzees.

Seeing the chimp sitting there happily at the register, wearing a red Buntle's vest and staring at him, clearly waiting for him to approach, Randolph was stopped cold in his tracks. He regained his composure a moment later though, and, setting his basket filled with groceries down on the red counter, he asked, "Excuse me, but is there a manager here?"

The chimp, who had already begun taking Randolph's items out of his basket, passing them in front of the laser scanner, and putting them into another basket on the other side of the scanner, turned its head towards the west side of the store and shrieked twice loudly. Scratching at its left ear a little, the chimp then got back to work on the contents of Randolph's basket, while Randolph himself stood and waited for the manager, apparently, to appear.

Seconds later a door cleverly hidden in the building's west interior wall opened and a middle-aged woman with short, spiky green hair, the standard Buntle's red vest, and a large gold

Mercedes Benz medallion hung around her neck, came jogging out of it. She took one look at Randolph standing there rubbing his left ear and reasoned he must have been why she was called. "Any trouble, sir?" she asked, coming to a stop next to Randolph's register.

"I, uhh, was just wondering why your staff has been replaced by chimps," Randolph said uncertainly, wondering how much of what he said the chimpanzee helping him understood. Looking at the woman in front of him, Randolph could now see that her vest also had a name badge attached, with "Loreen" on it.

"Minimum wage, sir," the manager, maybe-Loreen, said.

"The chimps make minimum wage?" Randolph asked.

"Oh no, sir," the manager told him. "That's the problem. The government raised the minimum wage, and since our prices are so low, we couldn't possibly afford to keep our staff, so we made the changeover to chimps. The first couple of days were a little rough, especially over in produce, but since then things have been great. And our profits are way up!" At this point she grinned widely and pointed at her necklace.

“You know, Loreen,” Randolph began, and then stopped himself. Starting over, he said, “By the way, my manager at Marmuck’s is also named Loreen.”

“Oh, my name’s not Loreen,” she said flatly, looking back over her shoulder in the direction of the hidden door she had come out of.

“Anyway,” Randolph said, “I don’t think your prices are all that low...”

“Exactly!” non-Loreen interrupted, still looking over her shoulder.

“And if the chimps are working for free,” Randolph continued, ignoring her, “I think you really ought to lower them across the board, especially your dairy products. I mean, either that or actually pay the chimps.”

As the words escaped his lips, the chimpanzee at Randolph’s register immediately stopped working, letting the head of broccoli it was holding roll onto the floor. It jumped up on the counter, kicked Randolph’s basket over, and in a highly dramatic gesture ripped the Buntle’s vest off its chest and hurled it at the manager standing there, shrieking loudly to its fellow chimps. Seconds later the entire front of the store erupted into a frenzied din as all the chimps at all the registers followed suit, screeching at each other and heaving everything in sight that wasn’t fastened down either onto the floor or at the front windows. The baffled manager and

Randolph were momentarily struck dumb, frozen in horror.

“I think they’ve just gone on strike,” Randolph said in awe, trying to carefully back away from the chimpanzee baring its teeth on the counter in front of him.

“Strike!” the manager yelled. “They can’t strike—we’re all out of bananas!” She shot Randolph a desperate look and slowly began moving towards him.

As soon as she was close enough Randolph reached out and clasped her firmly by the hand, and then the two of them turned and sprinted as fast as they could out the door, with their hearts in their throats and the manager’s huge Mercedes Benz medallion bouncing heavily against her back as they ran.

7. A Discovery

Very rarely Randolph would be scheduled for an afternoon shift, starting at two and then closing the store at ten. Whenever he was, Randolph knew he could count on *something* to happen, and so as he shuffled down Mantonian Avenue through the snow and packed ice towards Marmuck's he tried to imagine what it could possibly be that day. He had just decided on buried treasure when he arrived at the store and discovered that he hadn't been far off.

As Randolph crossed over Staleworth Parkway he noticed a number of people milling around near the back of the Marmuck's parking lot. Glancing down at his watch, he saw that he still had about twenty minutes before his shift officially started so Randolph made a beeline for the small crowd to see what all the excitement was about.

As he approached, Randolph saw a large industrial excavator at rest, and near that an enormous hole in the ground. He also saw his lovely girlfriend Kim shivering a little and shifting from foot to foot. Along with her were two police officers, a man in a long brown trench coat and large brown earmuffs, and three teenagers in ripped jeans, plastic coats, and dog collars with leashes of various lengths and colors around their necks. A thin mist seemed to surround the group as everyone was talking at once

and their frozen breath hung suspended in the subzero air.

“What’s going on?” Randolph asked, nearing Kim and coming to a stop between her and one of the police officers.

“Oh, hey Randolph,” Kim smiled, looking over at him. “Lucas has us working together today, the sucker!”

Randolph chuckled and asked, “Who else is scheduled?”

“Just Dave,” Kim told him. “Should be a fun afternoon.”

“I’ll say,” Randolph agreed and gave her an exaggerated wink. Looking down into the gaping hole in front of him Randolph thought he saw a naked human arm sticking out of the dirt at the bottom, but was sure that couldn’t be right. “Is that someone’s arm down there?” he asked.

“Yep, that’s an arm all right,” the police officer on his left answered. “And there’s a body attached to it, too. A magnificent hairy brute of a body.”

“There is?” Randolph asked again, kneeling down and peering into the hole. Sure enough, there was an entire man down there, covered in hair and wearing what appeared to be fur clothing. Randolph couldn’t be sure, but he thought that the man looked an

awful lot like some of the Neanderthal pictures he had seen in his old biology textbooks.

“Yep, there sure is,” the police officer repeated. “Frozen solid, too. Probably been buried down there for at least a month.”

“A month?” Randolph asked. “It must be longer than that. I mean, it looks like he’s wearing fur.”

“The rich bastard,” the police officer said in obvious disgust. “Fur! In this day and age! He also has some kind of axe head down there, but it looks like a real piece of junk. I can’t imagine anyone stupid enough to buy one of those. Probably from Wohl-Max, their tools suck.”

“An axe head? Does it have a handle?” Randolph said, now lying on his stomach and trying to use his hands to shield his eyes from the afternoon sun so he could get a better view of the bottom of the hole.

“Some crumbled junker, like I said,” the police officer responded.

“Go ahead and slide down there if you want to have a better look,” the other police officer, who had been standing silently at the edge of the hole and near the man in the brown trench coat, chipped in and said.

“I think I will,” Randolph said, and nodded at Kim.

“You watch out down there,” Kim told him as Randolph warily began lowering himself over the edge of the hole. Once his whole body was over and he hung suspended only by his fingers, Randolph let go and dropped the rest of the way down, landing with a small thud near the feet of the frozen figure. Moving very slowly, and being extremely careful not to actually touch the man entombed there, Randolph worked his way around to the other side where he had a clear view of the man's head. He was immediately struck by the large cranial ridge extending along the forehead just above the eyes, the protruding middle face, large nose, and long flat skull of the man. Glancing now at the man's body Randolph saw that it was very muscular, and much wider than an average person's, quite a bit shorter as well. The axe head was stone and although it appeared to be naturally shaped, it had very clearly been sharpened on one edge. There wasn't much left of the axe's handle, but it looked like it had originally been either antler or wood.

Leaning back from the frozen figure in front of him, Randolph stood and craned his head to look at the half dozen or so still standing around up there, an awed expression all over his face. “I'm no expert, but I think this is a Neanderthal man,” Randolph said very slowly. “Which is an incredible find for this part of the world; someone should call the Science Museum immediately.”

“Nonsense!” The man in the brown trench coat and earmuffs said quickly. “Neanderthals don't exist.”

“Well, not anymore anyway,” Randolph told him, an uneasy feeling that he knew the man starting to creep up on him. He tried to look more closely at the face peering back at him but found it difficult to make out the man's features. From where he stood, it looked to Randolph like the man only had a single eyebrow, but he thought that couldn't be right.

“No. What I meant was Neanderthals never existed, obviously,” the man shot back in a voice full of arrogance.

At this, the three teenagers standing there began speaking in low voices amongst themselves and nervously adjusting the leashes around their necks while Randolph took another good look at the man frozen in the dirt. “I think you're wrong about that, sir,” Randolph said. “This man is clearly not from our times.”

“And are there little bunny rabbits and unicorns down there too?” The man in the trench coat said sarcastically. “Get off your drugs, hippie, you're hallucinating.”

‘Hippie?’ Randolph thought to himself, ‘When have I been called that before?’ He tried for a few moments to remember who it was that had given him that label, but was soon distracted again by the amazing discovery lying there in front of him.

“Kim, you really need to call the museum. We should get an anthropologist down here at once,” Randolph said, not taking his eyes off the Neanderthal. “This is a stunning find. Neanderthals were only thought to have existed in Europe and Western Asia; to find one here in North America is unbelievable!”

“Sure thing, Randolph,” Kim said, turning and jogging quickly into the Marmuck's rear exit propped open by a cardboard box behind her.

As soon as she was gone the man in the brown coat repeated himself, more firmly this time, and said, “Officers, I reiterate my demand that this hole be filled up again. Nothing exists down there.”

“I don't know, sir,” the officer who had told Randolph to slide down into the hole said. “I can see a man down there, and he does look an awful lot like the guys in my old school books. I think the young man may be right.”

“LIES!” The man in the trench coat screamed. “Everything you learned in your school's so-called ‘science’ and ‘history’ classes is nothing but lies put there by Beelzebub himself. Neanderthals don't exist, because evolution doesn't exist. You had better read the Scriptures more carefully, sonny.”

“Are you saying the man frozen down there doesn't exist?” The first police officer asked, scratching his head and looking perplexed. He glanced first at his

fellow officer, and then over at the fidgeting teenagers for help, but no one offered any.

“That’s right, he doesn’t exist,” the man in the brown coat said firmly. “God created Adam and Eve, and we are all descended from them via their children’s incest. And I can assure you that Adam and Eve were not Neanderthals.”

“Are you sure about that?” The second police officer asked, now looking confused himself. “I mean, what’s your authority in all this?”

“I have the highest authority of all of you,” the trench coated man answered confidently. “I am an officially licensed pastor; that’s all the authority you’ll ever need, so listen to what I have to say. And that’s an order.”

On hearing that he was a pastor, Randolph suddenly looked back up at him, recognizing the man in an instant now. He was the one who had made all the fuss over the small mocha! “Hey pastor,” Randolph yelled out, “I did find your drink eventually. It was behind the couch the whole time!”

The pastor glowered down at him and continued addressing the two police officers. “Listen, sons, you two had better get a move on with this. That man down there doesn’t exist and should be re-buried at once. No one else should be allowed to see this body.”

“Why not?” the first officer, deeply confused now, asked innocently. “I mean, he looks okay to me.”

“Because he doesn't exist! Evolution doesn't exist!” the pastor screamed at him, spit flying out of his mouth as he leaned into the officer's face to emphasize his point.

“Wait just one minute,” the second officer said skeptically. “If he doesn't exist, then why can I see him?”

“You can't see him!” the pastor continued screaming, turning on the second officer now. “And if you can, then you've been possessed by Satan like that hippie down there in the hole!” He then turned back around to say something to the teenagers, but they had their backs to him and were murmuring louder and fidgeting about even more than they had been earlier, so the pastor let it drop and said nothing.

“I don't think I'm possessed, but I could swear I see a frozen Neanderthal down there,” the second officer responded glumly. “Do you see him, Bob?” he asked his fellow officer.

“No,” the first officer, Bob, said. “I guess I don't. Let's get him re-buried.” He turned to face Randolph and yelled down at him, “Get out of there, man! We're going to have the frozen guy re-buried. He doesn't exist!”

“I could hear everything you just said,” Randolph yelled back in frustration. “Don’t be crazy, this is an astounding scientific find! Just leave him down here until someone from the museum arrives and can safely take his body away to be studied.”

Just then Kim came running out of the rear exit and announced excitedly, “I’ve been on the phone with everybody. People from the museum will be here any minute. Even the mayor is coming!”

A look of deep rage passed over the pastor’s face as Kim came skidding to a stop at the edge of the hole and beamed down at Randolph. “Young lady,” he began, his tone grave and severe, “I’m afraid I have no choice but to damn you to an eternity in hell!” He spat twice on the ground, set his jaw firmly and made the sign of the cross, then turned and marched back to his car with his nose held proudly in the air. On his way the pastor paused only once, to call out over his shoulder, “And see you on Thursday evening, Kim. I’m looking forward to a pleasant meal.” With that he reached his car, opened the door, and sat down heavily before turning over the engine.

As soon as the pastor was out of sight, one of the three teenagers tossed the end of a leash down into the hole and called out, “We’ve strung our power cords together, dude. Grab onto the end and we’ll haul you out.” The other two flashed Randolph the devil’s horns sign and then stood behind the first

teenager, bracing their feet and holding onto the end of their leashes.

When he was back on ground level, Randolph thanked the teenagers and then gave Kim a puzzled look and asked, "What did that pastor mean by his Thursday remark?"

"I have to have dinner with him then," Kim said sadly. "He's started dating my mom."

"Ouch," Randolph said sympathetically as the mayor's limousine, a small sedan from the museum, and an ambulance pulled quickly into the parking lot.

"Thanks," Kim said and sighed. "Anyway, it looks like the right people are here now. We'd better get punched in or Lucas will throw a fit."

Randolph laughed and the two of them headed together into Marmuck's.

8. The Message

The first thing Randolph would always do when returning home to his one bedroom apartment, even before greeting his parrot Stan, would be to glance at his answering machine to see if its little red light was blinking, giving him the happy news that he had a new message. The last few days, however, that friendly flashing light hadn't exactly indicated what it usually did...

