

# KRIS ST. GABRIEL



Includes  
THE HARVARD  
SKULL FIASCO  
and  
RISE OF THE  
BLUE BANDICOOT

# the blue bandicoot

SAGA

xx SPECIAL OMNIBUS EDITION xx

# the blue bandicoot saga

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about kris st.gabriel

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Cover design by Kris St.Gabriel.

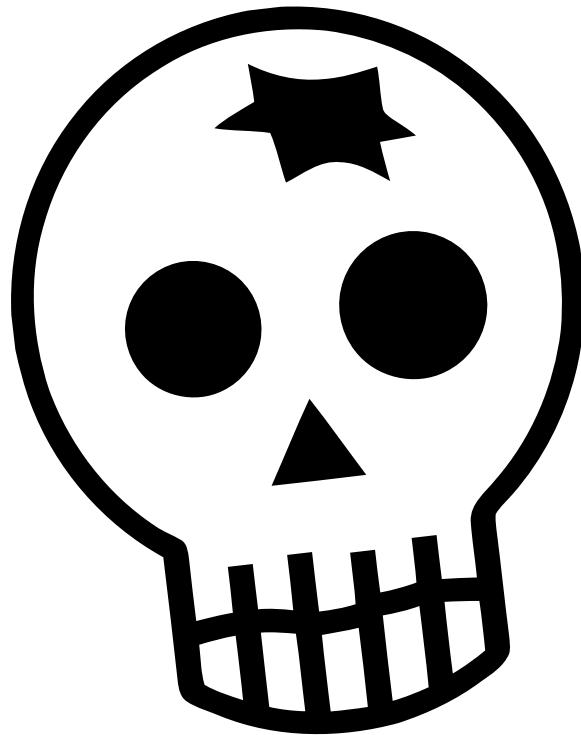
# **The Blue Bandicoot Saga**

by Kris St.Gabriel

For librarians everywhere, for fighting the good fight.

## PART 1

# The Harvard Skull Fiasco



“This world is full of the most outrageous nonsense. Sometimes things happen which you would hardly think possible.”

— Nikolai Gogol, *The Nose*

# a terrible misunderstanding

At ten in the morning on Wednesday the 23rd of December I walked into the library at Harvard Medical School expecting to be arrested at any moment. I remember it vividly. For hours the night before I had rehearsed ‘innocent looks’ in front of a mirror while my dog, Gertrude, looked on with pity.

It was an impressive performance. If they handed out awards for *The Most Perfect Impersonation of a Man Who Had Not, Two Days Earlier, Stolen the Skull of Phineas Gage from a Museum in the Same Building*, then my portrayal was an act for the ages.

Tragically, the foyer was empty. I paused in the middle of the atrium and looked around in a casual sort of way. My heart hammered treacherously, so loudly it might have echoed off the dull beige walls.

Now, it is worthwhile noting that a swarm of fanatically violent policemen did not, in this moment, smash through the skylight in a rain of shattered glass and bullets. That’s what I expected to happen. I stared upwards into the silent atrium, waiting for a dozen gendarmes to descend like corpulent beetles on a string, but I waited in vain.

Then I looked over at the Circulation Desk; nobody burst out from behind brandishing guns and rocket launchers. Everything was stillness and tranquility. Were it not for the fact that I was in a large concrete building in the middle of winter then crickets would definitely be chirping. Believe me, this was precisely the situation for which crickets practically live.

I turned around slowly, prepared to sink to my knees with my hands on my head – a gesture that has been known to make American police a little less

inclined to shoot people. It was all very eerie, really. The security guard over by the entrance stared at his crossword and muttered curse words in Estonian. I could hear a distant vacuum cleaner and someone coughing in a cubicle somewhere. Otherwise, apart from my moment of panic, not much seemed to be going on in the Countway Library of Medicine this morning.

*Ha, I thought to myself after a long pause. I am totally going to get away with this.*

I had taken only two steps in the direction of the elevator when I realized that a battalion of cops was probably hiding outside my office, armed to the tusks with clubs and pistols, ready to riddle me with justice the moment I rounded the corner.

I paused again to reconsider. Where should I go? Back through the glass doors outside? I don't want to sound paranoid, but somehow the idea didn't seem sound. Although I hadn't noticed any snipers on the roof, I'd sure feel silly if I were shot.

Recall that on Monday I had walked off with one of Harvard's most prized possessions; it was sensible of me to feel a little tense. On Tuesday – I don't remember what I did on Tuesday, I think I was in meetings around campus all day and somehow managed to avoid the library altogether. But today? Well, I couldn't postpone it any longer. I had to return to the scene of the crime.

My biggest problem was that in the course of planning the heist I had, by my count, mentioned it to approximately thirty-seven librarians. I'd taken the precaution of swearing them each to secrecy, of course, but not everybody is as discreet as me, so I don't know.

The other issue is my nationality. I'm embarrassed to even have to say this, but even in these progressive times certain Americans still maintain some fanciful notions about Australians. Something about us inheriting, by way of our colonial history as a penal settlement, a vague and ill-defined tendency to

commit criminal acts. I detest any generalization based on nationality and never do it myself, but I suppose we should all be philosophical when dealing with people descended from Puritans.

Note that less than a week ago everything had been fine on all fronts. And now a skull was missing, and they were all wondering which fool had let the Australian into the building.

It stung a little. I like Americans overall but having to contend with childish stereotypes like these had made me wonder if I should just clear off home to Thargomindah and be done with it all. Perhaps I err on the side of optimism, but I'd decided, somehow, to give them one more chance. Besides, there was nothing left for me in Thargomindah anymore. Just painful memories and a couple of irritating police constables wanting to have a word about a missing forklift.

*Now stop and think, I told myself. What is the last thing my adversaries would expect me to do?*

The answer was obvious. I turned right, proceeded past the Circulation Desk, and through the little gate marked 'Staff Only.' Nobody would expect me to stop by Wendell's office; it was reckless, bordering on lunacy. After all, Wendell was coordinating the library's so-called 'Recovery Committee,' a secret task force charged with retrieving the skull from my possession. I wasn't supposed to know about that, of course, but there are lots of things I'm not supposed to know, Wendell's email password being only one.

Then again, I *am* the library's IT Guy. In my profession, there is always one tricky client you have to keep your eye on – and for me that client is Wendell.

As an aside, what kind of librarian chooses 'Library01' to be their password, anyway? The answer to this question lay on the other side of the door in front of me. And, because I had stolen the skull of Phineas Gage, this was the exact door upon which I should not, under any circumstances, knock. Still, the look on his

face when he opened it made the whole lark worthwhile.

“Hullo Shea,” he said, wide-eyed and dumbstruck.

“I don’t like you,” I told him, pushing past him and settling into the armchair across from his desk.

“Why don’t you like me?”

Well, look – this is embarrassing, but unfortunately I suffer from Pathological Problems With Authority. I can’t explain that to Wendell, of course; Wendell is a middle manager, and my disorder more or less prevents me from conveying useful information to managers.

“I can’t explain it to you,” I told him, shrugging. “All I can say is that my reasons are very complex and nuanced. Though it might be because I have Pathological Problems With Authority and you’re a manager.”

Then I pressed my fingers to my temples and winced in spite of myself.

Wendell is a thirtyish-year-old African-American with the genial but slightly harried air of a man far busier than he actually is. I have never seen the Circulation Desk manager occupied with anything that you or I might consider actual work. I suppose this is why he feels compelled to turn up to work in a suit or, at the very least, collared shirt and vest. Nobody knows why, but Wendell wears horned-rim glasses which make him look like an undergraduate from the 1940s. There was nothing wrong with his eyesight; the lenses had no refraction and he often forgot to put them on, but he wore them just the same. Even if I *didn’t* have Pathological Problems With Authority those glasses would still annoy me. In short, everything about Wendell is so sensible and pro-establishment that some days I can’t even look at him without feeling itchy.

“I know you have authority issues,” he said. “Listen, how long have you worked here now?”

“Eight months, give or take.”

“Then we’ve been having lunch together almost every single day for eight

months.”

“So?” I replied cagily. “I enjoy our conversations. Just because you’re middle management scum doesn’t mean we can’t be pleasant to one another.”

“Oh, of course,” he remembered, untucking his necktie from his vest and squinting at it. “You always get tense at me when I wear a tie.”

I shook my head in vigorous denial.

“Yes,” I said, then flinched and massaged my temple lightly. “And the reason for that is simple –”

“My neckties,” he recited, “seem to confirm your suspicion that I am an unsound person, to be either avoided or at best, antagonized.”

I gazed at him for a while, feeling the itch return. “Wendell, if I’ve ever repeated myself it is only because I like to be consistent in what I say.”

“Well I happen to like my ties,” he grumbled obstinately. “The ladies at the second-hand store where I buy them all say I have impeccable taste.”

I offered what I hoped was a polite grimace.

“Everything that is wrong with the world has been wrought by men wearing neckties. It is the uniform of oppression.”

“And I look good in ties. That’s what bothers you, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s the fact that you’re wearing that travesty when it’s not even required by Harvard’s dress-code.”

“Let us pause for a moment to enjoy the pleasant irony of *you* lecturing anybody about the Harvard dress-code.”

Exasperating, isn’t he? For some perverse reason or other Wendell doesn’t understand that dress codes don’t apply to me. I think he might have been harboring some resentfulness about it, actually. I am a member of a professional caste that people generally expect to dress shabbily. It is a tradition that symbolizes our exceptional importance.

“I work in IT,” I reminded him for the thousandth time. “This is our uniform.”

“Your cargo pants have grease stains on them,” he observed dispassionately. “And that t-shirt under your sweater? I know for a fact you wore that t-shirt yesterday.”

“I like this t-shirt,” I justified reasonably.

“And, as for that gray sweater, I also happen to know that you removed it from Lost and Found two months ago. I was there. I watched you do it.”

“It got cold two months ago. We Australians feel the cold, Wendell. Do you think I would have stolen this sweater from Lost and Found if it wasn’t cold?”

“It looks like it was a summer home for an entire generation of moths. Happy, well-nourished moths.”

I’ll admit I had shaken the occasional moth out of the sweater. Never with malice but with a sense of camaraderie for the little creatures. My people don’t call them sweaters, by the way, they’re jumpers, and this was the first I think I’d ever owned. I was very fond of it, holes and all.

But Wendell was wrong to imply I dressed carelessly. I was an employee of Harvard Medical School’s Central IT department, and we rarely did anything without a good reason. We liked to show up to work a little unkempt because it implied that we were too preoccupied with the esoteric to bother with the sartorial. Dressing shabbily reminds everybody of our particular importance. Or, to put it another way, my ‘sweater’ implied a threateningly high level of technical competence. It also recommended that everybody had, therefore, better be nice to me *or I wouldn’t fix their computers.*

“People like myself,” I said to Wendell, “don’t believe in dress codes.”

“But you don’t mind enforcing one on me.”

“It’s completely different. There are principles at stake. For generations, men dreamed of not being required to wear ties. Men once stood and died on blood-stained barricades for the right not to wear a tie, and here you are, brazenly

spitting on their legacy. And for what? For the chance that some higher-up spots you in the elevator and makes a note of it in some large, leather-bound ledger. Thursday,” I said, pantomiming the writing in a diary. “Rainstorms. Had tea with U.S. Attorney General. Young Wendell wore a tie again. Clearly a serious-minded individual. Let’s promote him to senior management at our earliest convenience....”

Wendell received my mockery with a wry smile. “Oh, come on, you know Harvard only awards promotions based on merit.”

I know it is wrong to snicker, but we snickered anyway. And, for the record, he snickered first. He’s a snickerer, that Wendell. Take it from me – I am sufficiently comfortable in myself to be able to admit other people’s flaws.

“Well, this has been nice,” he said, moving around his desk and settling into his office chair. “But I’m going to have to excuse myself. I’m very busy today.”

I stared at him expectantly.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said at last. “You were being serious.”

“Yes. What’s wrong with that?”

“Shhh, Wendell. I’m trying to imagine you being busy. It requires a great deal of imagination and focus...”

“I’m often busy!”

“Don’t do that. Don’t spoil a successful joke with hyperbole.”

“I am serious, Shea,” he said, eyeing me closely. “I’m not authorized to talk about this with you, but there’s a kerfuffle that needs dealing with.”