"Hey Stan, another new message," Randolph said, setting his backpack down on the floor next to his front door and carefully taking off his boots.

"Braawk, mother fucker!" Stan replied, poking his beak at the thin bars on the side of his cage.

"Maybe, but let's hold out on judging that for now," Randolph said, tossing his sheepskin coat onto his small couch and heading over to where his answering machine sat on his folding dining table. He stared at the flashing red light again for just a moment before reaching down and pressing the play button on the bottom right of the machine.

"You have *two* new messages," the machine's mechanical voice said loudly before being followed by a quick salvo of "beep, beep, beeeep!"

Randolph nodded and prepared himself for the message that was about to follow.

“God damn it, John! It’s over, all right? Stop calling me and leaving all those fucking stupid messages!” a woman’s voice shot out of the machine at him.

“What the hell?” Randolph said in surprise, “how did she respond?” He thought he had better go back to the first message from four days ago to see if he could figure out what had happened before he listened to the final new message.

Rewinding his machine’s tiny cassette all the way to the beginning he pressed the play button again and sat down in his folding chair next to Stan’s cage to let the drama unfold.

“Beth, for God’s sake, please pick up,” a frail-sounding male voice said as the message that had begun all this wafted out of Randolph’s answering machine. “I can’t go on without you,” the voice, whom Randolph now knew to be John, continued. “I just can’t. Pick up the phone, I’m begging you. Or if you’re really not home, then call me back as soon as you can. Please, Beth, please.”

A short pause followed, then another beep, and then the second message started playing: “I waited by the phone all night, I even slept with it under my pillow, but you never called,” John’s voiced whined out again. “Beth, I need you, I really do. You’re the only one who has ever been able to make me enjoy

taking my medicine. Swallowing those pills with a drink of water from the glass you held was heaven. I don't know if I'll be able to keep taking my prescription now. Please, Beth, pleeeeeeeeeease, I need you. I need your water holding skills. Call me back. I'll sleep with the phone on my ear tonight."

Another beep followed, and then the third message from John, "Beth. My ear hurts from having slept on the phone all night. You didn't call again, but I think I know why. Listen, I'm sorry I said your toenail polish looked shabby and drab. I didn't mean it. The colors were fantastic, they really were. That combination of bright green and pink dots on the brown background was breathtaking. I just couldn't tell you because I love you so much. Please, come over and pour me a glass of water. I'll lick the polish off your toenails and bake a cake with it. I really will. I'll sleep with the phone in my pants tonight. I love you, Beth. Call me. Please."

'That cake line is good,' Randolph thought to himself as the message rolled to its end and was followed by another pause and short beep. 'I'm going to have to remember to use that one.'

The fourth message, from the day before, was next, and although Randolph basically remembered how it went he listened more intently this time around. "Beth," John crowed, "I think I got some kind of penile rash from the phone last night. I'm not sure how but there are red spots everywhere and it hurts when I pee. But not as much as my heart hurts, Beth."

I'm dying for you, dying without you. I mean it, Beth, I really do. My soul is leaking out of me as we speak, I can feel it. I'll be in heaven soon, or hell, whichever. Hell is life without you anyway, Beth. Without your glasses of water and your toenails and your fiery breath that always smells like the most heavenly garlic. I need your garlic in my life again, Beth, I need it in my nose and in my throat and on my clothing. I don't know what I'll do if you don't call me back. I can't be held responsible for what I may or may not do. Call me. Now. Beeeeeeeeeeeth!"

The next beep brought Randolph back to the present, and he heard Beth's screeching banshee voice wail out again the way it had only moments before, "God damn it, John! It's over, all right? Stop calling me and leaving all those fucking stupid messages!"

'Okay, now for the new one,' Randolph thought, rubbing his hands together and leaning forward excitedly, wondering if it would be John's response to Beth's last or another new message from Beth herself. He quickly put his ear down next to his machine's speaker; he didn't want to miss a syllable of what would come next. A second later the familiar beep rang out and then the first bits of static as the magnetic tape rolled forward and the new message began, "Hey Randolph, Pierce here. Listen, I was just wondering if I could come over and borrow your bike pump later. Let me know, eh. Thanks!"

Randolph let his forehead drop onto the table and groaned loudly. "You called it, Stan," he said without looking up.

Stan chirped happily and hopped around in his cage.

9. Guts All Over the Parking Lot

“But that’s just it, there’s only one side to the coin. The point isn’t just to avoid applying labels, Brian, it’s to actually stop thinking about things dualistically,” Randolph said into the espresso bar as he polished the steam wand. “I mean, it’s all related to your perception of reality, not reality itself. What is actually real in the materialistic sense is quite possibly what is true reality itself, but in order to get at that through our sense organs, and further the mental filters that we needlessly apply, we need to fundamentally change our attitudes towards the world around us.”

“Woah, woah, hold on a minute right there, Mr. Monist,” Brian said from where he stood leaning against the counter next to the coffee urn. “First of all, we have to apply labels to things. It’s how we interact with our surroundings. Human language is one of the main engines of our evolution, and it’s a major reason our cultures have advanced so quickly in such a short period of time—biologically speaking, of course.”

“Granted,” Randolph replied, finishing with the steam wand and going on to polish the chrome front of the machine. “But the labels that we give things do not necessarily reflect the true nature of those things.”

“That’s entirely irrelevant,” Brian said to Randolph’s back, gesturing to no one in particular with his right hand. “And even worse, it’s misleading. Take that cat out there in the parking lot, it’s moving around a lot and so the label ‘alive’ would almost certainly apply *necessarily* to that creature.”

Randolph glanced up to look at the cat in question, then over to Brian who looked far too comfortable leaning against the back counter. “You’d better not let Loreen catch you leaning like that,” he warned.

“‘If you’ve got time to lean you’ve got time to clean!’” Brian quoted, chuckling. “I’ll go make some chocolate mix in a minute, but first let me say this: If that cat weren’t moving around, and in fact had its guts spread all over the parking lot, then the label of ‘dead’ would further necessarily apply to it. So all your fancy word games are simply that. The fact is that we need labels, our brains function on running them, and the case could even be made that we are evolutionarily programmed to label things as a prime survival—an environmentally adaptive—skill.”

“But if you put that cat there in Schrödinger’s box then it’s both alive and dead, at least according to one interpretation,” Randolph said, returning to his polishing. “My point about labels is that they are intrinsically meaningless. If I choose to label that cat out there as being ‘kuhumanah’ rather than as

being 'alive' it makes no difference whatsoever to the current state of the cat. The fact that we insist on labeling everything hinders our understanding of the true nature of reality by applying false dichotomies. For that cat to exist there must be an equally existent non-cat, otherwise the distinction could not be made and moreover the..."

"Uhh, excuse me, fella?"

Randolph looked up suddenly at a voice that definitely wasn't Brian's. He glanced at the register and noticed a man in a reindeer-emblazoned sweater standing there staring at the menu board, scratching the stubble on his right cheek lightly.

"Welcome to Marmuck's sir, how can I enrich your Marmuck's experience today?" Randolph said quickly, wondering where Brian had gone and how long he had been having a conversation solely with the espresso machine.

"I think I'll have a large latte," the man said, his eyes riveted to the menu.

"No problem, sir," Randolph said, exiting Brian's account on the register and then punching in his own employee number before conducting the transaction. "That'll be \$3.87 with tax. And I'll have that ready for you in just a moment." He smiled slightly at the man and then moved back to the espresso bar to begin steaming the milk and pulling the shots he'd need for the drink.

While Randolph was working on the man's latte, Brian came out of the back room carrying a large box of chocolate powder. He set the box down on the counter and pulled a large measuring cup and a square mixing bowl out of a drawer, and then filled a pot with water and put it on one of the urn heaters to bring it to a near boil, all the while roundly ignoring the customer at the register, who had by now begun watching him with a small measure of interest. "How else can you explain that every human society on the planet, no matter what environment they occupy, has developed systems for labeling their surroundings, and sometimes very complex systems as related to their environments. The Inuit language, for example, has numerous terms for what we simply call 'snow'," Brian said as he put a long thermometer into the water he was boiling and watched the mercury as it rose.

"That's actually not true," the man said, suddenly joining the conversation. "The various dialects of that language really only employ two base roots; one that functions like our 'to snow' and another that refers to the noun 'snow'. All of the various terms simply attach different affixes to these two roots, and can't really be considered different words."

'This guy knows his stuff,' Randolph thought, deeply impressed. 'Brian's not going to like that.'

Brian turned, a look of deep annoyance plain for all to see etched across his face, and said, "I think I know what I'm talking about, sir."

Before the man could respond, though, Randolph stepped back to the register with a large latte in hand. Setting the drink down, he took the four dollars that the man had left on the counter and placed them in the cash register while he gathered the man's change. "Don't worry about him, sir, he's minoring in philosophy at the U," Randolph explained. "Here's your thirteen cents change. Would you like a receipt printed up?"

"No thanks," the man said, still watching Brian as he measured out the chocolate powder into the mixing bowl as if it were radioactive material. "And you can keep the change."

"Thanks a lot, and have a nice day," Randolph said, placing the coins in the tip jar as the man turned and walked out of the store, shaking his head from side to side.

As soon as the man had left, Brian looked over at Randolph from the far side of the work area and remarked sarcastically, "Different affixes for snow! What a moron!"

10. The Slush Mat

Spring came finally to Sornsville, and with it the gradual thaw of the frozen earth, the ice-caked tree branches, and the mounds of packed snow that seemed to shrink noticeably day by day. Along with this rebirth of the natural environment, and the just as visible rejuvenation of everyone's spirits, however, came that enemy familiar to all northern peoples—and Southern Hemisphere southerners—everywhere: the creeping, seeping, dripping brown sludge referred to simply as 'slush'.

Marmuck's, despite their illustrious corporate support, high cultural achievements, and general lauding by all sectors of society, was just as vulnerable to the dreaded plague of slush as any other merchant. Randolph knew this, of course, and was prepared to meet the challenge this year the same way he did every year: by doing as little as possible while he waited the threat out.

Walking to work that morning was the first time in recent memory that Randolph was actually able to keep his coat partially unzipped. He had stopped wearing his hat and gloves a few weeks back, and was beginning to enjoy his daily commute once more. Arriving at work before Loreen, he peeked into the store and noticed that the front mats were not rolled up as they usually were. 'If I had a key I

could get in and see what their condition is,' he thought to himself, ruing once more his demotion and subsequent de-keying. There was nothing he could do about it at the moment, though, so he waited calmly while the first few rays of light began to brighten the horizon in the distance.

Loreen arrived a few minutes later, in a rush as usual, and hurriedly opened the door for Randolph, muttering something about her alarm clock as she did so. With their first few steps into the store, both of them noticed the problem immediately. The mats had not been sent for cleaning the night before, and as such, the new mats to be rotated in had not been provided by the servicing company. With each soggy step they knew they were in for a long day.

“Who closed last night?” Randolph asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Dave,” Loreen sighed, then rushed into the back room to shut down the security alarm and prepare the cash registers for opening.

‘Fucking Dave,’ Randolph thought, wondering how many times he was going to have to mop the front of the store before his shift ended that day. He carried the pastry boxes behind the counter and then began brewing the morning's batch of coffee and warming up the espresso bar before he built his Modernist pastry towers for the display case.

By half past seven the front of the store was already a brown, sludgy, sloppy mess. Loreen had put a triangular yellow 'Caution' sign out, but that didn't stop people from nearly losing their footing on the wet tiles, nor did it do anything to stop their voluminous complaining.

"I came here for my morning triple chocolate, extra shot, ninety-three degree mocha with extra whip cream and room on the top," shouted one particularly miffed middle-aged woman, "not to have my feet covered in icy shit bricks!"

"I'm very sorry, ma'am," Loreen assured her, "but as you can see there are only two of us on staff right now, and unfortunately we haven't had a chance to mop the front of the store yet."

"Well you can shove your tip right up that mop!" the woman retorted, then sat down in an easy chair near the entrance and sipped her mocha while she read the morning paper, her feet squarely in a pile of slush.

Loreen sighed and glanced over at Randolph, who only shrugged and remarked, "Guess we'll just have to deal with this until ten when Lucas gets here."

When the morning rush had ended, Randolph was finally able to put a dent in the sludge building up by the doorway. Mopping was inevitable at this time of year, he knew, but the fact that the front mat contained all of the previous days' slush meant that

what would usually be sopped up before people tramped over to the register could not be absorbed by the soggy mat, and so the net result was that the tiles became a cumulative wet brown rink. Worse than that, though, was that the solution to the problem—mopping—ultimately created a bigger problem if the flow of customers didn't cease long enough to give the thin layer of clean mop water that remained a chance to dry. And since it was a Sunday, Randolph knew there was little chance of that.

The next two hours passed slowly for Randolph and Loreen in the tug-of-war that had erupted between the slightly wet mopped floor and the soaking wet sludge-ensconced floor. Loreen would cover for Randolph by handling the register and espresso bar while he mopped only to have the slower service result in more customers lining up and hampering Randolph's ability to clean effectively with the additional people and the extra slush they brought with them. This tragic interplay was only interrupted by the sudden arrival of their assistant manager.

At exactly 9:30 a.m. Dave burst into the store, yelling, "I'm here!" All eyes fixed quickly on him, and he lost no time in further seizing the moment. He stood stock upright for a few seconds, bravely saluted Loreen at the till and Randolph behind the bar, then ran into the back room, dodging customers as he went. A moment later he was back out front, a dirty apron hastily slung around his neck and the

mop and bucket in tow. Rushing back to the front of the store, Dave began mopping furiously, slapping the cloth strips down into the bucket and then, without even wringing the mop head out, onto the floor in a frenzy of activity that actually made conditions much worse as he sprayed water everywhere. Cries of, "Watch out!", "You got my pants wet, you idiot!", and, "What are you doing?" were roundly ignored by Dave in his cleaning zeal. Drops of sweat began to stand out on Dave's face while he pressed on with his task, all the while chanting to himself as if reciting a mantra, "Forgot to have the mats cleaned, Lucas here soon, clean up store real good, Lucas be proud, problem fixed. Forgot to have the mats cleaned, Lucas here soon..."

Randolph rolled his eyes at the odd display, but said nothing as he and Loreen had customers to serve. Eventually the customers themselves also gave up on getting Dave to stop, or even slow down, and instead gave him a wide berth. Everyone, that is, except for a man in a brown trench coat, obviously lost in thought, as he stepped into Marmuck's that day and ran straight into the whirlwind mopper that Dave had become, catching the mop head straight in his crotch on its upswing.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, looking down at the front of his long coat, which was covered in brown water that was shot through with bits of dirt, sand, and ice.

“Forgot to have the mats cleaned, Lucas here soon, clean up store real good, Lucas be proud, problem fixed. Forgot to have the mats cleaned, Lucas here soon...” Dave muttered without breaking rhythm or looking at the man in front of him.

The man, his single eyebrow lowered so far in fury that it was nearly in his eyes, repeated himself in a loud shout, “WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?”

Dave, shocked, stopped suddenly and glanced over at the man. Seeing that the man's crotch was dripping wet he said quietly, “I think you've peed your pants, sir. You'd better change or you'll disturb the other customers.”

The man's face darkened to a deep beet red and he bellowed, “I have NOT urinated in my pants! You splashed me with your mad mopping, you fool!”

Dave looked confused a moment, but then decided this was a situation best ignored, and went back to his mopping. The man, however, was not to be so easily put aside, and he grabbed Dave's right bicep and wrenched the mop handle from his hands.

“I need that for cleaning!” Dave protested, grabbing at the mop. “For mopping!”

The man put the mop behind him and used his body to block Dave's searching reach. “Oh no you don't!” he said. “You need to recompense me for this. And apologize!”

Dave stopped trying to get the mop for just a moment while he processed the man's statement, but then quickly returned to his frantic reaching while the man moved this way and that to keep Dave from getting at the mop behind him.

"Give it to me!" Dave yelled, completely fixated on retrieving the mop and continuing his cleaning.

"No! Not until you have my coat cleaned and apologize!" the man retorted.

"It's not my fault you peed your pants!" Dave protested, his voice pitched into a high whine.

"Hippie! I demand that you help me!" the man called, glancing over at Randolph who, along with everyone else in the store, was by now staring at the commotion taking place at the entrance.

A bemused look crossed Randolph's face as he recognized the man and replied calmly, "Sorry, sir, but that's our assistant manager. I really must bow to his higher authority."

"I have the highest authority!" the man retorted, backing up and turning this way and that to keep Dave at bay. "I damn all of you to hell! To hell!"

Dave paused a moment as something caught his eye from outside in the parking lot. A look of pure panic covered his face and a split second later he lunged

for the man in a full body tackle, dragging him down into the muddy half-frozen soup at their feet.

Just at that moment a horrified Lucas walked into the store. For a split-second all action stopped as Dave stared at Lucas, the man stared at Dave, and Lucas stared at the pair of them on the floor, a mop handle protruding out from behind the man's right shoulder.

Lucas' brain processed the situation in a flash of managerial lightning, and having ascertained exactly what was immediately necessary, he took the kind of decisive action that only he could. "Randolph!" he yelled, without taking his eyes off the chaos below him, "Get this man a free drink coupon!" Turning fully to the man, now covered from head to toe in a moist mess, he said as evenly and compassionately as he could, "I am very sorry, sir. But do not worry, your next drink here at Marmuck's will be on us."

11. Buntle's, Too

Another Tuesday rolled around, and Randolph decided that it was high time he made a trip to his local grocery store. He had read recently how Buntle's was able to smooth out their labor problems with the chimps they had employed, and was curious to see just how well the store was running now. There was also the added benefit of his being able to walk there and carry his groceries back home much more easily than the long trek along Staleworth Parkway necessitated by Buntle's' temporary forced closure. Setting the magazine he was reading down on his coffee table, Randolph walked along the narrow hallway into his bedroom and took his light spring coat out of his closet. He paused for a moment to look out the half-window that opened onto street level and noticed that the final traces of snow had at last melted away, leaving the blades of grass standing tall and breathing in the fresh air once again, their photosynthetic engines running at full capacity. '98.6% the same,' he thought, recalling the article on hominid evolution he had been reading. 'Amazing stuff, and it's all in the organization of the brain.' He exhaled deeply, then turned and headed to his front door.

The familiar walk south along Mantonian Avenue was made all the more pleasant by the days' mild temperature and bright sunshine. Randolph made

his way past the deli, the women's specialty clothing store, and the neat houses tucked back from the road before arriving at the jeweler's that anchored the small strip mall on the corner of Mantonian and Staleworth directly opposite the Marmuck's where Randolph spent his working hours. Reasoning that he spent enough time at Marmuck's as it was, and not wanting to have to face any customers he might know and the faked, forced interactions that would require, Randolph instead headed west immediately and decided to cross over Staleworth a couple of blocks down. By the time he had reached the crosswalk that opened onto the strip mall with Buntle's at its corner, he could see that the store was indeed open again and had a steady stream of customers heading in and out.

He waited there for the stoplight to change and then skipped lightly across the road, eager to see just how things stood. Dodging a puddle in the middle of the parking lot, he approached Buntle's' front door and was pleased to see that his old acquaintance non-Loreen was there greeting customers and handing out sheets of coupons. Her standard Buntle's red vest was now adorned with a nametag that read 'Mary', and was accentuated not only by her gold necklace with its large Mercedes Benz medallion, but also by a thick silver-colored chain-link necklace that was looped through the shoulder slits in her vest and looked like it hung quite heavily.

“Well, hello there! Good to see you again,” Randolph called to non-Loreen-possibly-Mary.

“Hello yourself!” non-Loreen-possibly-Mary said cheerily. “Thanks for your help on the day of the strike, I was scared to death and don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“Oh, no problem,” Randolph assured her. “I just reacted. It was nothing, really.” He smiled again and pointed at her nametag, “So your real name’s Mary?” he asked.

Non-Loreen-possibly-Mary shook her head from side to side and said, “No, it’s not Mary. I really don’t know what is happening with these darned nametags!” She handed Randolph one of the coupon fliers she was holding and continued, “But I do know what’s happening with this store! We’re booming! Check out my new necklace.” She pointed at her chest with her chin as she handed a set of coupons to another customer walking past. “Pure platinum,” she said proudly.

Randolph was duly impressed. “Wow, I’ll bet that cost a pretty penny,” he said.

“Quite a few pretty pennies,” non-Loreen-non-Mary replied. “And it’s all thanks to Buntle’s and our fabulous chimps. In fact,” she said, meeting Randolph’s eyes again, “we’re doing so well that we’re going to open up another store called Buntle’s, Too.”

“Oh, another Buntle’s?” Randolph asked. “Where will it be?”

“No,” non-Loreen-non-Mary corrected him, “not another Buntle’s. A Buntle’s, Too.”

“You mean like a Buntle’s, part two?” Randolph asked, squinting slightly in the sun.

“No, no! A small specialty store, mostly imports. It’s called Buntle’s, Too,” non-Loreen-non-Mary said with a tinge of irritation.

“So you mean that your new specialty store, which sells different things completely, has the same name as this store?” Randolph asked. “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“You don’t make any sense,” non-Loreen-non-Mary said under her breath. “It’s not called Buntle’s, it’s called Buntle’s, Too,” she repeated loudly.

“Oh, I get it!” Randolph said, smiling. “It’ll be Buntle’s 2, t-w-o.” He chuckled and started to head into the store.

“No, no, no!” non-Loreen-non-Mary said, grabbing his arm and stopping him. “Buntle’s, Too, like t-o-o. Geez, the chimps got it!” She rolled her eyes and released his arm, then turned away from him and left Randolph free to begin his shopping.

Randolph headed into the store as non-Loreen-non-Mary continued greeting the customers, running the conversation he had just had through his mind to see where he had gone wrong. 'T-o-o, I see...' he thought, 'these marketers are far too clever for their own good.' Upon entering he noticed immediately how much of an improvement the chimps had made since the last time he was there. Customers were confidently cruising up and down the well-organized and neat aisles, gathering their goods and checking out without any incidences of simian misbehavior. From the chimps stocking the shelves to the chimps cleaning the floors to the chimps handling the cash register transactions, all of the furry little red vest clad workers were doing exactly what they should have been doing. Randolph smiled and took a basket from the pile stacked at the door and began to gather what he had come for.

Twenty minutes later he was nearly ready to be checked out, all he was missing was a can of McCready's broccoli and cheese soup, a personal favorite. Walking up and down the canned food aisle again and again, for the life of him Randolph couldn't find the soup anywhere—all he saw were row after row of tuna, sardines, anchovies, sliced fruits, and desserts. 'Where on earth are they keeping their soup?' he wondered, looking forlornly up and down the aisle.

Feeling a slight tug on his pants leg, Randolph looked down and noticed a chimp gazing back up at him and smiling friendlily. It gave him a low series

of screeches and then pointed to the back of its red vest, which had the words, "I'm here to help!" printed on it with the Buntle's logo just beneath. The chimp then shrugged its shoulders and smiled again at Randolph, waiting patiently.

"Well, okay," Randolph began, and then knelt down to get on eye level with the chimp. "I'm looking for some McCready's soup," he said slowly, enunciating the brand name as clearly as he could. "Do you know where it is?"

The chimp gave a little grunt and took Randolph's hand before leading him two aisles over and slightly towards the front of the store. The chimp then released his hand and gestured broadly at all of the soup cans lined up neatly on the edge of the shelves. Grunting again, the chimp pointed at the guide sign hanging over the center of the aisle, where "Soups" was clearly printed amongst a few other dried food items.

Slightly embarrassed, Randolph thanked the chimp and then added, almost as an after-thought, "By the way, how did all of you end up settling with Buntle's?"

The chimp grinned at him again, a big, open-mouthed grin, and pointed at its teeth, which for the first time Randolph noticed had all been completely covered in sparkling gold caps.

12. Halfway to Aberdeen

Two employees taking a break together was absolutely anathema to Lucas' understanding of the Marmuck's employee handbook, but he wasn't there that day, and as it was also unusually dead for a Saturday afternoon, Loreen allowed Randolph and Kim to take their ten minute breaks at the same time.

Standing in the rear parking lot near the store's back exit, Randolph took long tokes on his ceramic oney, which was cleverly shaped like a cigarette, and stared at a squirrel delicately balancing on the edge of the large blue dumpster. "Did I tell you about that pastor's run-in with Dave the other day?" he asked, offering Kim a hit.

"No thanks," Kim said, waving away the pipe. "Yeah, you did. Yesterday, in fact. But did I tell you about his recent conversion?"

"Conversion?" Randolph asked, coughing the word out heavily. "No way! That guy? Converting? I thought he loved being a pastor!"

"Oh, he still is," Kim assured him, "just of a different religion. Actually, I'm kind of to blame for it."

“Well, come on,” Randolph coaxed her, “let’s have the whole story.”

Kim cleared her throat and adjusted the orange Marmuck’s hoodie she was wearing before beginning—she loved having an audience—and then made sure she had Randolph’s full attention by staring him in the eye and pausing dramatically. Patient as ever, Randolph stared back at her with eyes that were only slightly glazed over.

Satisfied, Kim began, “Well, you know he’s been dating my mom, right? Unfortunately, things have gone well with them, and so he’s been over to my house for dinner a few times. The last time he came he insisted on checking my bookshelf for evidence of Satanism, which of course my mom said was ridiculous and would allow no such search to take place. But,” she held up a thin pointer finger for effect, “as soon as my mom excused herself to use the toilet he apparently made a bee-line for my room, because when she came out he was sitting on the floor in front of my bookshelf carefully checking the front and back covers of all my books. My mom told him to get out of there, but I guess she didn’t see him slip a paperback into his suit coat pocket.”

Kim paused again to let the tension really sink in, but noticed that she had overplayed her hand when Randolph’s gaze drifted back to the squirrel still doing its dance on the dumpster railing. “Because later,” Kim said quickly in a voice that was gauged

to be loud enough to regain Randolph's attention without actually scolding him for letting it go in the first place. When his eyes met hers once more she arched an eyebrow and continued, "Because later when I came home he pulled the paperback out of his pocket and said that he'd like to borrow it. I was really surprised, I mean, he seemed genuinely interested in the story, so I said, sure, go ahead."

"What was it?" Randolph immediately asked, feeding Kim the question she was looking for.

"Frank Herbert's *Dune*," she said emphatically. "Now all he talks about is the coming of the Kwisatz Haderach and how he'll save us all with his prescience and superior mental abilities."

"So he converted to Zensunnism?" Randolph asked, shocked that the man could have changed his religious affiliation so quickly: but even more shocked that he did so in favor of a religion that didn't yet, and might never, actually exist.

"No, I don't think he understood the book that well," Kim said, furrowing her brow as she tried to remember what exactly the tenets of Zensunnism were. "He says he's Dunedonian now."