“You mean that business with the skull?” I asked with well-practiced innocence. “Word around the library is that it’s a hullabaloo.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Is that what they’re saying now? What a lot of nonsense,” he muttered disgustedly. “The librarians wouldn’t know a ruckus from a fracas.”

“Still, a hullabaloo is no laughing matter.”

“As I said before,” he said, a little tersely, and staring over the tops of his glasses, “it’s only a kerfuffle, and we’re keeping it contained. Fortunately, the Director has stayed out of it so far, but I don’t know how much longer that will be the case. If the Director gets involved, it’ll be a rumpus by nightfall. Or even worse, a brouhaha.”

“You know, if you’re not careful, Wendell, you might have a fiasco on your hands.”

“It won’t become a fiasco! Trust me, we’ve got this well-and-truly in hand. Besides, the skull isn’t even officially missing yet. Which is a good thing, really, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to talk about it openly.”

Of course, Harvard hadn’t formally acknowledged the theft. Wendell probably assumed that the Dean’s Office had been unnecessarily vague about the entire affair, but it was more likely that they were trying to postpone communication with the library for as long as possible.

Let us be perfectly clear. The Dean’s Office at Harvard Medical School has never, in any official capacity, described its relationship with the library as *vexed*. And it has not gone on record that they think the librarians are “a bunch of wild-eyed agitators who will one day get their just-desserts, oh just you wait and see.”

On a separate topic, it’s funny the way people often assume their IT guys are too busy working on a computer to listen to anything being said around them. Even more remarkable is this widely held assumption that we’re not passing interesting information among ourselves. Poor Wendell here was well connected at Harvard in some respects, but he could only ever see as far as the windows of the library. My situation was very different.

Even though my office was in the library, officially I was an employee of the illustrious Central IT department on the far side of the campus. I was embedded

here as the library's resident 'IT Specialist' – a vague title that carried with it an air of mystical interpretation that could be very useful at times. As a member of Central IT, I was connected to a spy network comprised of thirty or so similarly-named 'IT Specialists' in departments all over the campus.

Unfortunately for Wendell, even though the Dean's Office and the Countway Library of Medicine are housed in adjacent buildings, they were barely on speaking terms. Their respective outlooks are just so different, I suppose. To appreciate the differences between them, all you have to do is contrast each organization's attitude towards ghosts. Let me explain.

When the skull of Phineas Gage disappeared, nobody knew until the next morning because the security guards hadn't patrolled the library's upper floors the night before. In fact, they hadn't patrolled the library after hours in years, owing to all the 'weird ju-jus' up there.

The librarians had never minded, of course. They knew all about the 'supernatural wildlife,' as some referred to it, but were of the view that it provided the building with an interesting ambiance. They are fair-minded folk, the librarians, and it didn't sit well with them that the security guards had to wander about upstairs, late at night, dealing with all that creepiness.

The Dean's Office, on the other hand, took a different view of the matter. "Harvard Medical School's library has no ghosts," they claimed, "because there is no such thing as ghosts. Furthermore, this is the premier medical research university in the world, and the library had better get its act together. Those security guards have a job to do. There is nothing in their union negotiations excusing their patrols owing to – what did they call it, again? Yes, here it is. 'Nebulous feelings of preternatural dread'...." Etc.

In any case, and regardless of their disagreement over the supernatural, the fact is that nobody knew that the skull was missing until Tuesday morning. There was a day or so to reflect on the matter, and after that everybody became reticent.

Faced with any awkwardness, Harvard always becomes reticent. What do I mean by awkwardness? I mean the possibility of hypothetical headlines in international newspapers like: ‘Harvard Loses its Skull.’ That kind of awkwardness.

“If the skull isn’t officially missing, yet,” I wondered out loud to Wendell, “what is there to talk about openly?”

“Well, we *could* discuss the rumors of your involvement,” he replied, like some sort of amateur Sherlock Holmes.

I exhaled emphatically. “You mean the rumors of my involvement in the case of the skull that is not officially missing from the museum?”

He nodded emphatically. “It sounds like a Zen kōan, doesn’t it? But unfortunately, many of our colleagues recall overhearing you saying that the skull might become ‘not officially missing’ one day.”

“Wendell, can you imagine me ever telling anyone that the skull might become ‘not officially missing’? Have I ever been that fluent in Harvard political speak? And what is all this talk of people overhearing things that I may or may not have said? There seems to be a lot of very vague eavesdroppers in this library!”

He became solemn. “It’s a troubling situation for many of the staff. Right now, the skull of Phineas Gage is neither within its cabinet nor without. You know, we librarians don’t enjoy this amount of speculation about reality. We like reality to be firm and steady. Until the university administration can confirm the skull’s situation, we are all suffering the skull’s crisis of existence as best we know how.”

“This is all my fault,” I remarked irritably.

Wendell gave me a startled glance.

“Yes, I should never have prognosticated,” I continued. “All I did was predict that the skull would one day go missing. It wasn’t so difficult to do and is hardly

a sign that I had anything to do with it.”

He gazed at me with narrowed eyes. “Of course, of course. But it’s not as simple as that, is it? Perhaps you know more than you’ve been letting?”

“I have to admit I’m enjoying this. I get the strongest feeling, mate, that you’re listening very closely to everything I have to say. Speaking as someone who works in IT this is quite the novelty.”

Eight months into the job and the staff here were still writing their passwords on sticky notes attached to the sides of their computer monitors. Nothing I had said concerning information security had had any lasting effect on the librarians. At some point, I think I just stopped caring what I said to anyone. By August I could be heard around the library chattering freely about the race of alien lizards who had covertly seized control of the US Government. Nobody had batted an eyelash.

Today, on the other hand, I was a Person of Interest! Some among the upper-echelons of Harvard University were treating anything I’d ever said or typed in an email as unholy gospel. While Wendell and I sat here yapping, certain individuals were almost certainly poring over my emails with profound curiosity. Unfortunately, I had barely mentioned the alien menace in any of my workplace emails. Such a wasted opportunity....

“I imagine you must feel you’re in a tricky situation,” he said after a long, calculating pause.

“Would you like me to tell you my side of the story?”

“That would depend on the story’s genre.”

“What do you mean?”

Wendel informed me that he had never been partial to westerns or historical fiction, and he’d be grateful if no zombies popped up inside my narrative because thinking of them gave him chills.

“This is a heist story,” I explained patiently, “with elements of mystery and a

dash of the supernatural.”

“I also like stories that wrap up nicely at the end. I don’t want to be left in the dark about anything. I hate that.”

I looked at him, nonplussed. “Can I just begin?”

He nodded eagerly.

“Right,” I began. “It was all a terrible misunderstanding. One day –”

“Wait a moment – is this a love story?”

“What?! What are you talking about now?”

“You said ‘it was a terrible misunderstanding.’ And that sounds like a love story to me.”

“It’s not a ...” I broke off distractedly. “Well, you know there is – but look here, I don’t know where that particular arc is going. And besides, I haven’t had time to consider it too closely. I’ve been too caught up in events.”

“I was caught up in events, once,” he said, a little wistfully.

“I could leave,” I suggested, leaping to my feet.

Wendell leaped to his feet as well and waved his hands about as if to suggest the opposite, so I returned to my chair.

“Where was I?”

“We were establishing the genre. Elements of romance or something.”

“If you like,” I said through gritted teeth. “You know, Wendell, being the suspect of a crime is a lot like being in a love story. People hang on your every word, but all they really want to do is take away your freedom.”

“Or perhaps you haven’t stolen any hearts,” he mused. “Just a priceless skull.”

I’ll admit it. I did, at that moment, consider taking my chances with the battalion of heavily beweaponed law-enforcement thugs waiting outside my office; at least they wouldn’t be as bloody-minded as Wendell.

“It was all a terrible misunderstanding,” I repeated, loudly.

“I hear you,” he said. “You’re saying you only stole the skull by accident.”

“I predicted the skull would be stolen,” I went on, ignoring his nonsense, “because it seemed to me that it was bound to happen one of these days. And after a while, I began wondering how such a thing would be done. Skip ahead in the story, and one day I found myself planning the theft of Phineas Gage’s skull.”

He nodded. “This is widely-remembered.”

“But there are certain facets to this story that are *not* widely-remembered, Wendell. For instance ...”

# george ripley

For instance, I knew that the best way to gain access to the roof of the Countway Library at Harvard is to zip-line across from one of the offices in the School of Public Health building, fly over the courtyard of tables and raised garden beds far below, and then drop deftly onto the roof. At that point, I could creep cat-like over to the sky-light and cut my way through the glass with a high-powered portable laser.

From there it would be a simple matter of swinging across the vast, gaping atrium to the museum cabinets. Compromise the cabinet containing the skull without triggering the thermal alarm, using an alternating application of pressurized freezing gas and a blow torch — or a hammer, if the process proves too tedious. Then, swing back across the atrium and pull my way up to the roof with a mechanical pulley. From there I could make my escape via a portable glider.

I would then drift gently down to Huntington Avenue, and near the intersection of Tremont Street I would undoubtedly be met by a black Mercedes driven by a beautiful Ukrainian accomplice named Svetlana, with eyes as cold as ice, and a past murkier than the Dnieper.

The only problem with this plan was that I didn't know a beautiful Ukrainian named Svetlana. Or a Ukrainian of any other name for that matter.

And besides, I'm no idiot. As soon as I presented such a woman with the skull, I knew she'd only draw a Fort-12 semi-automatic pistol on me, shoot me once through the stomach, and push my bewildered, bleeding self out the door of the Mercedes and accelerate away with my trophy, but only after assuring me that her betrayal wasn't personal.

So, then I would have to hunt Svetlana across Europe for years until I finally tracked her down in a subterranean bar in Kraków, patronized by Russian gangsters and felons of every type, where I'd confront her – or really just ask that one, crucial question: 'Why, Svetlana? Why?'

And that seemed like a hell of a lot of time and effort, so I decided not to bother with the roof and find a better way into the building instead. I was still mulling over the problem, and wondering how science was getting along with the whole 'jetpack' sub-category of technological innovation and development when the landline in my office rang.

I flipped it to my ear and said into the receiver:

"Shea can't come to the phone right now because he is busy planning a complicated heist and does not wish to be disturbed. Send him an email instead. Thank you."

I hung up at once. There is a knack to hanging up on people, and the first rule is to never get drawn into a debate about it.

"That sounds like jolly fun," said the voice of a very elderly gentleman, close to my ear. "Can I help?"

A wave of dread passed over me as I wondered if I was having some sort of religious experience. A religious experience would be the last thing I needed right now, given the circumstances.

In the grip of fear, I nerved myself to look over my shoulder. An elderly man was peering tentatively into my office. It was George Ripley, Curator of the Harvard Medical Museum.

"Hello, George!" I exclaimed with a thrill of relief. My office had only one armchair, though, as usual, it was concealed beneath a Gordian knot of about five hundred spare Ethernet cables. I scooped up the mess and flung it over to the emptier corner of my office.

"Come in, come in and sit down, please. It's good to see you, mate."

The old man smiled, gingerly skirted the old cathode-ray tube monitors laying on the floor and settled into my armchair, looking like a kind, old wizard.

It was nice to see George above ground for a change. He usually haunted the basement level of the library, which I rarely found the time to visit. Why is his office in the basement when the museum is on the 5th floor? Well, for that matter, why is the mailroom on the 5th floor instead of at ground level, near the entrance?

Well, while we're asking reasonable questions, why is there an office on the 5th floor occupied by a nice lady who has been playing solitaire at her desk for seven hours a day, for going on eleven years?

If reality seems ill-configured in the Countway, the fault may not lie with your narrator. It's certainly not my fault that old George wears the same cardigan every day – a sad affair with only a few oddly-matched buttons. He also wears bedroom slippers and carries an antique pipe and the fragrance of tobacco. George is an affable old bloke who might have been six hundred years old for all I knew, but he looked a well-preserved hundred and twenty.

“So, you’re planning a heist, are you?” he exclaimed with warm enthusiasm. “It’s been decades since I’ve been involved in a good heist. They’re exciting things, you know. A few stalwart men, bravely and cleverly working their way past the guards and making off with a fortune. There’s nothing better than a heist to raise the spirits!”

“Well, I am working on a heist, George,” said I, “but it’s in the early days of planning right now. I’d love to tell you all about it, but first I’d have to be sure you can keep a secret.”

“Are you still thinking of stealing the skull of Phineas Gage?”