"There's no way that guy's from Scotland!" Randolph retorted.

"No, not Dundonian—*Dunedonian*," Kim corrected him. "He found some guy on the web to sell him an

official license for \$5 and now he's going around trying to convert everyone to his new church."

"Oh," Randolph said flatly. "Well, I hope he doesn't mention it when he redeems that free drink coupon Lucas gave him."

"I'm sure he will," Kim replied. She lifted her right hand, palm open to the sky, and exclaimed dramatically, "Father! The sleeper has awakened!"

Randolph burst into laughter and emptied the ash from his oney. "Back to work?" he asked.

Kim nodded, "Yep, it's about that time."

13. Ice Blended Coffee Based Flavored Beverages

“Welcome to Marmuck's, sir. How may I enrich your beverage based dining experience today? Would you care for one of our specialty seasonal drinks?” Randolph asked the teenager sporting the bright purple dog collar and attached black leash standing at the register.

“Yeah, ummm... dude... lemme see... have you got any of those, ummm... blendy things?” the teenager asked slowly, staring at the menu board hanging on the wall behind and above where Randolph was standing.

“Yes, sir,” Randolph assured him. “Those are in fact our currently offered specialty seasonal drinks. We have a wide variety available, as you can see from our menu. I'm sure you'll find one that appeals to your individual tastes and unique palate.” Every now and then Randolph liked to entertain himself at work by speaking in as indirect and haughty a way as he could, and today was one of those days. It helped, too, that he happened to be scheduled with the store's manager, Lucas, and the store's assistant manager, Dave. He knew that speaking this way would both please and annoy Lucas. Please him because it was how Lucas himself spoke, and how he preferred his employees to speak, and annoy him

because Randolph knew that Lucas would never quite be sure if Randolph was speaking that way because he ought to, or simply to take the piss out of him. It also, to Randolph's mind, had the added benefit of confusing Dave.

“Dude—woah. I just want some whip cream and caramel, man,” the teenager replied, holding up his hands as if in protest.

“As clearly indicated on our menu board, sir,” Randolph said as he pointed to a section of the board's upper right area, “our whipped caramel topped ice blended coffee based flavored beverage contains both of those ingredients, as well as being espresso based.”

The teenager stared at the indicated section and blinked a few times. His eyes met Randolph's and he said, “Okay, sold. Gimme one of those, dude. Fuckin’ let ‘er rip!” He slapped a five-dollar bill down on the counter and Randolph ran the transaction through.

“Very good, sir. Your total comes to \$3.15. Would you care for anything else today? Our employee handbook states that the caramel-filled chocolate brownie is an excellent accompaniment to the beverage which you have just ordered,” Randolph told him dryly.

“Nah, that's gonna do me to do 'er,” the teenager answered as he pushed the five dollars on the counter towards Randolph.

Randolph nodded and called loudly over his shoulder, “One whipped caramel topped ice blended coffee based flavored beverage, please!”

Lucas, who was standing at the blenders on the back counter behind Randolph, said, “I am right here, Randolph, there is no need to yell. What size would the young man like, please?”

Randolph turned to look at Lucas, and then turned back to the teenager and asked, “What size beverage would you like today, sir? I have totaled your transaction at the price of the central of our three sizes. I apologize deeply for my assumption. Is that in fact the volume of blended liquid that you would like to consume today?”

“Fuckin' fine, man, fuckin' fine! Just hurry up, okay?” the teenager responded.

Randolph turned again to face Lucas and asked quietly, “Did you get that?”

Lucas nodded and began making the drink. As Randolph finished running the order through the cash register and handing the young man his change, he could hear the last of the ice being scraped out of the large push bucket behind him. ‘Here it comes,’

he thought, and logged his employee number out of the till in preparation.

When the blender had finished whirring behind him, Lucas handed the teenager his drink with a brief, “Thank you very much, sir” and in the same breath said to Randolph, “Randolph, log out of your till and retrieve Dave from the back room. This ice bucket needs to be filled and you are the one who needs to do it. Dave can take over for you on the register.”

Randolph grunted and heaved the large ice bucket out from under the counter. The word 'bucket' didn't really fit the device Randolph thought, it was more of an enormous cooler mounted on the kind of rotating wheels that one commonly finds on grocery store shopping carts. Empty it was fine, easy to push and easy to maneuver, but filled with ice the thing's weight quadrupled and guiding it from the huge ice machine in the storage area through the narrow back room door, around the corner near the toilets, into the work area, behind the other staff without bothering them, and then finally into its place under the counter where the blenders were placed was a nearly Herculean task. Randolph had no doubts as to why he was the designated ice gopher that day—when working with management peons like him could always expect not to be treated fairly. ‘At least Loreen has us take turns,’ he complained inwardly as he pushed the ice bucket along the workspace and through the swinging door that separated it from the store's lounge area. He

avoided a nearby table, rounded the corner, and then punched the code into the lock on the back room door. As he swung the door open he pulled the ice bucket back enough so that the door could clear, then pushed the thing into the back room and allowed the door to swing shut behind him.

“Dave! Lucas wants you on the register!” Randolph called out. He opened the lid to the ice bucket and then pushed it into the corner next to the mammoth ice machine.

“Okay, going,” Randolph heard Dave reply from somewhere behind the stacks of coffee beans, tubes of caramel, sacks of chocolate mix, and the other boxed paraphernalia that the store needed to run. He slid the door to the ice machine open, grabbed the large plastic shoveling tool, and began laboriously scooping large amounts of ice into the empty ice chest. Moving robotically and keeping his pace even, Randolph didn't bother to look over as Dave slid past behind him and moved out into the front of the store.

Minutes passed as the ice mounted in the bucket, forming little mountains of roughly similar ice cubes that spilled down in steady avalanches that in turn became a smooth layer of continuous ice blocks on the bottom of the movable chest. Eventually it was filled, and Randolph slid the door of the ice machine shut, replaced the shoveling tool he had been using on its hook on the wall, and then closed the lid on the ice bucket. He squeezed

between it and the ice machine, opened the back door and kept it propped open with his left heel, then heaved at the large black cooler and got it rolling, carefully adjusting the angle of the wheels in small increments so he could position it to fit through the door without having to make more than one try. As he pulled the device through and again let the back room door close under its own weight, he noticed that all was not well at Marmuck's.

A very large and very frightening man was at the cash register with his left hand clenching Dave's shirt in a tight bunch, their faces so close that the man's long, bushy brown beard pouring off his chin was covering Dave's nose and mouth. The man's right arm was angled up with his elbow tight, and Randolph could just make out that he was holding some kind of tool pressed tightly against Dave's jugular vein.

"Give me the goddamn money!" the man yelled, yanking Dave even closer with his left hand as he did so.

"O—o—okay, I just need to open the register..." Dave's voice quivered as he spoke from under the man's beard. "Just let me... let me... ah, ah, achoo!"

The force of the sneeze actually made the assailant temporarily lose his grip on Dave's shirt, a look of surprise crossing his face. That surprise was soon replaced by disgust, however, as the man wiped the ends of his beard with his right hand, giving

Randolph a clear view of the weapon he wielded—a long ice pick.

“You got your filthy snot all over my beard!” the man screamed as he reached for Dave again and once more got hold of his shirt. “I’ll fucking slice you for that!”

“I’m so sorry!” Dave protested, managing to keep his face bent back and away from the other man’s head this time. “Your beard was so itchy, and some of the hairs were actually in my nostrils, and I just couldn’t help it, I mean, nobody can control when they sneeze! It was an accident you see... oh, please don’t slice me, I don’t need any more slicings...”

“Shut up!” the man cut Dave’s blabbering short by a sharp poke into his neck with the ice pick. “Or I’ll shove this so far into your neck that it goes up your asshole!”

Dave’s face was a sharp mixture of shock and confusion, and he mumbled, “Up my asshole?” as he struggled to get the till open, punching in his employee code again and again in his state of panic.

“Just the big bills! No ones or fives!” the man yelled, still holding the ice pick menacingly at Dave’s neck.

“All our big bills are in the little safe under the register,” Dave said quietly. “I can’t open it without a key.”

“Where’s the fucking key?” the man said, looking around the room and taking in Randolph standing frozen behind the ice bucket for the first time.

“I have it... it’s on a belt loop on my pants,” Dave informed him.

“YOU!” the man thundered, pointing his ice pick briefly at Randolph, “Get over here and get that safe open or he’s fucking gone!” As soon as his order was given the man returned the ice pick to Dave’s throat and twisted it cruelly, causing Dave to yelp in pain like a kicked dog.

Randolph nodded and silently slid out from behind the ice bucket and walked carefully over to the work counter, taking in the shocked look of the few customers in the store as he did so. Everyone was stock-still, watching the scene unfolding before them with faces that expressed deep fear, nervousness, concern for Dave, but also a tinge of excitement and voyeuristic pleasure.

Randolph was involved, however, and had no room for objective observations. His primary concern was getting the man out of the store as quickly as possible without any hint of further trouble or injury to Dave. He stepped behind the counter and moved very slowly and deliberately over to the register, keeping his eyes on the man as he did so and holding up his hands in a subconscious gesture of compliance and peaceful intentions. As he reached

the till he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Lucas was crouched on the floor whimpering, making slight and stealthy movements towards the open space under the blenders where the ice bucket usually sat. Randolph noted that tears were streaming from his eyes, mixing on his chin with a layer of drool that flowed from the edges of his mouth. Randolph couldn't make out much of Lucas' lower half, but the smell told him that Lucas had shat himself again.

“Come on already!” the man bellowed, following Randolph's gaze to where it was now focused on the floor. “Forget about him and get that goddamn safe open!”

Randolph snapped back to what was happening in front of him and took the keys en masse from Dave's belt loop, pulling the entire ring from the holder that was snapped onto Dave's pants and stretching the attached cord out as far as it would go. He found what looked like the safe key as he remembered it, hoping it hadn't changed since the time when he was a shift supervisor. He tried the key in the lock and it fit; turning it, he cautiously opened the safe door and pulled out the wad of twenties and pair of hundred dollar bills that had been placed there for safety reasons upon receiving them from customers. With eyes wide and a look of absolute docility on his face he offered the entire bunch to the man.

“Is that it?” the man asked, still holding Dave tightly and keeping the ice pick at his throat.

Randolph nodded, and in that instant the man released Dave, grabbed the pile of money from Randolph's open hands, and took a moment to see what the contents of it were.

It proved to be a pause that he could ill afford, though, because Dave lost no time in seizing the tip jar, raising it high above him, and then bringing it down in a tremendous smash onto the man's head as he turned to flee from the store. The force of the impact caused the glass jar to shatter violently, sending shards deep into the man's head and knocking him out in an instant. Blood sprayed from his wounds as he collapsed onto the floor, and the coins and few bills that had been the jar's contents similarly flew off in all directions.

“Yaaaaaarrrrrrrr!” Dave threw back his head and shouted in triumph. His eyes wild and feral, they darted around the room, taking in the shocked customers who most certainly hadn't seen that coming, Lucas still in a blubbering fetal position in the space under the counter he had managed to slink into, and Randolph standing next to him with his hands still outstretched and a passive expression covering his face. Dave then leapt over the counter top and began gathering up the scattered coins from the floor, leaving the man to continue oozing blood as each pump of his heart pushed more crimson content into the rivulets flowing from his wounds.

For everyone except Dave time had come to a standstill, and for a few long seconds his retrieval of the former contents of the tip jar was the only movement in the room. None even seemed to breathe. Then, finally awaking from his trance, Randolph announced to no one in particular, "That's the second time he's done that!" while Lucas broke out into an audible sob, his head buried in his crotch, and wailed tremulously but voluminously, "Free drink coupons! Oh, God... Randolph!! Free drinks for all! Coupooooons!"

14. The Iron Tarp, Part I: For the Record

Construction had begun early in spring that year, and as Sornsville geared up for its brief, hot summer, it looked like the building going up on the other side of the bookstore next to Marmuck's was nearly finished. Sheets of insulated tarp had covered the work in progress, marked with 'Noise Reduction—For Your Comfort' and the Gundersson Builders logo, but Randolph had never quite gotten over the feeling that of far greater importance to whoever had ordered the construction going on behind those plastic curtains was the secrecy they clandestinely provided rather than the actual noise dampening. It was a small neighborhood for him, after all, and the fact that a new addition to their little strip mall was being connected to the bookstore's west wall was immensely interesting to Randolph. Still, barring some kind of breaking and entering, or at least trespassing charge, he would just have to be content to wait and see; but it didn't seem like he would have to wait much longer.

And then, on the last day of May, the curtains came down. Approaching from the north, a customer was now faced with three large neon signs. Furthest to the east and on the corner of the building was Marmuck's Coffee, standing where it had always been. Immediately next to Marmuck's, and now in the center of the building, was Prounrow and

Whitney Books, also standing where it had always been. But on the western side of the face brick structure now stood something entirely new; its walls matched to perfection with the rest of the building, constructed with exquisite care to give the right impression of age and stability, modernity and gentrification, a brand new Moose's Coffee greeted young and old alike.

Randolph had an afternoon shift that day, and so by the time he arrived at work the place was already abuzz with the news. The stalwart Marmuck's customers, many who had begun frequenting the store long before Randolph had started working there, were shooting dangerous looks in the direction of Moose's, their scowls nearly as deep as the creases across their foreheads. Other customers, ones with less devotion to Marmuck's and less fervor for its corporate heads, were anxiously glancing around them, wondering who would be the first to break tradition and make the long march down to Moose's. Perhaps they could buy a coffee at Marmuck's, and then one at Moose's to compare the two? Surely that would be fair, some of them no doubt reasoned.