I stared at him for a long moment.

“How did you know that?”

“You told me about it last week, I suddenly remember. Actually, I think

you've told everybody who works here by now.”

“You make it sound like I've been unprofessional,” I said, feeling ruffled. “For the record – whenever I tell someone I'm stealing the skull of Phineas Gage I have always carefully asked them to keep it a big secret.”

“Well, that sounds prudent, at least,” he offered.

I nodded in agreement.

George has a good-natured smile, and I knew I'd miss him one day after I'd stolen the skull and absconded to Sweden or Colombia – I was still nailing down the details on that. But I'll admit that his flippant tone about my discretion had stung a little.

“But you know, George, before we leave the topic, I'd like to point out that I haven't gone around telling *everybody* about the heist. I mean, I haven't told Wendell.”

“Why is that?” wondered the old man.

“You know, I'm not really sure. I guess I just don't trust him. If you ask me, he seems a bit indiscreet. I think it's the tie.”

George assured me that the secret of my heist would be safe with him, and I felt instantly grateful.

“You can't know how good that makes me feel,” I told him sincerely. “After all, you are the curator of the museum which holds the skull in question. I'd feel awful if you were to take the whole heist in the wrong spirit.”

“Goodness me, no,” replied the old chap. Then he patted himself down, as if looking for his pipe, remembered he was no longer allowed to smoke in the building and became sad. Being the curator of the museum from which I would be stealing the skull would make the old fellow an ideal inside man, of course, but no matter how “jolly fun” it all sounded to him personally, I had misgivings.

“I'm fine telling you that I'm planning to steal the skull, of course, but you

shouldn't really know exactly when. Or how, for that matter. It would spoil the surprise, I reckon."

Old George saw my point – his eyes twinkled, and he touched the side of his nose.

"Ah, so it could happen at any moment, you're saying?"

"Precisely. But you better not ask too many questions, in case I accidentally give you too many hints. You should just tell your people in the museum to be on their guards. Emphasize a vague threat. You've picked up some fresh intel. Background chatter. A friend at Interpol reached out. Or 'word has reached you from sources you trust on the black market.'"

"Reminds me of when that nice Vincenzo Peruggia chap stole the Mona Lisa back in 1911!" remembered George. "Walked right out of the Louvre with it under his jacket! Had it for two years before they caught him with it. I stepped in and had a word with certain parties, made the case that security was just so lackadaisical – I'd been saying it for years, you know – assured the magistrate that poor Mister Peruggia had done us a favor, really. There was some pressure for a tough sentence, but I had promised the boy's mother he'd only serve a little bit of time in prison. He was out in a year. Terribly nice chap. His mother used to send me tomatoes to my hotel when I visited Rome. That must have been, what, 1913. My, time flies."

"It does," I agreed, feeling slightly at a loss.

It was probably an apt moment to remind George that these events had happened almost a century ago, but I was caught up in the story. And besides, I really didn't have the heart. I think all of the staff at the library had decided that George was getting vague in his senior years and conflating his own memories with matters he'd once read about. For example, on more than one occasion he spoke of being on a first-name basis with the nineteenth-century poet John Keats.

Usually, when George reminisced there would be someone around to exchange glances with, but here I was alone, nodding as if all was right with the world. No matter how unlikely his memories, no one would ever be so unkind as to correct such a nice man.

Besides, apart from his odd habit of describing large swathes of the past millennium in the first-person, there was no getting around the fact that nothing seemed to be wrong with his memory.

“The best antiquities thieves,” the old man said, “should always exercise their imaginations if you want my opinion. Dream up something complicated and unexpected. You know something, young fellow, I think this is going to be a great deal of fun!”

I smiled at him but felt uneasy. I had an obligation to make the forthcoming heist fantastically diverting for him. The problem was that I didn’t have a clue how to pull it off. Just now I had dismissed the idea of zip-lines and was already wondering about excavation equipment. I knew nothing about excavation equipment, but tunneling all the way up from below the basement to the museum on the fifth floor seemed like a massive pain in the neck.

Then again, maybe I was just over-thinking the entire thing.

“I wish I could ask poor Phineas,” I thought out loud distractedly.

“Too late for that, I’m afraid,” George Ripley said sadly. “Poor chap is dead, you know. But I’ll tell you something – we’ve got his skull in the museum. Why don’t you stop by and take a look at it sometime?”

I exhaled slowly and promised him that I would, at my earliest opportunity.

“It all happened before my time, of course,” he said.

I look at him askance.

“Oh yes, I didn’t join Harvard until much later. You see, in September of 1848, I was in the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, which was under Austrian rule, of course.

Here we go, I thought.

"It was a time of chaos for the Austrian rulers, and uprisings in all major cities of their Kingdom. I was there carrying messages between Napoleon III in France and Carl Albert, who was the King of Sardinia. The Piedmontese wanted France to join the fight against the Austrians, and the prevailing view in England at the time.... I should probably mention here I was an English spy, which explains why I wasn't in the North of America. At the time, all the interesting things seemed to be happening in Europe, you see, so ...."

"But Phineas..." I prompted.

"Wasn't there, I'm afraid. It was just me."

"Was he still in Vermont?"

"Oh yes, he was in Vermont, near the town of Cavendish that September. He was a blasting foreman working on the construction of the railroad. A demolitions expert, one might call him today.

"You see, when you need to clear some large rocks out of your way, you call in a crew of experts – you don't try it yourself, too risky. Fiddly stuff, explosives. Especially in those days. But that was the business Phineas was in and it's fascinating work, or so I'm told.

"Let's imagine you're building a railroad and you need to remove an unusually large rock. What you do is you bore a deep hole into the rock, pour in the blasting powder, insert a fuse, and fill the hole with sand. Then you tamp it down with a tamping iron – which is just a metal rod, really – and after that, retreat to a safe distance and light the fuse.

"Fairly routine work for Phineas at that time. He was 25 years young. Clever, capable chap, and knew what he was doing according to all accounts. Until one day – well, it's an easy mistake to make, apparently – but poor Phineas forgot to add the sand. Still, who really knows? He was driving a meter-long tamping iron into the hole when a spark must have ignited the blasting powder."

“Kaboom,” said I.

“Indeed. Phineas’s face and hands received quite a scorching.”

We all know that the English are famous for understatement but in this case, I think George’s reluctance to describe Phineas’s injury in close detail was little more than good manners. We both knew that the tamping iron had shot up like a rocket, entered Phineas Gage’s head under his left cheek and exited through the top of his skull. Later it was found twenty-five meters away, covered with blood and bits of brain.

“Should have killed him,” noted the old man, detachedly, “but it didn’t, you see, which is where the story gets strange.”

George was right. Typically people in Phineas’s situation prefer to lie down and stop breathing. Instead, he got back onto his feet, looked about and said ‘ouch.’ Or words to that effect.

I’m sure at least someone who was there said something like, ‘Dude! You have a hole in your head!’ – because there’s one in every crowd, isn’t there? To which Phineas probably said, ‘Really, Kevin? You don’t say. Will someone please find that tamping iron and hit Kevin with it? Thanks.’

“Half an hour later,” George continued, “Phineas was sitting on a chair outside his hotel in the town of Cavendish when the doctor came riding up in a horse-drawn carriage.

‘Doctor, here is business enough for you,’ he said to him nonchalantly.”

“And you’re absolutely sure he wasn’t Australian?” I asked. George nodded.

Unnerved – and probably regretting his decision to pursue a medical career – the doctor arranged some shards of the broken skull over his patient’s exposed, pulsating brain and then stitched him up as best he knew how. When you consider that Phineas had survived both an iron bar through his skull *and* an encounter with a nineteenth-century doctor – all in a single day – then it seems a real pity that he wasn’t able to get himself outside afterward to buy a lottery

ticket.

Over the next two months, he made a slow but steady recovery. Miraculously, and in spite of the doctor fussing with him, he lived. In fact, he went on living for another twelve years.

This all strains credulity, of course. If some novelist made up a story like this, she would be told to rewrite it in an instant. “It’s all too unlikely,” people would complain. “It lacks realism. Change the story, so Phineas is only concussed by the blast. Perhaps he – no, make it she – is suffering from amnesia. She only thinks she’s got a hole in her head. Perhaps she has a Ph.D. in forensic psychology and an ongoing romantic relationship with a serial killer. And the two of them are beleaguered by time-traveling zombies ...”

The point is that Phineas’s survival was so bafflingly unlikely that when the medical world learned of his death years later, it descended on his skull with ill-disguised glee.

“Obviously, Harvard Medical School had to have the skull in their collection,” concluded George, with a dash of wistfulness. “His story is now recalled in roughly 60% of all introductory psychology textbooks. It’s the most famous skull in the entire world. So, I do hope you’ll be careful with it after you steal it, young fellow.”

“I’ll probably be careful,” I promised.

It was then that the old man finally recalled the reason for his visit. “You know what – it’s the silliest thing, but my computer doesn’t seem to want to activate again. It’s been very moody of late.”

I clucked my tongue and promised I’d write a letter to George’s manager advising her that George’s machine had completely exploded and there was nothing to be done about it until tomorrow. In fact, George might as well take the rest of the day off.

The old man looked at me solemnly and told me I was the best thing that had

ever happened to the library. I replied that I knew that, and that, in my opinion, he was the finest person I'd met since coming to work here. We gripped hands, swore allegiance to one another and then, after making me promise not to use explosives while stealing the skull, the old man vanished.

I didn't need to go downstairs to know what was ailing George's computer, of course. I'd been working in this library for months at this point, so I already knew that the nice lady who cleaned his office had once again knocked the electrical cable out of the wall while vacuuming under his desk.

There was no explaining this to George, however; to his mind, all electronic machines were the products of an unfamiliar sorcery. In any case, I was happy to have an excuse to stop by his office. Really, I just wanted to hear more about his adventures during the Napoleonic Wars.

## cheering up wendell

“And so, you see,” I concluded. “That explains everything.”

Wendell wrung his hands with frustration. “No, it doesn’t explain anything! What was the point of that anecdote?”

“The point, Wendell, obviously, is that I didn’t go about telling everybody I was planning to steal the skull of Phineas Gage. Because I didn’t tell you, Wendell. Because I don’t trust you, Wendell.”

“Well, that doesn’t make me feel very nice!”

“In my defense, you wear neckties. And, if it makes you feel any better, I probably told everybody in the building about the heist except you. But only because everybody else is pretty nice.”

“And I’m not?”

I shook with exasperation. “You’re a middle manager! How many times do I have to accidentally mention that I have Problems With Authority?”

“You don’t seem to have a problem with any of the other middle managers,” he complained peevishly.

I clicked my tongue; he was being mawkish.

“Come on, Wendell. You have to admit that the other managers are pretty ineffectual. Most of them can barely manage themselves, let alone a library. You, on the other hand – you’re different!”

“It’s true,” he muttered petulantly. “I am different from the others. I’m good at this. And you know what? The truth is – they envy me.”

“They should envy you. You’re the worst kind of career bureaucrat this

library has probably ever seen. I would go so far as to say you have a rare and special talent for mindless chicanery.”

He still looked downcast, so I stood, went around his desk and put my hand on his shoulder.

“Come on, cheer up, Wendell. You’re the only manager in the library who aggravates my Pathological Problems With Authority, don’t forget. That has to mean something!”

He smiled, suddenly sheepish. “That’s … really nice of you to say.”

“It’s the truth,” I continued with stern admonishment. “Look at you. You’re a career politician in the wealthiest university in the world. And you wear neckties. Every few evenings you go out to Harvard events and network with people. You’re climbing a management ladder, Wendell. And you also wear neckties. You know what? This all makes you a villain in my book.”

“Oh, stop it,” he said, smiling immodestly. “Does it really?”

“Of course it does. Now I don’t want to see you feeling bad just because I didn’t let you in on my plan to steal the skull of Phineas Gage. I was never going to tell the likes of you, Wendell, because, basically, you’re a force for evil – understand?”

“Thank you,” he said gratefully. “You know, it means a lot for someone of your ilk to say that.”

“Don’t mention it.” Then I reached up and pulled one of his books from the shelf behind me, turned it around so the spine faced the wall and squeezed it in randomly on a different shelf altogether. I was settling contentedly back into my armchair when we heard a discreet knock at the door. A woman of immoderate prettiness peered in and asked Wendell if she could take a fifteen-minute break.