Randolph saw the uncertainty in their eyes as he pulled the front door open and marched boldly to the back room to punch in and put on his official blue apron. Some of the more faithful customers nearly saluted him as he walked by proudly, chin in the air. Here was one of their own, one of the trustworthy and consistent coffee monkeys that

served them their fix whenever they needed it and reassured them that they were part of the very elite of the elite by remembering their first names and preferred style of beverage. They had invested years in this company and were not about to surrender now to some damned interloper coffee chain; even if it was a local company while Marmuck's was headquartered more than two thousand kilometers away on the coast. They had all drawn their lines in the sand, and knew Randolph was one of the fine young warriors who would protect them.

For his part, Randolph wasn't too worried. Marmuck's and Moose's had been competing with each other for years, and both companies were still expanding and taking on new staff. It struck him that the differences between the two stores were far fewer than the similarities, and while he didn't have any doubts that the management style of each individual store in either chain was likely to be somewhat unique, he was willing to bet that the overall business structure of the two companies was nearly identical. He didn't actually know anyone who worked for Moose's though, and hoped that the new store now open so close to his own would provide an opportunity to remedy that. He would just have to be careful not to let Lucas or Dave see him fraternizing with "the enemy".

All of that would have to wait though, because Randolph had a full shift in front of him. He looped his apron strings around his back and tied a tight knot in the center of his stomach; it was going to be

a long day. Heading back into the front of the store, Randolph nodded solemnly at the regular customers he recognized, most of whom hadn't budged an iota during the few minutes he had been in the back room. His nods were graciously returned, an act that seemed to somehow further cement the bond between them, and strengthen the resolve of all those present to never even set one foot inside Moose's. To them, to the faithful, the very thought was anathema, and brought with it the foul stench of sulfur from the darkest recesses of hell. Stepping behind the counter and moving across the work area, Randolph met Loreen's eye as she gestured for him to take over for Brian at the espresso bar.

"He's had a rough morning," Loreen said.

"See you later," Brian mumbled, then sighed heavily and undid the strings around his apron. He wadded it up into a ball as he exited the store's work area and headed towards the employee's room, shoulders slumped.

"Been busy?" Randolph asked, looking over the line of cups lined up on top of the espresso bar. There were about eight orders to fill, and the line at Loreen's register still had about five people in it.

"Surprisingly, yeah," Loreen replied while she waited for the customer in front of her to decide his order. "A lot of people have even been coming in here with mugs from Moose's."

“What do you mean?” Randolph asked, surprised.

“Just one moment, sir,” Loreen said to the man at her till and then stepped close to Randolph and said very quietly, “They heard about the new Moose’s and came in here by mistake, thinking we were Moose’s. Lucas gave us strict orders not to correct them, and even insists that we honor their mugs the same way we do for Marmuck’s mugs.”

Randolph placed the steam wand he was using on the surface of the milk to produce the maximum noise possible and asked, “You mean they get the refill discount for bringing in a Moose’s mug?”

“What?” Loreen hissed, glancing back at her register.

Randolph gave up on camouflaging his intent and turned off the steam wand. Whispering directly into Loreen’s ear he repeated his question. She nodded, touched the side of her nose, and then returned to her till. ‘I’ll be damned,’ Randolph thought, ‘Lucas is trying to pull the old switcheroo! Wonder how long he’ll get away with it?’

Finishing the cappuccino he was working on, Randolph set the drink down on the pick-up counter next to the espresso bar and called it out loudly. He then started pouring more milk in preparation for the next order, pausing only to smile a little at the customer that came to retrieve the cappuccino.

“Worried about Moose’s at all?” Randolph heard from his left. He turned to see the man who had just gotten his drink still standing there, a pencil behind one ear and a small notebook in hand, calmly sipping away. The man smiled disarmingly at Randolph as he caught his eye, demonstrating that he was willing to wait for an answer.

“Not really, no,” Randolph said, and then returned his concentration to the row of drinks waiting to be made.

“Aren’t you afraid you’ll lose customers?” the man said, his tone now more insistent than it had been.

Keeping his eyes on the work he was doing, Randolph replied, “Marmuck’s and Moose’s have both been in this city for a long time. People have always had a choice, and I think that those who have been coming here will keep coming here. Marmuck’s customers are the greatest.”

The man wasn’t to be brushed off so easily though, and continued with his line of questioning. “But there have never been a Marmuck’s and a Moose’s as close to each other before; surely having your main competitor in the same small strip mall must cause some concern.”

‘What is it with this guy?’ Randolph wondered. ‘If empty praise doesn’t please him, what will?’ He poured the shots he had pulled, added the milk and a perfect layer of froth, then placed a sleeve and lid

on the cup he was holding and called out, "Triple shot latte!" As he did so he met the man's eyes again and said, a little firmly, "I'm not worried about Moose's, sir."

"So you're in favor of having a Moose's practically next door?" the man asked, and Randolph noticed that he now had his notepad open and was jotting something down in it.

"Look, it's not like I'm saying 'Moose's! Cowabunga, dude!'" Randolph said, trying not to let the irritation show in his face. "I'm simply saying that I think our Marmuck's will be all right." He turned back to the espresso bar and began working on the next drink in line, a mocha, hoping that would be the end of it.

"Can I quote you on that?" the man asked.

"Fine," Randolph said, studiously avoiding the man's gaze.

"And how about a picture?" the man said, his voice elated.

Randolph decided the only way to finally get rid of this nuisance was to enthusiastically embrace everything the man said, so he threw his arms up in the air and yelled, "Yes! By all means, yes!"

The man smiled broadly as he produced a small digital camera from his pocket, aimed, clicked, and

exclaimed, "Perfect!" He then turned and hurried out of Marmuck's, his entire face aglow.

'Finally!' Randolph thought as he got back to doing what he did best, mixing and serving espresso and steamed milk in the exact proportions.

After he had finished closing and cleaning the store that night, Randolph returned home to find that a special evening edition of the *Blightland Neighborhood News* had been delivered to his building. 'Well, at least I got some mail,' he thought as he pulled the thin newspaper out of his box. Opening it up, he saw that most of the front page was an article on the new Moose's under the headline, "Local Coffee Chain Muscling in on the Big Boys". And there, right in the middle of the article, was a picture of his chest, shoulders, and face—huge fake smile and all—with the Marmuck's logo clearly visible on his apron. Under the picture ran the caption, "'Moose's! Cowabunga, dude!' says local Marmuck's worker".

"Shitfuck!" Randolph yelled loudly at his own photo. "I'm done for!"

15. The Iron Tarp, Part II: Countdown

‘I’m done for!’ Randolph thought again as he headed to Marmuck’s for an afternoon shift. He had the following day off, but was relieved to have at least one workday in between the incident with the newspaper and his absence from the store. If he was going to have to face the hammer he wanted to have it over and done with. ‘I am completely fucked!’ he told himself. ‘Lucas will never forgive this! That goddamn newspaper guy, he didn’t even tell me he was with the press. And then he completely took my words out of context! I remember what I said—word for word. I should write a letter of complaint to that stinking *Blightland Neighborhood News*. I mean, that kind of reporting has got to be violating some kind of ethical code. Like reporters even have an ethical code! No, that’s being too harsh, of course they have an ethical code. The main problem is the difference between the so-called reporters who spend their time doling out gossip and the real reporters who actually write on real news events—and do it objectively. But anyway, my main problem is Lucas. And possibly Dave. I don’t think Dave will know what ‘cowabunga’ means, but he’ll certainly understand the exclamation points. But Lucas—no, Lucas is definitely my main problem. Not only is he the manager, he’s also a stoic Corporate devotee; he’ll never forgive a transgression like this, even if it is only a perceived

transgression since what I actually said was far different. And on top of all that, he is a huge “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” fan. I’ve seen his pictures from the comic conventions he goes to—he even dresses up as the turtles on a rotating basis. Says it throws the other attendees off because they never know “who he’s going to be”. I can’t imagine it’d be that difficult for them to guess though, I mean, there are only four turtles after all. That’d give everyone a one in four shot of guessing correctly every time. I wonder if anyone actually does bother guessing whom he’ll go as? Oh, yeah, and I guess I forgot about that rat guy and some of the other characters. Anyway, Lucas will know what it means, and he’ll be pissed as fuck! Fuck! And he’ll be on the clock when I get there too, he opened this morning and will have about an hour left on his shift when I start mine. Oh man, he is going to put me through the ringers! If I get fired from Marmuck’s what am I going to do? I’ve been working there for five years now, and I need this job to keep money coming in so I can save enough to buy the new computer and software I need to start making my psychedelic trance music. Kim has that club event coming up and I promised her I’d DJ it with the new shizzzat. It is going to blow people’s minds! Well, I guess if I do get fired I could always try working at Moose’s. Their drinks are nearly the same, and I’m already trained on all the equipment they use. And that’d really show those fucks at Marmuck’s! Ahh, but I can’t do that—it’d be too weird seeing everyone all the time. I love those crazy mother fuckers, even Lucas and Dave. We’re

a great crew and everyone has their little role to fill. Even old morose Brian is an important part of our team. Listen to me! Talking as if *I* were the manager! But I'm not, Lucas is, and it'll be solely up to him if he lets me go or not. Maybe I can grovel somehow, get on his good side by complimenting his recent buzz cut or something—even though he looks like a complete freak. I mean, as if that old hair-style of his, greased to fuck and parted straight down the middle, wasn't bad enough, now he's got this ultra-hardcore buzz cut that makes him look like a skinny reject from the Army. Anyway, I've got to get on his good side, and I've got to keep my job, and that's that!

Arriving at Marmuck's at last, his head still abuzz with paranoia, Randolph opened the front door and felt the cool, slight breeze of the air conditioner on his face and the icy daggers from his co-workers' eyes. Loreen was on the espresso bar, it looked like she was cleaning it, and Lucas was measuring coffee grounds for the afternoon urn. As soon as he heard the door open, he looked up, saw Randolph, immediately dropped what he was doing, and said, "Can I have a word with you, Randolph, please?"

'Here it comes,' Randolph thought.

Lucas motioned to a table in the corner, away from the few customers who were relaxing in the store, and Randolph obediently walked over to it and sat down, his back to the wall. Before joining him, though, Lucas went into the back of the store and

came out carrying a newspaper and a manila file folder. Joining Randolph at the table, he set the newspaper down heavily and glowered, his entire face one of perfect rage.

Glancing down at the paper, Randolph saw that it wasn't the *Blightland Neighborhood News*, but the city, and statewide, *Sornsville Log Cabin Press*. "Crap!" Randolph exclaimed, unable to control himself.

"Crap is right," Lucas snarled. "Deep, deep, crap. The deepest crap of them all. Crap so deep you can not even see the light of day because of all the crap that is on top of you." He opened the newspaper to the local section and twisted it around so that Randolph could see what the lead story was. And there, exactly as it had appeared in the *Blightland Neighborhood News*, was the story on the new Moose's with Randolph's ridiculous picture and quote even larger than they had been.

"Look, Lucas," Randolph began desperately, "I can explain everything. You see, that guy, he never even told me he was a reporter, and I had no idea that what I was saying would be..."

"So you admit to saying it?" Lucas asked, leaning towards Randolph and narrowing his eyes.

"Yes, but it's not like that. I said more, I said... I... I..." Randolph stammered. He paused, swallowed

hard, and then continued, "That's a great haircut, Lucas."

"Do not try and butter me up!" Lucas roared, causing more than a few of the customers in the store to cast cautionary looks their way.

"Look, I said a lot more than that," Randolph started again. "What I actually said was, 'Look, it's not like I'm saying, 'Moose's! Cowabunga dude!'" The reporter just cut out the first part so he could have a sensational quote."

"Are you spying for Moose's?" Lucas asked, leaning in even closer to Randolph now, his face a mixture of doubt and resolve.

"No! Absolutely not! I love Marmuck's! And I'm completely devoted to this company," Randolph said, placing his hand on his heart.

Lucas sighed and set the newspaper to one side of the table. Opening the file he had with him, he remarked, "Well, since that incident that shall not be named, involving a certain mammalian life form, your L.P.R. and other evaluations have been more or less satisfactory. And it is true that you are one of the best cleaners we have." He paused, his face softening, and then quickly going hard again he snapped, "Loreen! How long until Randolph's upcoming L.P.R.?"

Loreen looked over at them for the first time, and then walked to the back half of the work area where a number of electronic timers were magnetically stuck to the secondary cooler. Squatting down to read the numbers, she announced, "It says: 7:5:4:32:17 for Randolph's next Laborer's Progress Review."

Returning his attention to Randolph, Lucas said, "So there you have it. Seven months, five days, four hours, thirty-two minutes and seventeen seconds until your next L.P.R. Now," and he raised a single finger in the air, "I am going to call the author of this article at the *Neighborhood News*, the *Log Cabin Press* evidently bought it from them, and see if I can get to the bottom of this."

A look of intense relief passed over Randolph's face as he realized that he wasn't going to be fired after all.

"But," Lucas continued, more sternly, "I will make a note of this in your laborer's file, along with a copy of both the *Neighborhood News* and the *Log Cabin Press* articles—despite the fact that they are identical—as well as leaving a note as to your inappropriate and wholly uncalled for 'TMNT' reference." Lucas closed Randolph's file, moved his pointer finger now squarely into its middle, and said as firmly as he could, "You may not remember this incident, Randolph. And I may not remember it, either. But by God, the file will! Oh yes, Randolph, the file remembers all."