“I haven’t seen a patron in the last half hour,” said Astrid, flicking a smile in my direction.

I am not easily rattled, but smiles like Astrid’s have been known to make the

males of our species do a variety of silly things to prove their genetic worth. Inspired by a smile like hers, men have tumbled from cliff-faces, burned up inside rocket capsules, and gone missing at sea. Countless others have even found themselves tangled up in mortgages and parent-teacher meetings.

I stared at the shelf and tried to be invisible.

“Take as long as you need,” Wendell told her pleasantly, getting up and strolling out to the Circulation area. When I was certain Astrid had left, I crept out of his office and sat down on one of the tall swivel chairs behind the front desk.

Astrid, I knew, was responsible for purchasing all the library’s medical journals. Her office was on the fourth floor, but I wasn’t surprised to find her here today; whenever the library was short-staffed, librarians often liked to come down to help at the front desk. After all, there was no better place to catch up with colleagues and exchange gossip.

Wendell and I were meanwhile enjoying a long, comfortable silence when a tall figure came lumbering by like an unhurried bear.

“Rufus!” we exclaimed. He smiled lazily and loped toward us.

“Any word from the Director?” he wondered, yawning, and looking like he’d just woken up from a nap.

Everyone was hoping that the administration might close the library early today as a Christmas present to the staff.

“Not so far but I’m crossing my fingers,” said Wendell. “It would be great for morale.”

Rufus nodded. “It would be, but perhaps the Director will do it anyway.”

I didn’t know too much about Rufus. He’s one of the reference librarians who inhabit the second floor. He is far too computer-savvy to ever need my services, so I didn’t get to see him too often.

Tall and thickset, Rufus is as striking as he is unassuming. He has a long and fastidiously neat beard and wears the same midnight-blue corduroy overcoat to work each day, regardless of the weather.

Rufus also seems to know just about everything. For example, did you know that a group of ferrets is called ‘a business’? Or that the average water bear can survive in space – without a space suit – for ten days? Thanks, Rufus!

Usually, however, and despite the breadth of his general knowledge, he really didn’t have much to say for himself. I often saw him drifting around the library deep in thought. In short, his is a somewhat mysterious figure, and I wouldn’t be surprised to learn he is secretly a warlock.

“Where did you go to university, Rufus?” I asked him now. “Was it Harvard?”

He smiled benignly.

“Our Human Resources Department doesn’t generally hire Harvard graduates. They have very lofty standards.”

“Is Harvard not a good school?”

“Well, it’s not terrible,” said Rufus.

I looked at Wendell.

“He’s right,” he said. “It’s really not terrible. And some of the students are bright, to some extent at least. Rufus, what was the name of that really bright student who used to come in here? The one from India?”

“Kuldeep.”

“That’s the one! He could locate books all by himself. And he was always so friendly and –”

“I don’t understand,” I interrupted. “I thought this was a good school.”

“And it is … from a certain point of view,” Rufus reassured me. “You see, what we do here is provide an environment in which the scions of wealthy

families can mingle, you know, and really – get to know each other.”

“You see, Shea,” said Wendell, leaning comfortably against the desk, “in our country, it is highly important that you know the right people.”

Rufus nodded. “You can’t put a price tag on introducing your children to the right people.”

“Well, technically you can,” said Wendell. “That is Harvard’s business model, after all.”

“Very witty,” smiled Rufus.

I dislike rolling my eyes, but sometimes these people leave me with no choice.

“But this is a school, isn’t it?” I demanded.

“There is an educational component,” said Wendell with a nod.

“And there are students here, learning things?”

Wendell nodded. “Oh definitely.”

“We have some of those,” agreed Rufus. “You can never have too many.”

“Some of them work very hard, too,” said Wendell supportively.

I hadn’t had much interaction with the students – my job was to help the staff and the occasional faculty member; these duties kept me too busy to even notice the students. Well no, I did know one – a mousy girl called Piper who was always on the fourth floor looking distracted and frazzled.

“You should go home, Piper,” I’d invariably tell her, laughing. “You’ve been in here far too long.”

“I’d love to, believe me,” she would say and, waving her textbook, she’d declare in a panic-stricken voice that she needed to understand the next three chapters by tomorrow.

“You work too hard. You need to go easy on yourself.”

But Piper always shook her head. “I need a break, but not yet. There’s a lot of

pressure on me right now. My last semester didn't go very well. I cannot fail this next exam..."

I can't say I honestly understood. Whatever future Piper was working for seemed hardly worth the hassle.

"I know this one student," I told Wendell, "who works very hard, and —"

"Well, if she's a medical student she has to."

"The medical students are expected to learn things," said Rufus seriously. "In fact, it is absolutely required."

"We don't let them practice medicine, otherwise," Wendell agreed. "Just think of the malpractice suits!"

By this point, I had had enough. "But I've met all of these smart people here!"

Wendell and Rufus blinked at me. "Who, the students?" they asked in unison.

"Well, I meant the staff."

They looked relieved.

"Of course *we're* smart," said Wendell, looking at me narrowly.

Rufus put his hand on Wendell's arm. "I think Shea is asking where all these smart people came from, if not from here. The answer is everywhere, Shea. Smart people are educated in ordinary public schools and colleges. Small towns and villages all over the world. If some of the world's brightest people wind up working here, it's because Harvard poached them.

"Harvard is brilliant at poaching people, dude. You know, faculty from other institutions. Luminous luminaries like myself, who have published an awful lot of richly informative scientific analysis. When Harvard poached me, I decided to become a librarian.

"Which isn't to say they always hire the best," he added, looking dubiously at Wendell.

"One day I shall run this library," Wendell uttered ominously, "and you will

rue the day.”

“And the sky will burn, our crops will wither, and death will stalk the land. Something like that?”

“Stop reading my diary, Rufus.”

Shrugging, the reference librarian yawned, shook our hands and announced that he was going to head up to his office and have a little nap.

We watched him galumph up the stairs.

I considered following – my office was on the second floor as well – until I remembered that a seething gang of law-enforcement goons was probably waiting for me up there with their police-issued axes at the ready.

I sat down on the stool again and kicked my legs absently. Wendell eyed me carefully.

“You know, I have never asked you this, but I’ve occasionally wondered what brought you to the United States in the first place.”

“A girl.”

He beamed at me. “Ah-ha! This sounds like a love story!”

“That’s how it sounded to me too. Do you want me to tell you the story?”

Glancing at his watch, Wendell became sad. “Perhaps not now, I was thinking about getting some folks from Inter-Library Loan to cover the Circulation Desk so I can take an early lunch –”

“Alright, I’ll tell you now, then. I won the lottery.”

## imogen and me

And it wasn't just any lottery – it was the green card lottery, which is organized by the Department of Homeland Security in the United States. Curiously, I did not submit my winning ticket – my girlfriend Imogen did that on my behalf, and one for herself for good measure. If either of us won, we would marry and then move to the United States together. Because it would be beneficial to her career or something. I don't know. There was some particular advantage to her being located in a country of three hundred million people instead of Australia's paltry twenty million, I think. My place was at her side in the Americas, or so she kept insisting to everybody.

If I don't remember all the details clearly it might be because Imogen had a tendency to say a great deal in any given day. I couldn't always keep it all in my head. I remember one day wanting to suggest that, rather than hurling great gobs of raw data at me all day, she issue daily reports that summarized the major themes in short sentences.

I might not have actually suggested that, however. I often abstained from expressing my thoughts too explicitly around Imogen because, as she often told me, my thoughts were usually wrong. Instead, I staggered about in her wake. The full scope of her intentions and plans for both our lives was, for me, a slightly unnerving mystery.

That is why I wasn't so surprised when she came in one day waving about an opened letter, addressed to me and stamped with some sort of eagle insignia, advising that I had won the green card lottery. I remember it because it was also the day I learned what a green card was and that the United States held lotteries for them. Imogen had probably explained it all to me in the past. I was probably

doing something tricky with my computer at the time.

And now Imogen was spinning and spinning, in a rotational axis that was wobbling unevenly, like a badly tossed gyroscope, between wedding plans and a list of things to do before emigrating. I had no idea what was happening.

Where did I want to live? Whom did I want to marry? These were questions that nobody – not even Imogen – had ever asked me.

I thought about broaching the subject with her – perhaps having a frank conversation over a nice cup of tea – but grew concerned that a display of independent-thinking on my part at this juncture might antagonize her.

I didn't plan it or anything. I was just making a sandwich one day when I somehow found myself detachedly putting a few of my things into a large duffel bag. Then I observed myself pushing that bag through the window and watched myself follow.

For the next three months, I lived in hiding, and mutual-friends assured me that my life might be in jeopardy. Imogen's family was out looking for me. Did I mention that her brother was a police officer? If you're reading this – please learn from my folly and never attempt to maintain a romantic relationship with a woman whose brother is a member of the Queensland Police Force.

I had to dye my hair silver. And even though I am ideologically opposed to mustaches I grew one anyway – because that is how serious the situation was! I moved into a friend's apartment on the far side of Brisbane and there, in a dark room with drawn shades, I stayed and fretted.

The weeks, as they say, turned into moths, though I've never understood that saying – I've read numerous books on caterpillars and some of them can take days to reach pupation stage, which goes to show you how cliches can be completely unfounded in fact.

After an interminable period of anxiety in which I dropped weight and assumed a vampiric pastiness, a friend spotted Imogen's car less than a mile

from my hideout.

Two hours later I was on an overnight bus to Canberra.

I knew nobody there, so it seemed the safest course of action. In the evenings I went slinking between shadows seeking some unexposed crack in the world, some broken edge through which I might slip away. Then one night I glanced over my shoulder, and there was Imogen's brother – three meters away and aiming a taser right at my back!

It was over. Would you believe that part of me was even relieved?

I wasn't even angry. It was nobody's fault after all. He and I stood at a distance from one another, and quantum forces swirled around us like coils of smoke. Two timelines stretched off in different directions. Behind him I could see a whole new world taking shape, a world where I would be tasered and dragged back screaming all the way to his sister, to live out my days in servitude.

"I'm sorry!" he shouted hoarsely, grief and pain in his eyes. "You have to come with me! I'll never hear the end of it if you don't!"

I looked over my shoulder; across the road and beyond a ragged line of trees I could see that star-spangled banner, dancing and waving above the American embassy. I turned back to him, and the winds of causality kicked a wave of dust into my eyes. Blinking, I fell to my knees.

"Do it!" I yelled over the rising wind. My world breaking apart, I could feel it shattering into violently spinning shards. Another world – and another future – was forming around us.

"Forgive me!" he yelled over the shrieking winds.

Forgive him? How could I bear a grudge against the man? He was Imogen's brother – wasn't that enough of a cross to carry?

"Of course I forgive you!" I cried, and the vortex churned and twisted. Soon, I somehow knew, my world would be gone and another, darker one would be in

its place. Then I sensed a sudden hush. I knew in my heart that all was lost.

The silence and stillness dragged on. Eventually, I rubbed my eyes and blinked. Imogen's brother was nowhere to be seen – the air was still and empty. The night's sky was clear and cloudless.

Trembling with relief, I staggered in the direction of the embassy.

# octavia

“Are we going to lunch or not?”

I nearly jumped. Spinning around I found a tall, imperious woman standing behind me, looking impatient and amused.

It was Octavia, the Head of Rare Books. She was one of the Countway’s most senior people, and she also happened to be Wendell’s boss. He sat up straight in his stool and unconsciously adjusted his cuffs.

“Did I lose track of time?” he muttered. “But no, it’s only eleven...”

Octavia shrugged. “An early lunch would be better, especially if the director decides to close the library early.”

“I wish the director would put us in the loop,” sighed Astrid.

I now realized that Astrid must have returned from her break a while ago and had been quietly sitting behind us, listening to my story about Imogen. I quickly averted my eyes from her, in case she smiled at me or something.

“Yes, the director has a flair for avoiding decisions,” Octavia observed acidly.

“It’s no bother,” said Astrid. “We’ve been sitting here listening to our IT guy tell us how he came to live to America.”

“I know, I’ve been standing over there eavesdropping for the past several minutes. Quantum causality and all that. By the way, that girl sounds like trouble if you ask me. Why didn’t you just tell her to buzz off?”

Wendell and I exchanged understanding glances.

Octavia was a chief librarian at the world’s foremost medical library, and she also happened to be a fiercely determined individual. In the past thirty years

she'd breezed through every obstacle in her path; whenever someone had wandered across her trajectory she had knocked them down with the barest quiver of an eyebrow.

I remember meeting her husband back in autumn at an after-work party in the library foyer. An affable bloke who doted on his wife, he took me aside and told me I should get married to a good woman as soon as possible.

“When we first got married, Octavia said I could work anywhere I wanted. I told her I wanted to be an electrician – and she said: go for it!”

I'd whistled appreciatively.

“On Saturdays, if it's not raining,” he'd confided proudly, “she lets me drive the car.”

Not every man is so lucky. Some of us find ourselves with no option other than to relocate alone to a different continent. Of course, I have always been a quiet supporter of gender equality, but the realist in me can't see it happening in my lifetime. Maybe one day women will think of us as their equals, but until then I'd be content to see men permitted to have more than half a shelf in a bathroom.

Still, as much as I'd have enjoyed explaining to Octavia the inherent societal value of male self-determination, I feared the conversation would get bogged down in intricacies.

“Well, you see, Octavia, it wasn't as simple as you say. Some women can become fractious when you disagree with them and –”

“What do you mean – some women?” she asked softly, looking at me like I was a spider who had crawled onto her slice of cheesecake.

Wendell seemed as if he couldn't decide whether to vault the Circulation Desk or just smash his way through the glass window behind us.

“No, I'll come out and say it,” I declared bravely, voice quavering only a little. “There are some people to whom a man does not say ‘buzz off,’ and

Imogen is one.”

Octavia, gazing at me sternly, made only a ‘tch’ sound in her mouth and looked at Wendell.

“Well, are you going to gape like a parrot or come to lunch?”

Without waiting for his reply, I slipped off the tall chair and started in the direction of the STAFF ONLY gate.

“And where are you going? You’re coming with us too. We’re all having lunch.”

“I’m busy, Octavia,” I said. Actually, I was going to go upstairs and look for Piper. My stressed-out student friend was probably lurking about somewhere, reading and brooding about some exam or other. If I was getting arrested later today, then I should probably start saying my goodbyes to friends.

“No,” she said. “You’re not busy.”

“I am not going to lunch with you, Octavia,” I told her firmly.

“Yes, you are. And so is Astrid.”

“Sure thing, boss lady,” said the latter cheerfully. I remembered now that Astrid’s own supervisor had gone on maternity leave. Octavia was the most senior librarian in the building, and probably everyone’s boss these days.

But she wasn’t mine. I stared at her pleadingly, and she stared at me, like some sort of cryptic mechanical cat.

“Damnation, Octavia,” I whispered. “Have some pity...”

“You’re coming with us, Shea. And, best of all, you are going to continue your story!”

I looked at Wendell for support, but he was looking down at the floor. My eyes darted between the two, back and forth, back and forth. The clock on the wall ceased to tick. Nobody moved or made a sound. I began to wonder if something odd was happening to me.

“Why?” I asked, at last, sounding plaintive even to myself.

“Because,” Octavia replied in a patient and reasonable tone, “we would like to hear you explain how you stole the skull of Phineas Gage.”

# the recovery committee

Well, this is a bad idea, I thought to myself, following her out into the sunshine. I should have fled.

Even running away shrieking like a madman would have made more sense under the circumstances. I had taken the skull of Phineas Gage after all, and they were on to me. And yes, they were being nice about it, of course, in much the same way that a cat can sometimes be nice about a mouse scuttling across the kitchen floor, but where was it all leading?

I was worried. People like Wendell and Octavia are peculiarly adept at getting their own way. Unfortunately for me, they rather badly wanted to see the skull of Phineas Gage back in its ‘rightful’ glass display case.

I had a plan to get away with the theft, naturally enough, but these folks also had a plan, which was to stop me. And, knowing the librarians, that plan likely involved my corpse hanging outside the library entrance in a spiked-cage. You know, for the benefit of hungry crows and as an educational resource for anyone who had ever daydreamed about stealing an exhibit from their collection.

“I just sent a message to the folk in Inter-Library Loan,” said Wendell, walking at my side. “They’re sending someone to cover the Circulation Desk while we’re gone.”

“Why are you telling me? Why would I care?” I muttered savagely.

“Don’t be grumpy,” he whispered. “And don’t let her get under your skin. You’ve been doing very well so far.”

I looked at him askance. What did that mean? You see what I mean about Harvard managers? Sometimes they can be really tricky and inscrutable.

By now everyone in the library knew the skull was missing, but nobody seemed particularly alarmed. No doubt they were confident it would be returned soon. Or perhaps, I thought, they were preoccupied with other rumors. For instance, some claimed that the library Director had been overheard using the word ‘restructuring’ in passing.

What did that mean? And what sort of fool uses the word ‘restructuring’ inside a library, anyway? If the missing skull seemed like an omen to some, it was resting on a large pile of others.

Some of the librarians, however, were taking the matter of the missing skull very seriously indeed. I had every reason to worry; the combined brain-power of Wendell and Octavia was no joke. If I didn’t watch myself, I could be in handcuffs by nightfall.

I had to keep an eye on them, apparently. And what better way to do that than have lunch with them?

We passed into a canyon of shadow between the Countway and Harvard’s School of Public Health, ascended the concrete stairs and hurried across Huntington Avenue into the bright sunshine. If the Harvard administration had stationed snipers on the rooftops, then they were well-concealed. Wendell looked at me quizzically; I pretended to be admiring interesting birds. He looked at me as if I might be slightly mad and said nothing.

When we reached Tremont, we turned left and headed up the hill for a few blocks until we arrived at a small, nondescript Japanese restaurant. Inside was warm and empty – it was only a little past eleven in the morning, after all – so we took a table against the back wall.

This is where the battle shall be fought, I thought, draping my peacoat and scarf over the back of my chair and taking my seat.

As I looked across the table at Wendell, I remember my maxim that no possible good can ever come from talking to people who wear neckties.

We were all quiet for a long moment. To be honest, it felt a little awkward. Even Astrid seemed vaguely apprehensive.

“How long have you been working at Harvard?” she asked me abruptly. “I don’t remember when you began. You just appeared among us, out of the blue.”

“Out of the blue is exactly how it felt to me as well. Some days I can’t even believe they hired me, let alone interviewed me.”

“They interviewed you?” exclaimed Wendell, snickering. “Someone in Human Resources must be feeling sheepish today.”

Octavia shot him a glance, and he looked down at the table, embarrassed.

“On the day of the interview,” I said, “I felt very relaxed. It was pretty much an unexpected situation for me. I had to assume that the invitation to a job interview was the result of some kind of clerical error. Or else they were rounding out the numbers and including minorities in the process. You know, just for the sake of being nice.”

“You’re a minority?” asked Octavia.

“I’m Australian. There are only twenty million of us. But they wouldn’t hire me, obviously. They knew what they were doing – or so I assumed. Don’t look at me like that, I was inexperienced back then. And besides, there was that other matter.”

“Which?” asked Octavia.

“The other matter. You know.” All three offered me their best blank expressions. “Are you really going to make me say it? Really? Very well. People like me don’t get hired by institutions like Harvard.”

“Why is that?” asked Astrid. She was sitting in the chair beside mine, I now realized. I don’t think I had ever been this close to her – did I detect the faint fragrance of vanilla? There was a fluttering in my stomach. Noting everybody was still looking at me, I dropped my gaze to the table and began to explain it to them.

It was a little embarrassing. Obviously, people like me don't get hired by institutions by Harvard – they have mechanisms in place which have been set up specifically to exclude us. The interview process is threaded with a series of subtle and cleverly worded questions that constitute an invisible wall that people of my temperament find impossible to surmount.

Let me give you an example of such a question.

‘Would you ever sabotage our organization from the inside?’

Most people just say ‘no.’ I, on the other hand, have little choice: my answer is: ‘Yes.’

Why? Why not just lie to them? Well, that's a complicated topic. Rather than answering directly, it might be easier to offer another example instead.

‘Would you ever steal anything from our organization?’

I know, I know – all I have to do is say ‘no,’ and now I have a job. I'm part of the team, and free to steal all the office supplies, plastic forks and ethernet cables that I could ever want.

But wait a moment – how do I answer the question?

‘Yes!’

*Why, Shea? You scream in your head. All you had to do was tell them ‘no,’ and you would have landed the job! What is wrong with you?*

That's a fair objection. Perhaps a third example will do the job.

Imagine you and I are locked in a room with a suspicious device with wires, plastic tubing and four large jars of plastic explosive. Attached to this device is a single red button labeled ‘Do Not Touch.’

How long do you think it will take before – you know what? I've already touched the button. Now look – I'm hitting it with my fist. Someone pull me away – wait, first let me pull at all these interesting wires on this suspicious device...

What I'm trying to express is that I am precisely the type of candidate they screen for at nuclear power stations. And it's not just that – thanks to a court order back in Australia I'm not even allowed within fifty meters of a forklift. It doesn't annoy me anymore, though. Forklifts just don't have the acceleration you want on a highway anyway.

But what all this means, however, is that I knew well in advance that Harvard would never hire me; I only applied because I am an optimist who needed a job. I went to the interview with no expectations. I did, I'll admit, take along a morbid curiosity as to how it would all go wrong.

The other reason I went to the interview is that sometimes I enjoy dressing up. I may not wear neckties but still – people always treat me so well when I put on a nice suit. I think it's because people put a lot of trust in nice suits.

You know, people really shouldn't put so much trust in nice suits. They are far too easy to steal. You just try one on in the changing room of the store and, if it looks alright, walk right out the door with a dignified but relaxed expression on your face. Nobody is going to stop you – nobody ever stops a man in a nice suit from doing anything.

Oh, don't feel bad about it. The shop had lots of nice suits. And besides, when you don't need it anymore, you can always do what I did and give the suit away to someone less fortunate than yourself. I gave mine to a homeless illegal immigrant from the Dominican Republic. One day he wore that suit into a bar frequented by Wall Street traders, and three weeks later he was a hedge fund manager. A few months later he sent me a crate of very expensive Scotch, which I also gave away to homeless people. I'm all about giving back to the community, I suppose you could say.

# interruption, part one

Wendell seemed to be experiencing some sort of internal strife; it was as if he wanted to say something highly specific but could not quite decide how to phrase it. He just was on the brink of giving up when he seemed to change his mind.

“You realize that telling a story that discloses a willingness to steal things doesn’t really help your case, don’t you?”

I pressed my fingers to my temple and squinted. “What case? What are you talking about?”

“The skull of Phineas Gage,” said Octavia patiently. “It’s missing, remember? And some people think you’re behind it.”

“Yes,” I said, nodding at her. “It’s annoying.”

Octavia and Wendell exchanged glances. Astrid sipped from her complimentary glass of water and played with the straw.

“Perhaps you misunderstand,” said Wendell quietly. “We are listening to everything you say and trying to decide whether or not you are behind the theft of Phineas Gage’s skull.”

I nodded politely and said nothing.

“Now, to your credit, you seem to have a compulsion to answer questions honestly...”

“My Nana was very strict about lying. ‘Don’t be a liar,’ she’d always say to me. ‘The world is filled with people who are unhappy because they’re dishonest. She was a wise woman, my Nana.’”

Wendell nodded. “And so you’re quite upfront about having at least stolen a suit in the relatively recent past...”

I held up a finger significantly. “I also gave it away afterward to a homeless man. Which means it’s all balanced out, ethically speaking.”

Wendell’s mouth worked silently for a moment.

“No. No, it doesn’t – and even worse, now he’s a hedge manager! But look, none of this is the point.”

“Then why did you bring it up?”

“You’re confusing the issue,” put in Octavia.

Another thing that got on Nana’s nerves was eye rolling. ‘Don’t do it,’ she would say, ‘it’s not polite.’ All the same, it required an enormous mental effort not to roll my eyes at Octavia right now.

“The point here,” Wendell swept on determinedly, “is that everything you’re saying corroborates certain suspicions about you. Your problems with authority. Compulsive behavior. Willingness to steal.”

“Skepticism,” I corrected him, “about people who seek positions of power. Instinctive honesty. Charity to the poor.”

I couldn’t help myself. My blood was up, as they say. Wendell and Octavia seemed startled, but Astrid was smiling at me. My heart was racing. To hell with the world, I thought, smiling back at her.