Lucas stood and gathered the newspaper and file in his hands. Turning once more to Randolph he ordered, "Now punch in and get to work. I expect perfect behavior from you now on."

16. The Iron Tarp, Part III: Hardcore Espionage

A day off, a job to go back to, and it was summertime. Randolph couldn't have asked for much more. He woke up late that day and spent most of the morning lazing about his living room while Stan bounced around his cage and chirped happily at the company. "Mother fucker! Asshole! Brawk, brawk," he chimed in rhythm to the background music of the re-run of "C.H.I.P.S." that Randolph was half watching. "Cunt!"

"Stan! Where'd you learn that?" Randolph demanded, looking up from the TV. 'That bird is going to get me into so much trouble,' he thought, and quickly changed channels; something about the highway patrol always brought out the worst in his beloved pet.

Randolph had plans to meet Kim later that day during her lunch break for a secret sampling of Moose's coffee, but in the meantime wasn't quite sure how to occupy himself. After milling about his apartment for another couple of hours, he decided to go for a short walk down to the drugstore on his side of Staleworth Parkway, just to the west of the strip mall that housed Marmuck's, Prounrow and Whitney Books, and now, of course, Moose's.

It was a beautiful day for a walk. The sun was shining, rabbits and squirrels were busy scurrying about for food, birds were perched on the branches singing happily, and to top it all, a light, warm breeze was blowing in from the west, carrying with it a slight scent of the great river that flowed nearby. Randolph smiled—he couldn't help it—as he walked by the deli neighboring his building and noticed that nearly everyone in there was smiling, too. It was just one of those days. His pace matching his mood exactly, Randolph strolled down the sidewalk along Mantonian Avenue, nodding his head to an unheard tune, and long before he came out of this pleasant daze he realized he was at the intersection with Staleworth. He turned to the right and continued on past the jeweler's and the party supply store, and very soon found himself at the large Zinron's Drug. Almost against his will Randolph stepped through the automatic door and into the yellow fluorescent light and overly air-conditioned cool of Zinron's.

He was really only there to kill time until he met Kim, so he went straight to the aisle where the magazines were and searched for one with an interesting cover. Finally settling on an issue of *Popular Science*, Randolph opened to the table of contents and scanned through it for an article to read first. While he stood there with the magazine opened in front of him, clearly absorbed in what he was reading, a voice suddenly cut in over his shoulder, “Why don't you just buy it?”

Startled, Randolph turned to see a silhouette he recognized as the man walked past. "Oh, hi Steve!" he called out after the man. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, however, Randolph regretted having said them. He would normally never call out to a Marmuck's regular if he happened to run into one, but something about the sunshine that day, the smell of the river on the air, the way the wildlife half hid behind the thick cover of the bright green leaves on the trees, had completely entranced him. Even worse, from Randolph's point of view, than having greeted a regular outside of the safe parameters of the Marmuck's manufactured setting, was the fact that the man he had just initiated a conversation with was a notorious negative-nelly. He was sure to ruin Randolph's high spirits and send him careening down the exit ramp of the doldrums for the rest of the day. It was too late for second thoughts, though, and what was done couldn't, of course, be undone.

At the mention of his name Steve stopped his forward momentum altogether and turned to face Randolph from his position slightly further down the aisle towards the back of the store. Once he had finished his rotation, he seemed to consider Randolph for a long moment, taking in the young man's face with a peculiarly puzzled expression on his own. Realizing that the man had no idea who he was, Randolph compounded his earlier mistake by identifying himself, "My name's Randolph. I work at the Marmuck's across the street."

Steve processed the information with that same inscrutable look for another moment, then moved closer to Randolph and said quietly, "Cowabunga indeed, young man."

"Look," Randolph began, immediately on the defensive, "I've already been through this with Lucas. The whole thing was the reporter's fault. He completely took what I said out of context, twisted it, and then printed it under the pretense he presented in his article. I didn't even know the man was a reporter or that I was being interviewed. If I had known, I would've simply told him to get lost. We were way too busy that day."

"And how did Lucas react?" Steve asked, moving even closer to Randolph.

Randolph took a step back, and lowered the magazine he was holding. "He's going to call the paper and get it straightened out," he said quickly.

"Well, what's good enough for Lucas is good enough for me," Steve said, his voice grating out his words like cement from a mixer. "You weren't fired or anything, were you?"

"Oh no, sir," Randolph assured him. "Lucas knows how committed I am to Marmuck's and that I would never intentionally betray our fine company."

Steve took another step closer to Randolph and lowered his neck so that his nose was nearly

rubbing against Randolph's forehead. Very quietly, and with the stale pungency of coffee all over his breath, Steve hissed out, "Good. That's what I like to hear. Because you know what? Huh? You know what?"

Instinctively Randolph took another step back and raised the magazine he still held between his face and Steve's, brandishing it like some kind of glossy shield. "No sir, uh, Steve. What?"

Turning away from Randolph and abruptly continuing his march down the aisle towards the back of Zinron's, Steve pumped a clenched fist in the air and yelled, "Fuck Moose's! That's what! Fuuuuuuck Moose's!"

Relieved that the ordeal was finally over, Randolph closed the magazine, forgetting all about the article he had half read, and set it back on the rack where he had taken it. Glancing quickly around him to make sure that Steve was safely out of sight, Randolph scampered to the exit and stepped back into the bright sunshine. Continuing west down Staleworth he decided to cross near the strip mall that Buntle's anchored, then cut back east across the parking lot and meet Kim at Moose's. There was no way he wanted to chance running into another regular, or fellow Marmuck's employee, on his errand to patronize the competitor.

Glancing at his watch, Randolph saw that he only had about another five minutes before Kim would

clock out for her break and join him, so he slowed his pace and tried to regain the same happy nonchalance he had before he met Steve. Try as he might, though, he just couldn't get back into that headspace, and so as he reached Moose's he decided somewhat grumpily to just stand out by the front door and wait for Kim.

It was only about a minute later that Randolph, standing with his back to Moose's front door by one of the metal picnic tables that were neatly scattered on the sidewalk, heard a voice from behind him, "Pssst! Hey!"

He turned to see Kim, or what was almost certainly Kim, peeking from around the corner of the far side of Moose's, where he had just walked past. Her hair was different though, both in color and length, and she wore a huge pair of sunglasses that squeezed against the brim of her baseball cap. She was waving at him frantically, so Randolph shrugged his shoulders and lazily joined her in the narrow area between Moose's and the hill that separated it from the neighboring mall's parking lot.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Kim?" Randolph asked, looking intently at her face.

"Of course it's me!" Kim scolded him again. An instant later her anger dissipated and she laughed as he said, "My disguise rocks!"

“Yeah, wow,” Randolph admitted. “Why are you wearing it, though?”

“I thought it'd be a good idea since we're sneaking into the belly of the beast,” she said in all seriousness. “I brought some stuff for you, too. Just in case, you know?”

“I guess...” Randolph said, and took the fake mustache, wig, hat, and sunglasses that she offered him. “It's a bit weird, though...”

“Come on, it'll be fun. Just like real spies, sent to gather information on the enemies' movements and relay them back to headquarters,” Kim said and laughed again. “Can you break their secret caramel latte code, Randolph?” She wiggled her fingers in his face and continued in a hypnotic voice, “Caaaaan youuuuuuu?”

Randolph chuckled as he nodded and put on his own disguise. “Too bad you're still wearing your Marmuck's apron, though,” he joked.

“Am I?” Kim asked, surprised. After glancing down at herself and noting that she had in fact left the apron back at Marmuck's as she thought she had, she said, “Very funny. Now let's go, my half-hour's ticking away.”

They turned and headed back down towards the front parking lot and then into Moose's, their hearts

in their throats and eyes constantly darting this way and that on the lookout for a familiar face. As they entered the store, Randolph nearly took his sunglasses off to get a clearer view of the interior. Every bit of the place, down to the very last detail, was designed to look exactly like someone's comfortable log cabin up in the north woods. "This place is incredible!" Randolph whispered over his shoulder to Kim.

"I know," Kim said in awe, then quickly added, "But keep your voice down, we don't want to draw any attention to ourselves."

Randolph said nothing, and the two of them continued towards the counter in silence, both subconsciously noting the many differences between this store and their own: the lettering on the menu signboard, the bright chalk boards that contained messages hand-written by the employees, the endearing animal imagery that adorned the bags of coffee beans and nearly all the signage, the plush carpeting that must have been much harder to clean in the case that someone spilled something—this store made their own look like some kind of over-bleached and sterile hospital waiting room.

"Two small coffees, please," Randolph ordered in a voice far lower than he normally used.

"Sure!" the employee behind the counter said. "Do you want to try our quiz for a discount on your drinks?" she asked in a friendly tone.

'They have quizzes for discounts!' Randolph thought excitedly. "No, thank you. I don't know, we don't know," he said in the same faked voice.

"Uh, okay," the Moose's employee said, clearly finding Randolph's response a bit odd. "That'll be \$3.50 for the two."

Randolph felt Kim poking him irritably from behind, so he quickly handed over four dollars and said, "Keep the change."

"Thanks a lot!" the employee said, smiling as she took the money, put the change in her tip jar, and then poured the two coffees for Randolph and Kim.

Taking their drinks, the two Marmuck's provocateurs quickly exited the store the same way they had come in and ducked back down the side of the building, once more shooting looks nervously in all directions. Safely hidden away, Randolph and Kim exchanged looks as they held their cups to their lips and blew into the holes in their lids to cool the coffee inside. "On the count of three, then immediate reaction," Randolph said.

Kim nodded and prepared herself mentally for the plunge.

"Ready?" Randolph asked. "One, two, three..."

They both took small sips, let the black coffee roll down their tongues and into the backs of their mouths, swallowed slowly and carefully, and then in perfect unison said, "I can't taste the difference!"

17. The Garbage Run

Each for their own reasons, most employees at Marmuck's hated taking the garbage out to where the strip mall's dumpster sat in the rear parking lot. But then, reasoned Randolph one morning as he headed to the back room to do just that, most people didn't like taking the garbage out of their homes, either, and that consisted merely of bringing the plastic sack either to the bin in their garages or to their building's dumpster, depending on if they lived in a house or an apartment. No matter where he was taking the garbage from and to, Randolph didn't mind the chore. And, in fact, when it came to Marmuck's, he actually liked the task. It gave him a chance to get outdoors for a while, and if the garbage was of a sufficient amount, he could sometimes extend the time it took to accomplish the dumping into another quasi-ten minute break. On that day, or that morning at least, the odds looked to be stacked in Randolph's favor—quite literally.

He put his sheepskin coat on over his Marmuck's apron, then also his hat and gloves, and moved around the corner to where the garbage had been piled against the rear exit door since the night shift of the previous day. Randolph wasn't quite sure why the night shift wasn't allowed to bring the garbage out after dark; the only time he asked Lucas about it all he got in response was a mumbled, "Because it is

too dangerous. Much too dangerous out there." So whatever the logic behind the decision was, and it was very probable that it was merely the groupthink of a corporate boardroom, somewhere along the line it had been decided that no garbage would be dumped past nightfall anywhere in the vast empire of Marmuck's, Inc. An unfortunate side effect of this decision for stores at northern climes like Randolph's was that night fell very early in winter, which meant that at times the garbage would be piled in the back of the store for five hours before the branch was closed down for the day.

‘Must have been busy last night,’ Randolph thought as he looked at the mountain of 70-liter plastic bags filled with trash, tied off securely at their tops, and piled haphazardly against the rear exit. He took a deep breath of clean air before entering the garbage zone, and then waded through the bulging bags very gingerly, taking great care not to step on any uneven surfaces that might cause a rupture in the outer plastic linings separating him from their sticky interiors. Reaching the back door, he pushed on the bar that stretched across it and heard the familiar sound of the rubber door lining releasing its suction grip, then felt the bitter wind bite at his face and the pure cold stinging the inside of his nostrils. Putting his face completely outdoors, Randolph exhaled and then breathed in the fresh air deeply, sending shivery daggers into his mouth and lungs. ‘Now for it,’ he told himself, and propped the door open with one of the nearest garbage bags before grabbing

another and heading down the side of the building towards the rear parking area.

Randolph could easily have taken a bag in each hand as he made his garbage run, but he had been assigned this duty for the entire shift that morning and saw no reason to rush it. "Now look, Brian's not feeling well today," Loreen had told him when he arrived at eight that morning. "So you're going to be on garbage all day, ok? Whenever it slows down a bit, I want you to take out any garbage that hasn't been and then check the interior bins to see if they're full or not."

"What's wrong with Brian?" Randolph had asked.

"I'm not sure," Loreen began, "but he mentioned something about being voted most likely to be fed to the wolves." She had scowled and then looked at Randolph with an expectant air, like someone waiting for a translator to begin speaking.

"Oh, his class must be reading Plato's *Republic*," Randolph had said. "Why wasn't I scheduled to open like I usually do? I could've done the trash as soon as it got light out today."

"Ask Lucas, he makes the schedules," Loreen had responded. "Anyway, I'm counting on you, Randolph."

And so there he was, with bag one of what looked like about twenty in his hands, walking along the

side of the building and listening to the crunch of the dried snow under his feet. Rounding the building's back corner Randolph saw the dumpster sitting majestically where it usually did, a small windswept dune of snow resting across its base, its wheels encrusted in ice. 'Old bluey,' Randolph thought, remembering with affection all the times he had stood back there in the rear parking lot and watched the animals at play around the massive steel rectangle. They weren't bothered by human ideas like filth and stench, they simply smelled the opportunity for free food, and weren't too proud to scavenge for it. That humility always struck Randolph with a small sense of awe, and he hoped that should he ever fall on such unfortunate times that he had to rummage for food—say, in a disaster or something—that he wouldn't be too haughty to refrain from following their lead.

By the time he was on his fifth round-trip, Randolph noticed that the thick growth of bushes in the small wooded area behind the parking lot was rattling back and forth. 'Must be the wind,' he thought, but then noted that between their leafless branches he could see a flash of blue, then a spot of orange. 'What in the world is that?' he asked himself, and decided to move in for a closer look.

Dumping the bag of garbage that he had been carrying into the cavernous dumpster, he reached up and pulled its lid down, all the while staring at the movement in the bushes but pretending to be looking at what he was doing. From this vantage

point he could see that it was two people, lying side by side now, with a number of snow angel shapes around them. Curious, Randolph forgot about trying to be inconspicuous and walked directly over to where the two figures lay.

“Oh, the inside of your mouth is so warm,” Randolph heard a hauntingly familiar voice say as he approached. “And it smells like coffee, always coffee.”

“That’s because I just drank some coffee,” the other voice responded, and this too seemed all too familiar to Randolph.

“I want to suck on your tongue. I will suck all the coffee out of your taste buds and drink it down myself,” the first voice replied.

“Yes, Lucas, yes!” the second voice said excitedly.

‘Lucas? What the fuck?’ Randolph thought, and instinctively took a step back towards the store.

There was a flash of orange again, and then the blue rotated back into sight as the movement in the bushes increased once more. “Yesshh, yesshh, thuck on my thung!” the second voice garbled out.

‘Who would be dumb enough to try and talk while their tongue was being sucked?’ Randolph thought, now standing next to the dumpster again. “Dave!”

he yelled out inadvertently as it dawned on him who exactly was rolling around in the snow back there.

At the sound of his name Dave sat up abruptly and stared straight ahead at Randolph like a deer caught in headlights. He stood up quickly, and began wiping the saliva from his mouth, followed a moment later by Lucas, who too stood and brushed the snow from his Marmuck's blue coat, straightening it as he did so. Both men took a few steps away from each other and managed to simultaneously stare at Randolph and avoid his gaze altogether.

After a very long and very awkward silence, it was Lucas who finally spoke first. "We were just, uhh, inspecting the parking lot, you see. Everything must be in perfectly proper order. It appears that these bushes are somewhat improper. Mangled. Mangledly improper and this cannot be tolerated." He paused a moment, then sighed and finally met Randolph's eyes. "Look, Randolph, this does not need to be repeated to anyone at work. It might look somewhat—inappropriate. Marmuck's rules state that any non-business relationship between members of management must be reported to Corporate before said relationship is allowed to blossom."

"Yeah, you homofeeb!" Dave called out, now brushing the snow from his own puffy orange coat. "Don't discriminate against us!"

Randolph started to say something, then stopped and opened the lid to the dumpster. He took a long look inside the vast metal crate, and then turned back to Lucas and Dave, who were still standing apart from each other and watching him anxiously. "I don't know what to say guys," Randolph began, holding his hands out and shrugging his shoulders. "I really don't care what you do, I'm just taking the garbage out."

"Thank you," Lucas said and exhaled deeply. "And do not worry, we will of course inform Corporate of our status." He took a few steps towards Dave and smiled up at the much taller man.

Dave, however, had his familiar expression of deep confusion etched all over his face. He looked down at Lucas smiling at him, then over at Randolph, who was now shifting some of the garbage bags inside the dumpster to make room for the rest of the load. Something didn't sit quite right with him, and he expressed it by yelling angrily, "You homofeeb! We're special! Don't you dare hate us!" Picking up a handful of snow, he packed it together into a baseball-sized snowball and threw it squarely at Randolph's back as he hung half-inside, half-outside the bright blue dumpster.

"Hey!" Randolph said, his voice echoing off the steel interior. "What are you doing?" He slid back down to the ground and turned to face Dave. "I don't care, okay? Plenty of people are gay, that doesn't make you guys special or even worth

talking about. And anyway, everyone's known about you two for months. It's no big deal."

The confusion deepened on Dave's face as the anger melted out of him. "What do you mean we're not special?" he asked meekly.

Randolph shrugged and then returned to adjusting the garbage bags in the dumpster. "Like I said, plenty of people are gay. To me, it's just another aspect of normalcy. I like women, you like men, who cares?"

"But what if I also like the ladies?" Dave continued, a glimmer of hope in his voice. "Does that make me special?"

"Sorry, Dave," Randolph called from inside the dumpster again. "But there are plenty of people like that, too. The term is bisexual."

Forgetting all about Lucas, who was frowning deeply at Dave's side, Dave took a few steps towards the dumpster and queried, "Well, what if I'm a bothsexual and I also like lizards?"

Randolph chuckled a little to himself and said, "Now that *would* make you special."

"Wooh!" Dave called out in triumph, pumping both his fists in the air. "Because I do like the lizards!" He turned back to Lucas joyfully, and then finally noticing how upset his lover looked, he

quickly, and tenderly, added, "But not as much as I like you, Lucas."

18. Malcontents

“Join the Brown Baggers Party!
Fighting today for your
freedom now!”

Randolph blinked and read the sign again. It was nearly 5:30 in the morning and he could barely see the flier posted on Marmuck's' front door, granted, but he was sure that there was something amiss with its wording. He shifted his body to the left to allow more of the light from the streetlamps on the corner of Staleworth Parkway and Mantonian Avenue to shine on the paper taped to the door and read it again in its entirety:

“Are you sick and tired of politics as usual? Ready for a brand new change? Ready for a return to the good old days? Then join us at our BIG meeting in the Convention Center downtown Friday! We'll show those fat cats in government what the people can do! One-day membership is just \$35!

Join the Brown Baggers Party!
Fighting today for your
freedom now!"

More tape on the bottom held a large brown paper bag affixed to the flier, but that made about as much sense as the rest of it. Randolph decided to try and figure it out later; it was always difficult for him to think that early in the morning, and anyway Loreen was sure to arrive soon and unlock the door so that he could begin his opening duties: brewing an urn of coffee, warming up the espresso machine, and of course arranging the display case with the day's pastries. There was enough on his mind already, Randolph thought.

A minute or two later a car pulled into the parking lot and honked a brief greeting at Randolph before parking in the rear near the bright blue dumpster. Loreen came striding up a moment or two after that, juggling the store keys and her car keys in one hand while holding a large tumbler in the other. "Get that coffee brewed quickly, Randolph," she said, positioning a brass-colored key into the lock, "it's cold as all get out today and I need a pick-me-up." She stopped suddenly as she read the flier posted on the door in front of her face, directly at eye level. "Lucas isn't going to like this," she continued. "Take that down and put it in the back room, please." She pushed the door open and then hurried to the back to switch off the automatic alarm system, leaving Randolph to turn on the interior lights and begin his normal rounds.

Twenty-six minutes later, at exactly 5:58 a.m., a rotund middle-aged woman in a red overcoat began beating on the door excitedly. “Cofffeeeee!” she screamed as she pounded her mittened fists on the door, the long braids on either side of her Nordic winter hat swinging wildly in some kind of primal rhythm.

‘Ahh, Deborah,’ Randolph thought. ‘Wouldn’t be a morning shift without her.’ He walked over to the far end of the work area, exited through the swinging door, and headed to the front to let her in. “Good morning, Deborah! Beautiful weather today, don’t you think?” Randolph said, beaming a cheesy grin at her.

“What weather?” Deborah retorted. “Do you have my coffee or don’t you?”

“Let’s see... a medium mocha, right?” Randolph asked, knowing full well that that wasn’t Deborah’s usual.

“NO!” she bellowed, taking off a mitten and throwing it to the ground. “I want a medium brew coffee with just a tad of hot water. A tad!” She threw her other mitten to the ground in emphasis then immediately bent over and picked both of them up.

“Won’t take a moment,” Randolph said, and returned to his station behind the cash register

before quickly placing a cardboard sleeve around a medium-sized cup and filling it seven-eighths of the way with brewed coffee, and then finally adding a touch of hot water from the tap on the espresso machine. He placed a lid on top and handed the drink over to Deborah before punching in his employee code on the register's computer screen and totaling the purchase. Before he had even spoken the words, however, Deborah had the exact change counted out and placed on the counter next to where Randolph had set her drink.

"There you go," she said, pointing to the money. "You know, I've been wearing these mittens on purpose just so you remember me. Try and remember my drink, too. I want it ready before I even get here."

"Won't that cool the drink down?" Randolph asked, scooping the money into his hand before separating the coins into their respective bins in the till. He noticed that once again she hadn't tipped.

"Not if you add a tad of hot water!" Deborah insisted. She took her drink and waddled over to one of the deeply cushioned easy chairs near the windows, settling contentedly into it before rooting around in her purse and producing a number of fliers and brown paper bags. Over the course of the next few minutes she carefully affixed a paper bag to the bottom of each flier and then, pulling herself up heavily from the depths of the chair, she set about placing one on each table in the store before

leaving the rest in a pile on top of the newspapers stacked near the front door.

While she was doing all this Randolph watched with a bemused smile. He knew that Loreen would insist on all of the fliers being removed, of course, and was pleasantly awaiting what was sure to be an outraged reaction from Deborah. He didn't have to wait long; about five minutes after Deborah had finished her rounds and returned to her throne near the window, Loreen came out of the back room with the second, third, and fourth cash drawers carefully piled in her arms. She took one look at the fliers placed carefully in the center of each table and furrowed her brows noticeably. Swinging around into the work area she placed the drawers in their appropriate slots in the cash registers and then saddled up next to Randolph and whispered in his ear, "Just what is all of that crap on the tables?"

"More fliers like the one on the door, by the looks of them," Randolph whispered back, trying to hold down a laugh as he spoke. "And Deborah was kind enough to also place a big stack on top of the newspaper rack."

Loreen sighed and said, "Okay, look. I'll deal with Deborah and you clean up all the fliers. Just leave them in a pile in the back with the one you took off the door. I'm sure Lucas will want to see everything." She plastered on her most peaceful smile and moved around to stand in front of where Deborah was now quietly enjoying her morning

coffee. "Deborah, good morning. I'm Loreen, the shift supervisor, as you know," she began.

"I know who you are!" Deborah interrupted, keeping her eyes squarely on the drink in her hands.

"Good," Loreen said, careful to keep her voice conciliatory. "And you probably also know then that Marmuck's doesn't allow any kind of social, political, or religious material to be distributed anywhere within its stores' premises." She gave Deborah a small smile and waited a moment before adding, "And so Randolph here will now clean these up and place them in the back. Just store policy, you see. Marmuck's Corporation is of course strictly neutral in all these matters."

"Well what about freedom literature?" Deborah snarled, still avoiding looking at Loreen.

"That too, I'm afraid," Loreen said sweetly.

"What about my rights? I have free speech in this country, you know!" Deborah shot back, aiming her words into the lid of her coffee.

"You certainly do, and that's wonderful," Loreen said. "But you can't distribute any written material in here, and you know that your free speech and leaving leaflets around are two different things—completely."

“Well, freedom isn’t different!” Deborah said angrily and heaved herself onto her feet once more. “And I won’t stand for having my rights trampled on! Good day to you, Loreen, good day to you FOREVER!” She angrily slammed her knit hat back onto her head, threw herself into her red overcoat, shoved her hands into her mittens, grabbed her drink and headed for the front door. “See you tomorrow!” she yelled on her way out.

Finally able to express his own free speech Randolph burst out laughing and then walked into the seating section of Marmuck’s to gather up the fliers. Loreen simply sighed and headed back behind the counter to check the temperature on the brewed coffee urn and weigh out a few more filters full of ground beans for the rest of the morning.

As he gathered up the papers from the tables and newspaper rack, Randolph took the time to read each one. It appeared that there were three different types of fliers, each with a unique message from the Brown Baggers Party. One of the fliers read like the one that had been on the door earlier that morning, and the other two went like this:

“The Brown Baggers Party cares about you! We care about what happens to you and what happens to your money. We’re committed to fighting those ridiculous taxes you always have to pay for all those

services you don't need. We want YOU to keep YOUR money! Join us downtown at the Convention Center for our BIG meeting Friday! One-day membership is just \$35!

Join the Brown Baggers Party!
Fighting today for your freedom now!"

"At the Brown Baggers we're against everything you're against! We're mad as heck and we're not going to take it anymore! And neither should you! If we all join together we can really show them who we are and what we want. And you know what we want—it's the same as what you want! Join us downtown Friday at the Convention Center! One-day membership is just \$35!

Join the Brown Baggers Party!
Fighting today for your freedom now!"

After reading the group's other two fliers Randolph knew no more about the point of the whole thing than he had after the first one. But whatever the

Brown Bagger's platform was or wasn't, they certainly seemed determined to make a lot of noise. Which he was sure would be fine with Lucas, just as long as the noise wasn't made inside a Marmuck's. Still, there was something odd about the apparently groundless anger of the group; not quite odd enough to prick Randolph's curiosity to the point that he wanted to head downtown for their meeting Friday, but enough that it gnawed slightly at the back of his head.

As Randolph made his way home that day, squinting his eyes against the bright afternoon sun reflecting off the blanket of white that covered the landscape, he was still wondering just what the Brown Baggers were all about. Walking along Mantonian Avenue he happened to spot another of their signs plastered onto a streetlamp and decided to investigate. Nearing it, he could see that the content of the flier was the same as one of those that Deborah had distributed at Marmuck's that morning—the money one, in fact—but also that the brown paper bag taped to the bottom appeared to have something in it this time. Stepping across the piled snow to get closer to the streetlamp, he opened up the paper bag a bit wider than it already was and peered inside. After a reflexive step back, Randolph forced himself to look down at the contents again and confirm that it was what he thought it was: a large pile of vomit, frozen solid by the subzero temperatures. 'And it looks like he had tacos.'