“What kind of person steals a suit?” asked Octavia, scrutinizing me like I was some rare beetle.

“A person,” I replied, hotly, “who doesn’t want to spend four thousand dollars on it, that’s who.”

“The suit cost four thousand dollars?” exclaimed Wendell, gaping.

“I’m sorry. I should have made it clear that I was talking about a nice suit.”

“It must have been nice!”

“There is no way I was paying four thousand dollars, though. I mean, what do people expect? Unemployed folk can’t blow all their money on clothes.”

“Nobody is saying you have to spend that much money!”

“I know that, Octavia. That was the point I was just trying to make. All you have to do is put the suit on and walk right out the door, and nobody is going to stop –”

“I mean,” she said loftily, “you could have bought a cheap suit and –”

I clicked my tongue at her naiveté. “Really. Did you just say a man should wear a cheap suit to a job interview at Harvard University?”

“Shea has a point,” Wendell observed, becoming grave. “There are issues of class at play here. There are complex and unspoken codes which govern –”

“Listen!” cried Octavia, waving her hand dismissively. “Can we not talk about class?”

“America in a nutshell,” I whispered to Astrid.

“My point here,” continued Octavia, “is that you are remarkably untroubled by your own criminal behavior.”

“Well,” I said primly, “I personally think that charging someone four thousand dollars for some cuts of cloth is a far more serious form of criminal behavior. The seamstresses themselves probably get paid less than 12 dollars per hour. Did you even think about that?”

“It’s true,” said Wendell sadly. “The clothing industry is rife with exploitation. Workers are paid unlivable wages and labor in terrible conditions –”

Octavia was about to explode with indignation when Astrid’s voice rose excitedly.

“You know what he is?! Do you know what you are? You’re a bounder! A genuine, real-life bounder!”

“No. I am not,” I corrected her firmly.

“You are! That’s exactly what you are!”

I shook my head. “Technically speaking I am a rascallion. But let’s not argue – I have no interest in discussing the matter any further.”

“I’d like to be a rascallion!” said Wendell, eyes shining and looking inspired.

I shook my head once again. “You can’t be one, Wendell. We have a rigorous dress code. The thing about rascallions is that we are always just one nice suit away from becoming a bounder.

“It’s why I can’t own nice suits,” I added, feeling suddenly wistful.

“So,” Octavia continued stubbornly, “we have established that he has criminal tendencies. But his role in the theft of the skull of Phineas Gage remains ambiguous.”

“That’s what happens to people like me,” I said to Astrid. “Ask anyone with criminal tendencies, and they’ll tell you. The moment anything goes missing, everyone starts blaming them. Prejudice is just a fact of life, I suppose.”

The waitress appeared out of nowhere, took the ladies’ orders, and then turned to Wendell.

I took the opportunity to remind Wendell not to order panda, an error I had made one time in a Chinese restaurant called Panda Express, which had resulted in a scuffle and a table overturned by an overly-emotional chef.

Wendell promised he would be careful about it, but not without glibly remarking that I should never be permitted into the food court of the United Nations building because who even knew what kind of war might break out as a result.

I gave him an admonishing look. It was not proper etiquette, I reminded him, for an American to mention war in a Japanese restaurant. Abashed, Wendell ordered a few makimono rolls. I ordered the same, and the waitress vanished.

“Now,” began Octavia, becoming business-like, “let us return to the subject of Phineas Gage’s skull.”

“Why the rush? Wendell has raised an interesting point about the unspoken rules that govern what a man should or should not wear to a Harvard job interview.”

“You know – I just thought of something,” said Wendell. “If you hadn’t, uh, walked off with that four thousand dollar suit, you wouldn’t even be sitting here right now.”

He was right. “You can’t always follow the rules – because most of the rules have been written specifically to keep us all locked out.”

“It’s funny,” remarked Astrid. “A nice suit is a kind of disguise, isn’t it? It has an unmistakable power. But, with all power, comes the temptation of corruption.”

I couldn’t help but agree. “A man of good character, for example, can slowly over time find himself wearing ridiculous neckties for a –”

“It was only a matter of time,” muttered Wendell.

“– wearing ridiculous neckties that he does not need to wear! This is a casual work environment, Wendell! You wear a tie, then others wear ties, and now we’re all expected to wear ties!”

Octavia slapped the table. “Did you steal the skull or not?”

We went silent. In my heart, I felt sad and a little irked by her lack of tact.

“Honestly, Octavia – when you’re around people who have criminal tendencies, it’s not polite to ask them what they have or haven’t stolen. I ask you, are you behaving nicely right now? Are you really being the best *you* that you can be in this instance?”

“I think,” offered Astrid, “she’s just really interested in the issue. She’ll probably keep persisting until she knows the truth.”

I nodded. “You’re right, Astrid. One of the things we all appreciate about Octavia is her determination. And the truth is that I do know something about the skull’s whereabouts, but I’m afraid to tell any of you.”

“Why afraid?” asked Astrid.

I know it’s ridiculous, but part of me still hoped I could make myself understood to these people. The problem was that – in their minds – there was something broken about me. Theirs was a simpler world, where all human behavior could be summarized under two columns of ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ All acts in the ‘wrong’ column were apparently committed by people with broken brains like my own. There was no cure for us, just a widespread certainty that punishment cleansed the world of everything.

What was I worried about? I was afraid that my companion’s thinking was too ingrained. If I were unable to persuade them, then the consequences for me would be very severe and cruel. My life would become little more than a dice roll inside the great casino that is the American legal system. And why would I want that? For all its theatrics and extravagance nobody wins in that seething festival of absurdity, apart from the lawyers.

The truth is that nobody in the history of the world has ever had a nobler reason to steal somebody’s skull than I – but what did that matter? All any of them wanted was the simple narrative. The restitution of a stolen artifact. A wrongdoer brought to heel by the invisible hand of universal justice. The preservation of the *status quo*.

My story was far too nuanced to place in the hands of a jury of my peers. After all, what would a courtroom make of the ghost on the fifth floor? They’d dismiss this crucial piece of evidence out of hand. How could I ever trust a court system that is so woefully ill-prepared to grapple with the mysterious and fantastical?

And so I had no choice – not only was I compelled to steal the skull of

Phineas Gage, but I was obliged to not get caught in the process. That's what made it so tricky. Whenever I had tried to do anything remotely criminal in the past I was caught almost immediately.

This time was going to be different. All through the early weeks of December, I had kept myself busy, fixing library computers and helping the staff. My nights had been spent sitting in front of a mirror practicing my innocent looks.

They were not going to catch me this time. I was going to get away with it. And besides, I had a plan.

“Alright,” I said to them at last. “I’ll come clean. I *did* steal the skull of Phineas Gage.”

Even as I said it, I felt myself wince.

## i make a deal

“You need to give it back at once!” hissed Octavia.

“No, I don’t.”

Two rolls of makimono – twelve, elegant circles of rice and vegetables – were arranged neatly on a rectangular tray before me. I lifted one with chopsticks, dipped them in wasabi and soy sauce, and took a bite.

“Yes, you do!” Octavia uttered, pointing her finger at me.

I swirled a lump of wasabi into the soy sauce. “I think you’ll find that I don’t.”

“You’re doing that wrong,” remarked Wendell. “Mixing the sushi and wasabi.”

“Here we go,” I muttered peevishly, putting my chopsticks down with irritation. “Apparently everything I do is wrong today.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Quite the opposite, in fact, if you’ll let me finish. The point here is that millions of Japanese people get annoyed when they see foreigners mixing wasabi and soy sauce together. They feel that this is the wrong way to do it. It ruins the flavors of both the wasabi and the soy, apparently, and it offends the chef.”

I couldn’t help but sigh.

“This is like that whole, sad incident at Panda Express all over again. Maybe these places should put up signage about etiquette. If the chef comes out here and kicks over a table then I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You misunderstand,” said Wendell calmly. “It is not just you who does this – in fact, almost everyone in the world who isn’t Japanese mixes the wasabi and

soy together. It irritates them, though, because to their sensibilities it is, at best, unrefined and at worst, wrong.”

Octavia had a funny look on her face. It was as if she was dying to tell Wendell to shut up but also somehow intrigued by the direction in which he was taking the conversation. Meanwhile, Astrid studied me carefully. It was a very odd experience, in fact. I was the center a social situation that I could not, for the life of me, understand.

Wendell was idly playing with his chopsticks.

“Are the Japanese being unreasonable? Is this little more than culinary groupthink? What do you think, Shea?”

“Well, I don’t want to upset anybody, but if Americans told the world it was wrong to put barbecue sauce on our food then I’d be going through an awful lot of barbecue sauce around my house.”

Octavia cleared her throat and was about speak, but Wendell lightly touched her arm.

“Part of me feels the same way,” he said. “I think most people do. And this is very reasonable. A master sushi chef has a different palate. He or she likes and dislikes different foods from you or I. We are entitled, I believe, to enjoy food the way we like it. But others won’t agree.

“*Argumentum ad verecundiam*. The appeal to authority is a famous logical fallacy. If I wheeled a master sushi chef in here just to tell you that you’re wrong, the logical thing for you to do is ignore her and enjoy your food the way you like it.”

I nodded.

“But I don’t really have to explain any of this to you because you have an innate resistance to appeals to higher authority. You have Pathological Problems With Authority. In fact, you have a hypersensitivity to a logical fallacy that both distracts and impedes you, rendering you practically dysfunctional –”

“Have you been talking to my boss? Listen, Hector doesn’t know what he’s talking about. You should ignore everything he says. That’s what I do.”

“Pfft,” exhaled Wendell disdainfully. “I wouldn’t put any trust in the psychological insight of an IT manager. They’re all third-rate amateurs when it comes to the human soul. And what’s the point of them, anyway?”

The accuracy of this assessment left me stunned. “You know, I have often wondered the same thing!”

Say what you like about Wendell, but for someone with a predilection for neckties he sure could make a lot of sense sometimes.

“Have you met the CIO of Central IT?” I pressed.

Wendell waved the question aside. “The only empty head I want to discuss right now is that of Phineas Gage.”

I shrugged.

“What about it?” I asked curiously, taking a bite.

Octavia, who has been listening quietly for a while, spoke up at last.

“You don’t think the skull belongs in our museum do you?”

Wendell frowned at her. I couldn’t help but do the same. Was she constitutionally unable to understand criminal inclinations? Obviously, I didn’t think the skull belonged in the museum. Why else would I go to the trouble of stealing it?

I elected not to reply. There is never any point in explaining this subject to most people. Experience has taught me that the majority of people cannot wrap their mind around the advantages to be found in stealing things. Proof of this can be found in the popularity of the proverb ‘there is no such thing as a free lunch’ – which rather frankly reveals just how many people have no idea how to steal their lunch.

Of course, I’ve tried reasoning with people, but you can say, ‘if you steal it,

you don't have to pay for it' a thousand times and all they'll do is stare back at you in confusion, and repeat 'but it's stealing!'

Some days I have no idea how our species ever got this far. Would it be worthwhile, I wondered, to mention to them that Phineas Gage's skull wasn't always a museum exhibit? It was buried in the ground for years before news of Phineas's death reached his former surgeon.

Dr. Harlow was the original thief. It was he who convinced the Gage family to exhume the skull and deliver it to him in New York – a full seven years after Phineas had died! Money exchanged hands, presumably. The Gage family was not wealthy, and it would explain why they'd go to such trouble. But what was Harlow up to?

When you read over his writings about Phineas's alleged 'changes of character' after the accident, it all seems a lot like unrepentant conjecture. From a distance, his involvement with the skull after Phineas's death reeks of opportunism, veiled by a thin smokescreen of scientific interest. It was Harlow who donated the skull to the museum at Harvard Medical School. Grave robbing, abetted by the gratitude of a famous university. A glass cabinet in a museum conferred a luster of respectability to the whole matter.

And then onwards through the 20th century and into the 21st, the skull has been a tourist exhibit for the well-heeled. A grisly bone face awaiting eternity with a vacant smile. Elsewhere the skull becomes implicated in all sorts of crazy theories about the human brain. But here at Harvard, it sits on a shelf to be gawked at by the curious – a totemic reminder that the brain is a terrifying mystery. In many respects, it has become the Mona Lisa of human skulls.

As far as the Recovery Committee was concerned the provenance of the skull was indisputable. It belonged on the fifth floor – and why? Because it had been there for a long time. At least until a few nights ago when it had vanished without a trace.

“You have to give it back, Shea,” said Octavia with a hint of warning. “I’m serious.”

“No.”

Wendell gave Octavia a peculiar look.

“He doesn’t have to give it back,” he told her. “It’s his now, don’t you see?”

Octavia shook her head. “Since when?”

“Since he stole it,” explained Astrid.

I nodded at her. “You don’t have to worry about it, though, Astrid. I’ve hidden the skull someplace that is so safe that nobody will ever find it.”

Wendell smiled.

“That’s reassuring. And respectful. I can appreciate that. The problem for us is that certain authorities are involved now, and they really want it back. And they can make our lives hell until it’s returned. That’s why Octavia is particularly upset.”

“Are you talking about Harvard’s Internal Security Group?”

Wendell and Octavia gaped. Astrid looked nonplussed.

“Who are they?” she asked.

Of course, I knew all about them. What kind of master criminal would I be if my planning hadn’t uncovered the existence of the nefarious HISG?

“They’re like Harvard’s secret police. Nothing to worry about, though,” I told her. “Trust me. I spent half an hour with them this morning before I arrived at the Countway.”

There was a long pause while Wendell disentangled himself from his stupefaction.

“You met with HISG? Nobody meets with HISG. We’re not even supposed to know they exist.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. Other than how underwhelmed I was, I suppose. But that might be the because I have Pathological Problems With Authority. For what it’s worth it was easily the worst 9.30am meeting I’ve ever had in this job.”

Octavia was nearing the end of her patience.

“What is your exit strategy here? How are you going to prevent yourself from being arrested?”

“Nobody can arrest me,” I replied. “Nobody has any proof.”

“But you’ve just told us that –”

I waved my hand dismissively. “I’ll deny I said any of this. I’ll declare the allegations scurrilous. It’s part of a harassment campaign! And political! I’m a pawn in an interdepartmental row. Who even knows what I’ll say.”

Octavia flung her chopsticks down with irritation and was about to speak, apparently quite angrily, but Wendell touched her arm again.

“What are you saying, Shea? Why did you tell us all this, then?”

“I don’t know. I’m very honest, I suppose.”

“Shea,” said Astrid politely. “Can we have it back?”

“The skull?” I asked, scoffing my third mouthful. I’d been doing most of the talking, and the others had almost finished their lunch.

She nodded.

“Why do you want it?” I asked her, genuinely curious.

“Sentimental reasons.”

Wendell and Octavia nodded with vigorous agreement.

I felt a wave of surprise. It struck me as highly peculiar that a group of librarians could feel so sentimental about a skull. It’s not like they had known Phineas in real life.

“Alright,” I said, after considering it a moment. “You can have it back.”

Octavia blinked at me. Wendell held his breath. Astrid merely thanked me and pushed away her empty tray.

“But you have to listen to my story first,” I added.

She nodded. “That’s fine with me. How about you guys?”

“Let’s be very clear about this,” said Octavia. “You’re saying you’ll give us back the skull if we let you … tell a story?”

I nodded. For some odd reason or other, the fourth piece of makimono tasted less substantial. Feeling bold and intrepid, I decided to try a mouthful of pickled ginger.

“And what if we don’t?”

Well, I’ll go ahead and admit it now; the pickled ginger was a revelation. The makimono became interesting again. “If you don’t, Octavia, then I’ll consider throwing the skull of Phineas Gage into the Charles River.”

I had tried sushi a couple of times before, and it had never really made much sense. It’s cold, it’s clammy and a bit weird. But now I was undergoing some kind of odd sensory transformation. Apparently, my palate had been living in a state of undiagnosed depression for years. The makimono, infused with soy sauce and wasabi, felt like the culinary equivalent of electroshock therapy.

“What choice do we have?” Wendell asked his boss. All at once, I found myself wondering if there was some other impulse driving them. Are they competing with one another, somehow?

I might have no talent for Harvard politics, but anyone could see Wendell was an intensely ambitious man. Of course, he wanted to be the hero who finally arranged for the skull’s safe return. It was easy to picture him placing the sacred relic into the director’s hands, with the quiet dignity of a fabled archaeologist. I could already hear him muttering something about being only too pleased to bring the matter to some well-deserved closure.

Flashes from cameras, journalists firing questions at him, etcetera. He would be a rising star, a man to watch. Wendell, the man of the hour. The man who'd shown some quick thinking during that whole brouhaha with the skull.

It would be sad for him, of course, if he had to share his glory with Octavia. A decade from retirement and at the pinnacle of her career, her lack of ambition made her a formidable opponent in a place like Harvard. Quick on the uptake and always ready with a pack of matches when a bridge needed burning, Octavia was Wendell's greatest rival. But why would she want the skull returned?

Because its disappearance was pure nonsense, I supposed. Here was a woman who was utterly fed up with nonsense. A long career at Harvard would do that to you, I thought wistfully.

But why, my imagination persisted, would Octavia meddle in this matter with the skull? Why not leave it all to her trustworthy subordinate?

The answer was readily apparent. There was no way she could let her upstart apprentice take any sort of credit for anything. Wendell needed to learn a thing or two. Patience, being one. His place in the scheme of things being another.

And what did Astrid want? Don't ask me. If I knew the answer to that question I'd have given it to her already and this story would be about the two of us living under one roof and arguing about shelf-space in the bathroom.

“How long is this going to take?” Octavia asked me suspiciously.

I sighed and thought about it for a little while. “How about … I give you back the skull by seven o’clock.”

“Tonight?” Wendell asked, eyes wide.

“If you agree to hear my entire story.”

“You swear?”

“I solemnly swear upon the sacred bones of my Nana.”

Astrid nudged me. “But do you pinky swear?”

We wrapped our little fingers together.

“I pinky swear!”

“That’s good enough for me.”

It was pleasant to be dealing with a reasonable human being for a change. I don’t know what it is about Astrid, but she just seems to have so much more common sense than, well, the two unrepentant bureaucrats sitting across the table from us.

And I don’t know whether it was serendipity or a coincidence, but somehow we both lifted our tall plastic glasses of water at the same time. Noticing this, we raised them slightly in a mutual toast.

Wendell and Octavia were frowning. They looked a little bewildered, actually. I have no idea why. I had offered them a great deal – a priceless skull *and* a good story, and all they had to do was listen. What else were they going to do with the rest of the day, anyway? Hang around pretending to get work done? Besides, the holidays were almost upon us – it was a time to be festive

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, yes,” said Wendell impatiently. “What do you want to tell us?”

I took a breath and held it. Suddenly it was difficult to resist the urge to leap from my chair and yell ‘HA!’ with triumph.

Let me explain.

I grew up near a small town called Thargomindah, which is a very isolated settlement in a remote Queensland, and this has always made me feel a little disconnected from the rest of the world. Wherever I go, I always have this odd tendency to feel like the things going on around me don’t make a great deal of sense.

Things don’t make sense to you, I would often tell myself, because you grew up in a really isolated part of the world.

The further I traveled from Thargomindah, however, the more I realized that this assumption was just plain wrong. Over time I had to revise the thought altogether. Things don't make sense to you, I came to realize, only because they don't make sense. People all over the world behave strangely, and typically with unmerited self-confidence.

Take Wendell and Octavia, for instance.

It wasn't that they had miscalculated; they had just assumed that someone with a strange foreign accent would never be able to beat them at their own game. They had forgotten that – to much of the world – they too had strange foreign accents. In other words, unlike Wendell and Octavia, I knew that my opponents were mysterious and unpredictable foreigners.

In short, they had underestimated me. *Don't get too carried away*, I thought excitedly. *You've got this in the bag. All you have to do is not get carried away...*

"I suppose it all starts in April," I said to Wendell serenely. "I remember it like it was yesterday. The air outside was cool and crisp, so I decided to take a walk."

# architecture and the dark arts

Between the Countway and Gordon Hall there is a concrete path that leads around to the Quad, and along that path are low, jutting blocks that offer serviceable – if slightly uncomfortable – places to sit and rest. It's not a bad place to go when you need a break from things, though it can be a little cold, especially when in shadow. I shivered a little, pulled my hoodie over my head, and watched the people passing to and fro.

From here I could overhear voices approaching and fading. A gaggle of librarians passed by, speaking in hushed whispers.

“The Necromancer has to be stopped!”

“We should write a letter to someone.”

“There’s no way of doing it anonymously. I tell you, we’ll regret it if we try. Best to bide our time and wait.”

The Necromancer was a nefarious chief administrator who haunted a corner office, high above us on the far side of the tower. She had been wreaking havoc in the library for the past few years, or so I’d been told.

I don’t often tell people this, but my Nana had always discouraged my interest in the arcane arts. She had been a witch doctor by trade, though she was retired by the time I arrived in the world. She was reluctant to teach me anything she knew because, in her professional opinion, magic was no business for men.

“Men are temperamentally unsuited for it,” she told me when I was ten or eleven. “A little bit of knowledge and you lock yourselves in towers and start trying to raise skeleton armies.”

I have to admit Nana had a point. If I’d had her knowledge of magic then that

is precisely what I would do. It would be me – in my tower – with my legion of mace wielding skeletons – and a long list of names with the words ‘Everyone Who Has Ever Crossed Me’ written at the top.

All in all, I suppose it’s probably better I ended up working for Central IT at Harvard Medical School. Besides, in my heart of hearts, I never had much interest in becoming a full-time practitioner of thaumaturgy. Magic is a lot of effort. Conjunction is unpredictable. Augury is messy. Exorcism is risky. Soothsaying is like opening your Christmas presents in June. And astrology is complete and utter nonsense.

My real passion lay elsewhere.

From the youngest age, all I have ever wanted to do was move to Monaco and become a successful jewel thief. Art and antiquities could be a sideline, of course, but my heart was set on stealing jewelry from wealthy widows and heiresses. That was my aspiration. This job at Harvard? A complete accident, as far as I was concerned. It was a fun thing to do in the meantime, of course, but it wasn’t my dream. Computers, like magic, were merely idle interests, based on things I’d been exposed to at an early age.

Still, I can’t pretend that being raised by a retired witch doctor had left no lasting impression on me. I’d acquired a range of skills and insights from the old lady – partly by osmosis, and partly because she’d never been able to resist showing off.

The point I’m working to here is that, despite everything my Nana had taught me about magic, I really can’t say if this Necromancer was a true practitioner of the dark arts. I had noted the widespread consternation she’d inspired, of course, but I had barely listened to the librarians’ tales of her mischief. The general gist of it seemed to involve a certain amount of dancing on burning pyres of library books, and the occasional summoning of gruesome horrors from an abyss or something of that nature.

The honest truth is that I neither saw nor heard any actual untethered demons making a ruckus on the upper floors. It's a shame, really; I would have loved to have gotten a look at that sort of thing. But sadly I never detected the faintest whiff of sulfur, nor set eyes on a single hoof print in the carpet. Eventually I had to wonder if they were all exaggerating a little.

The Countway is a cube-shaped pile of yellowing concrete that rises about six stories above the ground. Anyone looking at it could be forgiven for assuming it is some kind of architectural hate letter to humanity. Ornamental strips of concrete run down the facade as a rude gesture of postmodern solidarity with the Roman Empire. The design would probably seem original – innovative, even – to anyone who had never seen a large concrete box before.

If, somewhere in this galaxy, there is an evil alien civilization that exists only to inflict misery and suffering on all forms of life, then I suspect that their civilization's courthouses, prisons, torture chambers, slave pits, poison distilleries, chemical weapons plants, abattoirs, and insurance companies would all, in some way, resemble the Countway Library of Medicine. I don't know where the architect's childhood went wrong, exactly, but my guess is that he suffered terribly at the hands of terrorists.

Whatever the case, no well-adjusted human being can stand outside the Countway Library and think the architect wasn't nursing a grudge against us all.

It reminds me that a small minority of people harbor such an extravagant dislike for humanity that they would probably find careers in serial killing, or the financial services, far too pedestrian. These beings, avatars of sinister intent and subtle malice, feel they have no option but to become architects. And so, they live out their dark and twisted days in bowties and brightly colored spectacles, erecting monstrosities like the Countway Library by day, and by night dressing up as clowns in the secrecy of their own homes.

Nobody, you see, can stand in front of this library and feel uplifted and inspired by humanity's greatness; you can only feel slightly depressed, and

annoyed at your parents for lying to you about there being a God.