Randolph thought, wrinkling his eyebrows in disgust. 'Wonder if anyone's mad as heck about that?' Turning away, he walked back to the sidewalk and continued his commute home, sniffing a little against the bitter cold.

19. Post

“I’ve got a pizza delivery for a Mr. Smellydorkheadwhoisalsostinky.” The young man squinted his eyes as he read the delivery slip he was holding again to himself. Shrugging his shoulders he looked around the room expectantly, keeping the pizza level in its heavily insulated bag.

After a long silence a man sitting at one of the back tables glanced up from his laptop’s screen and said, “Yeah, that’s me, bring it back over here.”

“You’re Mr. Smellydorkheadwhoisalsostinky?” the pizza deliverer asked.

“I am now,” the man responded.

“Well, okay, that’ll be eight bucks,” he said and walked across the room to give the man his pizza.

“Here’s ten,” the man said, handing him a bill. “Keep the change.”

“Thanks!” the deliverer said, and strolled out the door.

‘Weird,’ Randolph thought to himself, ‘but I’ll let Dave deal with that, I hate telling customers the rules.’ He was standing at the back corner of the

Marmuck's work area where the most counter space was and was busily pouring out caramel from the storage tubes into the smaller dispenser tubes. He was trying to remember the exact tube-to-tube ratio to expedite the process and didn't want to have to interrupt himself to remind a customer yet again that no outside food or drink was allowed. Transferring the caramel from its storage tubes to the dispensers was an extremely important job to Randolph, and one that he insisted on doing himself whenever possible. Left to others, the store tended to end up with a number of dispenser tubes that gave one's hands a sticky residue after use and required more extensive washing when emptied. 'That's it! 2.14 to 1!' Randolph recalled excitedly as he heard the door open again. Glancing up just briefly enough to see if it was a customer or not, Randolph saw another delivery person, this time a young woman dressed in a dark blue uniform that almost matched his own Marmuck's apron. She was carrying what looked like a large tray in a paper bag.

"I've got some take-out from Newer Beijing Express here," she called out loudly. "Sweet and sour chicken with a side of rice?" She looked this way and that, trying to catch each Marmuck's patron's eyes as she repeated herself, "Sweet and sour chicken here. C'mon guys, I've got three other orders in my car." When no one responded she let out a frustrated groan and read from the order stapled to the paper bag, "Okay, look, I've got sweet and sour chicken with a side of rice for the short, skinny guy with a bad haircut."

Randolph reluctantly raised the storage tube he was pouring from to an angle high enough to stop the magma-like flow of caramel and said across the room, "That sounds like Brian, but he's not working today. Who called the order in?"

"I have no idea!" the deliverer fumed. "Do you want this food or no?"

"No, sorry," Randolph said as he returned his focus to the caramel. "And customers can't have outside food or drink in here anyway, so please don't try and sell it to anyone else."

The woman grunted angrily and pushed her way back through the front door, letting in a strong gust of frozen air that reached all the way to the back and sent a shiver down Randolph's spine. He glanced over to see how the man who had ordered the pizza reacted to his statement about outside food and noticed that he was now trying to hide behind his laptop's screen and hurriedly wolf down the rest of his 'za.

The trick to filling the caramel dispensers, Randolph knew, was to get the timing exactly right. If you didn't have the caramel flowing out of its storage tube at the correct rate, and this of course also involved the angle at which the storage tube was being held, then you wouldn't be able to stop the caramel's momentum just at the point where it reached the maximum fill line in the dispenser tube.

He had worked it out some time ago, right around the point where he realized that 2.14 tubes was one tube, and was now nearly finished with another perfect caramel dispenser.

“One large bouquet of flowers here!” a deep male voice suddenly blared, jarring Randolph’s concentration and causing him to inadvertently tip the storage tube down and accelerate the caramel flow, leaving a sticky mess on the side of the dispenser tube and counter. ‘Damn it!’ he cursed inwardly, ‘Something else to clean up.’

“Looks like, uh, some kind of yellow flowers mixed with white...roses? And also some kind of frilly green things tossed in,” the latest delivery person continued. “Anyway, flowers here! For one Mr. Kindafatguywithshaggyhair,” the man’s voice trailed off as he read the name out loud. He looked a little confused and then continued, “From someone named That Guy’s Mother?”

Randolph took a deep breath and let it out slowly to calm himself as he tipped the tube upright again and the caramel sludge made its way deeper into the storage tube. Setting it down on the counter he yelled curtly, “One moment, please,” and walked over to the back door. He punched the combination into the door lock quickly and forcefully, opened the door, and called, “Hey, Dave! I think your mother sent you some flowers.” He let the door close under its own weight and headed back to the corner to continue the task at hand as he thought,

‘Though I have no idea why she wouldn’t use your name.’

Dave came out of the back room a moment later, walked briskly up to the deliverer holding the flowers, took one look at the bouquet, and declared, “My mother hates flowers. These aren’t for me.” He then turned on his right heel and walked just as briskly back to the rear of the store, remarking, “No outside food or drink,” to the man just finishing his pizza as he returned to the back room.

It had all happened so quickly that the flower deliverer was still standing there motionless near the front door, the confusion on his face slowly being replaced by irritation.

“You heard the man,” Randolph called without looking up. “Must’ve been some kind of prank.”

“Assholes!” the man muttered to himself as he headed out the door, squeezing the bouquet slightly out of shape with his left hand in frustration.

‘Alright, tubes, time to be emptied,’ Randolph thought, looking down at the remaining one and three-quarter’s storage tubes and the four empty dispenser tubes. ‘And time for you others to be filled.’ He was glad that he had chosen to do this on a weekday mid-morning. Aside from the pizza guy there was only one other customer in the store, and the relative quiet was likely to remain for another hour or so until the lunchtime crowd came in. ‘What

I need now is pure concentration,' Randolph told himself, picking up the opened storage tube and carefully, very carefully, moving it above one of the empty dispenser tubes and angling it down incrementally until the thick golden brown liquid inside had achieved the perfect flow rate.

“Singing telegram for the manager!” a middle-aged man burst into Marmuck's and announced suddenly, causing Randolph's hands to once again jolt forward and sending more of the rich goo onto the countertop. ‘For fuck's sake!’ he thought. He turned angrily towards the man warming up his voice and waiting excitedly for the object of his song to present himself. “He's not here today!” Randolph said tersely, his voice taking on a hard edge.

“Well, who should I sing for, then? I'm all ready!” the man replied happily. He was dressed in a white jumpsuit covered in brightly colored polka dots of blue, pink, and green, and the neon red triangular hat on his head stood up sharply, mounted by a fuzzy white ball of yarn.

“Why don't you sing for yourself in your car on the way back to your company?” Randolph said with an uncharacteristic flare of nastiness. “No one here wants to hear it.”

While the man slinked back out of Marmuck's, his shoulders drooped low, Randolph reached down and took a thin white towel out of one of the bottom drawers. He wet the towel in the sink next to the

coffee urns and then started to mop up the spilled caramel from the counter, wiping down the side of the dispenser tube that he had sullied earlier as well. Once that was finished, he was finally ready to begin the tube to tube transfer process again and meticulously picked up the storage tube he had been using, cautious not to let any of its precious contents drip out of the open end.

“Candy-gram here!” Another young woman boomed majestically as she swung the door to Marmuck’s open and presented a sliver tray with a single heart-shaped candy in its center. “A candy-gram of love for the, uh...” her voice faltered as she searched the card in her hand for the recipient’s name. “For the really cute girl that works at Marmuck’s!” she declared triumphantly.

“Oh, that is it!” Randolph burst out, throwing the caramel storage tube violently onto the countertop and sending its theretofore carefully guarded contents bursting out the end in a single glop. He stormed out from the work area and marched to the front door, pushing by the shocked deliverer as he did so. Stepping squarely into the wall of cold that greeted him outdoors, he narrowed his eyes and headed directly for Moose’s.

20. Fin

“Another day, another dollar, eh Stan?” Randolph said as he put on his sheepskin coat and slid into his boots. There was no response from Stan, but then Randolph hadn't really expected one. His bird had always had the good sense to stay obstinately asleep until the sun came up. He opened his front door and stepped out into the hallway, thinking about how much the invention of the clock had changed the way people lived. Turning to his right, he headed out the building's back entrance and into the parking lot, opting that morning to walk to work along the quiet neighborhood roads that ran parallel to Mantonian Avenue. He paused to take his stocking cap and gloves out of his coat pocket; Randolph disliked wearing his hat, despite its warmth, as it tended to leave his hair matted and flat for the rest of the day, but when it was twenty degrees below zero outside there was little choice in the matter. Even as brief as his morning commute was, leaving skin exposed, especially the thin layers on top of the ears, was at worst a recipe for frostbite and at best an invitation to a lingering pain when he got back indoors and the sudden warmth started the blood coursing at its usual rate again. Rubbing his hands together and exhaling deeply, Randolph watched his misty breath hang thickly in the frozen air like the dust clouds of distant galaxies for a few seconds before he began the familiar walk south.

Nothing stirred in Sornsville at a quarter past five in the morning, and as Randolph crunched his way over the packed snow on the quiet city streets he thought again how the dead winter air enveloped his world in a kind of freezer-like still, a calming, all-pervasive embrace like death itself. No wonder the ancients, almost without regard to culture, all had mid-winter celebrations that focused on the re-birth of the world, when their environments sprang to life again as if returning from the grave. Many of these celebrations had since been circumvented, of course, and Randolph's own now revolved around the seasonal eggnog latte—a bizarre concoction that never sold well but at least provided some entertainment for the staff by giving them a new drink to make, and had the further benefit of filling Marmuck's with the unique scent of steamed 'nog.

There was no 'nog in the air that morning yet, though; indeed, there was hardly any scent at all except for the tiny hint of moisture created in Randolph's nostrils as the pure cold he was breathing in mixed with the internal warmth of his body. He set his brain to neutral and turned to his left, crossing along a side street that seemed to have been transported directly from some giant glass snow globe to his city. The houses, all lined up squarely with front yards of equal dimensions that were cut through evenly by the cement sidewalk, were covered in soft white layers of snow that glittered quietly in the light from the streetlamps. It would be another two hours or so before the sun

made its laborious way over the horizon, but that sparkle would lose its current glow, Randolph knew, as soon as the inhabitants of those homes awoke and began turning on their bedroom and kitchen lights. This world, now, belonged only to him, and were it not quite so cold Randolph would have paused to appreciate it.

He arrived at the jeweler's on the corner of Staleworth Parkway and looked at the posters advertising diamonds, love, and happiness in its windows as he waited for the traffic light to change and the 'walk' signal to light up. There was no traffic at this time of day, of course, and Randolph could easily have just marched across the broad four-lane street with scarcely a glance in either direction, but he always had a nagging paranoia that he would do so one day and be stopped and ticketed by some bored police officer on an overnight patrol, and so he waited. The round garbage can next to the thick steel pole of the traffic light was almost full, its contents covered in a thin sprinkling of snow that had fallen at some point in the night, giving the paper cup, condom wrapper, and old newspaper on top a strange sense of tranquility that no doubt belied the manner in which they had been disposed of. Randolph sighed and looked at the signal on the opposite side of the street, tucking his gloved hands momentarily into his armpits as he waited.

The light changed and Randolph crossed over. Approaching Marmuck's slightly from the east, he cut across the front parking lot and headed for the

main entrance, noting that the metal picnic tables on the sidewalk in front of Moose's had the same dusting of snow that the garbage can had. He didn't see Loreen's car in the back lot as he walked, but that didn't really surprise him as she typically arrived a minute or two after he did, careening quickly into the parking lot full of boisterous excuses for why she was late that morning, with the odd work-related request always mingled in amongst them.

And so once more he waited, his hands again tucked into his armpits, shifting his weight back and forth on his legs as his lack of motion allowed the cold to settle more deeply into his bones than it had as he walked. From his vantage point in front of Marmuck's he had a clear view of the broad swath Staleworth Parkway cut into the landscape. To the west he knew the street made its way down a long, gentle slope to the river, passing by the pickup truck factory whose location had been chosen all those years ago precisely because of its proximity to the river and ease of shipping that that allowed. To the east Staleworth continued its gentle slope, but climbing this time, up to the round summit that supported the old water tower built to resemble a European castle of yesteryear, the proud symbol of the entire Blightland neighborhood.

The time ticked away very slowly in the frozen air, and Randolph was beginning to worry as he finally heard the familiar rumble of an engine and the screech of tires making too sharp a turn at too high

a speed that always signaled Loreen's arrival. A smile spread across Randolph's face as he saw her come bounding up to the front door, juggling the store's keys, her large black tote bag, and a coffee tumbler in her hands.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Randolph!" Loreen said emphatically. "You must be freezing! Come on, let's get you inside, you poor thing. My alarm didn't ring, you know, the batteries must have died or something, but luckily I woke up anyway only a few minutes late. And then, well, you know how icy windshields get in weather like this, so I had to scrape all that off—oh, don't forget to count how many eggnog containers there are in the front refrigerator, we might need to order more and I'll have to do that before our shift ends." She paused and turned the brass-colored key in the lock, and then the two of them stepped into the timed warmth of their Marmuck's coffee shop.

About the author:

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