Stay to the right as you enter through the glass doors – a uniformed security guard is going to challenge you to swipe your identification card. If you don't have one, you'll be turned around and asked to leave. If this is the case, my advice is to get around to the other side of Gordon Hall – you can see some trees over there, and after staring at them for ten minutes, you might be able to recover a sense that the world isn't such a terrible place, really.

If, on the other hand, you don't run into any troubles with security then you will find yourself in a spacious atrium that is filled with both a powerful feeling of emptiness and the color beige. It is normal to feel uneasy and slightly light-headed here, so head over to the water cistern to your right, just in front of the Circulation Desk. It's there to help you.

After refreshing yourself a little you might notice a few overly-large oil paintings of 19th-century anatomy classes. There are also some pictures of bearded doctors whom Harvard Medical School still honors, even though – were they were alive today – they'd be treating your nausea with leeches and hacking off both your arms with a rusted saw. And not because it would help you, but because they're deranged.

There are two flights of stairs here; one sweeping gently up, and another that leads down from the far side of a large pit into a lower level. The stairs leading up to the second floor are such an obvious necessity for library visitors that they were, of course, not part of the original design. These stairs were added more recently, and the convenience they have offered to library patrons and staff is so great that their very existence probably has the architect rolling in his grave.

I remember the first time I entered the library. I looked about the empty atrium in a perplexed sort of way and asked the security guard whether this was, in fact, the library. When he said that it was, I thought Harvard was playing some sort of extremely complicated and expensive practical joke on all of us, which goes to show just how reliable first impressions can be.

Imagine yourself standing there, taking it all in. Something is bothering you, but you can't quite put your finger on what it is. Like all devious and clever tricks, a question rises up from the shadows of your unconsciousness until it finally starts flapping about in your mind like a bewildered bat: Where are all the books?

There are no shelves anywhere! There is no feeling of books! And why? Because the books are all on the other side of the atrium walls, hidden from view. The architect's second triumph, you might say, is to have robbed the library of any sense of being a library.

And why would he do that?

Perhaps he believed that no visitor to a library likes books? Or maybe he simply wanted to inconvenience everybody? Regardless of the reason, to see an actual book you need to leave the atrium, which means that this vast space in the center of the building is always empty. This, in turn, makes every visitor to the building feel mildly uneasy; it is like being in an empty restaurant at dinnertime.

The librarians, who compete for funding with other departments, must go to absurd lengths to prove that their library is being used continuously by students. That the building has been carefully designed to seem as if it isn't an actual library is, therefore, a textbook example of passive aggression in architecture.

Now, walk towards the stairs and look up into the atrium. Note the architectural homage to the average suburban shopping mall. On the third and fourth floors are rows of little study rooms facing into the atrium. On both your left and right sides you'll see balconies jutting out, each a landing for the two elevators on either side of the Countway. Here you are at ground level and – do you hear that conversation up on the fifth floor? Yes, this library might have the most perfect acoustics in the world.

Wait a moment – why would the architect create such good acoustics in a library? Wouldn't that drive the librarians crazy?

Yes.

Now, moving on – what’s that? Does the skylight leak when it rains? I’ve never asked the janitors, but doubt the architect would have skimped on any of the minor details. It is undoubtedly designed to flood, and does from time to time, but only down in the archives where the librarians least want there to be any water.

In short, if Hieronymus Bosch had lived to see the Countway Library of Medicine he would have sobbed with admiration. It’s no wonder the librarians think the building is cursed, or that security guards refuse to patrol the upper floors late at night. In conclusion, the fact that it hasn’t been burned to the ground by a cabal of Italian priests is an indication that the Vatican is no longer at the top of its game and really needs to get its act together.

## interruption, part two

“Why are you describing the architecture of the library to us? We work there, remember?”

“I have to describe the backdrop to this story, Wendell. It’s for narrative purposes – we need a sense of where we are.”

“We already have a sense for where we are!” exclaimed Octavia.

I received this compliment on my gifts as a storyteller and smiled modestly. “Thank you so much. Now moving on...”

“Did you really need to remind us about the flooding?” Wendell asked, suppressing a shudder.

“He’s right about the acoustics being so good,” Astrid noted. “I mean, who builds a library with such good acoustics?”

“Tell me about it,” muttered Wendell. The poor guy. All he wanted to do was shush people. He’s a natural shusher – it’s probably why he got into the library business in the first place. Here he was in one of the most important libraries in the world, and he can’t feasibly shush anybody. Well, no – he could probably shush one person, but then he’d have to shush the next person and the next. It would never stop. From minute to minute he would be shushing an endless stream of loud voices. It would go on for the rest of his career and drive him mad. It would drive anyone mad, even the most enthusiastic of shushers.

Octavia seemed distracted. “You know, I think the skylight does leak.”

“It really is a luckless place,” whispered Astrid. “Maybe the library really is haunted by evil.”

“I didn’t know your Nana was a witch doctor,” mused Wendell seriously.

“You know, I have an uncle in Haiti who dabbles in economics.”

Octavia cleared her throat. “Can we please get back to the story?”

# harvard astrologers

Harvard Medical School is wrapped around a large rectangular lawn that is called the Quad. One end of the Quad abuts Longwood Avenue. At the other stands a tall, proud pile of stone and columns called Gordon Hall.

It might look like a respectable building from the outside but behind its doors swarm a multitude of bureaucrats. It is a tower filled with mysteries. We all knew, of course, that Gordon Hall portions out large, wobbling slices of budget to the rest of the school, but who are the mysterious denizens of Gordon Hall? The librarians had precious few scraps of insight.

Gordon Hall seemed to coordinate their earthly duties in accordance to a higher celestial awareness. They reshaped departments incessantly, drawing and redrawing the boundaries of Harvard organizations within the shifting geometry of budgetary ley lines. But how had they acquired their knowledge and wisdom? Who were they? And how had they come to inhabit this magical castle, through which untold riches flowed like a sacred river?

The astrologers themselves are rarely visible. They move in strange circles, chanting solemnly and whispering edicts in riddletongue. But some afternoons these cryptic mystics have been known to descend to the tiles of the atrium, where they throw fabulously expensive parties.

The solemn observance of Harvard's timeless tradition of self-celebration is not an obligation that they take lightly. That's why you'll see chocolate fountains there, and stacks of exotic edibles and exquisite pastries, and a whirlwind of wait staff will blow through the crowd with plastic cups brimming with champagne.

Any Harvard employee is welcome to attend these parties, of course; nobody would want anyone to think such extravagance was for the benefit of a select few – in the 21st century, Harvard has risen far above such elitist frivolities. Still, if some lowly neophyte within the lower chambers of Gordon Hall always forgets to send out invitations to the campus mailing list, well – not everyone would be able to attend anyway, would they?

I saw, but dared not touch, wafers of woven chocolate that had been composed in secret underground laboratories by master chocolatiers in Switzerland. These delicacies are imported in diplomatic pouches by loyal Harvard alumni embedded in the US State Department. These slivers of chocolate are, it has been disclosed, an unofficial controlled substance; not only perilously addictive but one taste might ruin all other chocolate for you for the rest of your life.

I heard chamber music and much laughter. I saw deliriously high stacks of desserts and confections. Astrologers mingled with secretaries and administrative folk in an otherworldly scene of joy and levity.

Nobody in the Countway seemed to know about these parties apart from Kurt, who works at the circulation desk. We usually went along together, and waitstaff would bring us *vol-au-vents* and buttermilk fried calamari with lemon aioli and buckets of champagne. And we would laugh and act like nitwits, and nobody seemed to mind.

## interruption, part three

“Wait a minute! How in hell are you guys finding out about these parties?!” Wendell demanded, intensely agitated for some reason.

I shrugged. “We’ve got spies in Gordon Hall.”

“Please,” Wendell pleaded, grasping at the sleeve of my sweater. “Tell me who they are...”

“You know, I would have invited you along, but I assumed you wouldn’t enjoy all the tedious hobnobbing with influential Harvard people. Kurt and I really just try to keep to ourselves and scoff all the *vol-au-vents*. We also get very drunk, I suppose. But then again, everybody does...”

“I stopped going to those things years ago,” Octavia said. “Ten-foot tall chocolate fountains and my department hasn’t even got the funds to hire a part-time assistant for poor Agatha.”

“I know,” I said sympathetically. “I somehow knew, without even asking, that Wendell would feel the same way. It just seemed kinder not to invite him along.”

The man produced a series of short nods and looked miserably at his plate.

Astrid agreed that it all sounded horrible and boring and dissipated and wasteful, and though she doubted she’d have a good time, I should feel free to invite her along next time. “I hate the thought of you boys being stuck there, bored out of your minds, and with nobody else to talk to.”

I became suddenly wistful. Would I even be a Harvard employee by the end of today? That was a sobering thought. No more roaming the halls of Harvard with Kurt. No more Dean’s parties...

“Where was I?” I muttered, collecting myself. “Walking around the campus,

wasn't I? You don't have any other interesting interruptions in you right now, do you, mate? Alright, let's walk down the stairs..."

# the quad, the boat, and the macaw

Let's walk down the stairs and out across that expensive lawn that Harvard rolls out at the start of spring, with the purpose of providing the school's photographers a place to take pictures of students playing Frisbee.

The grass is usually covered with clusters of students eating their lunch but for the sake of having a little privacy let's imagine that autumn has come to Boston. See? Now the lawn is windy and deserted.

At the end of the Quad, above some fanning stone steps, looms Gordon Hall. A grandiose structure embellished with predictable Roman columns. As we look at it, I can't help but be reminded that Boston is very old, having been settled by Europeans in 1630. When you think about it, Americans have been referring to themselves as The New World for almost four hundred years. I suppose it's just a tradition at this point.

Like everyone who is not American, I know little of this country's history. I know it was founded by some religious extremists who wore amusing hats. I know that Americans celebrate their munificence each year at Thanksgiving, when they eat a lot of food and ritualistically carve evil faces into vegetables. We know they enjoy flags, speeches and watching a version of cricket that is played around a diamond.

Obviously, I would prefer to be able to furnish this narrative with all sorts of educational facts, but sadly this business with the skull has kept me far too busy. Over the past few months, I have barely managed half a chapter of a history of Polynesia. Incidentally, did you know that until the middle of the 19th century

the practice of eating one's enemies was a respected and honorable practice on the island of Fiji?

While that may not seem technically relevant to Harvard, it provides a useful reminder that ideas about what is right and proper vary wildly from region to region. In other words, the fact that I'm Australian prevented me from knowing what Harvard might do when I stole the skull of Phineas Gage.

This, after all, is why I discussed the topic at great length with my co-workers. What else was I going to do? There was no way I could make an accurate prediction about Harvard's most senior administrators on my own. Even with help from my colleagues it wasn't until the middle of autumn that I had a sense of how the school would retaliate.

First, Gordon Hall would try to reason with me. This would not work because, as many of my colleagues pointed out to me early on, I am not a reasonable person.

Next, Gordon Hall would probably threaten to lay waste to my 'professional reputation'. Obviously, I hoped it wouldn't come to that. It should ideally occur to someone over there that the fact I had stolen the skull in the first place might suggest that I don't value my professional reputation all that much. It would be awful if I had to explain that to them in person.

After all, the worst thing about working in IT is how often one has to explain obvious things to people who really should be able to figure it out themselves.

Anyway, I expected Gordon Hall would eventually become so frustrated with the situation that they would summon me to a meeting with campus police. This is the phase I looked forward to the least. As a person with Pathological Problems With Authority, I am never enthusiastic about meeting folks who work in law enforcement. Low-Paid Enforcers for An Oligarchical Ruling-Class make me socially anxious, I guess.

My other concern is that I'll inadvertently say something that might result my

getting accidentally shot. I read Americans newspapers; police revolvers go off accidentally here all the time.

The odd thing about the situation was that nobody actually had real proof that I was the culprit behind the theft. And meanwhile, I would be talking loudly about going to the press and using phrases like ‘ethnic targeting,’ ‘profiling,’ and ‘the systematic persecution of citizens from a former penal colony.’

Knowing me, I would throw in some stuff about how the world is secretly being run by a race of alien lizards. You see, I have always believed that, if something is worth doing, it’s worth doing properly.

Sooner or later Gordon Hall was bound to comprehend that the man who took their precious is skull is, to put it mildly, too much work. And as anyone who works at Harvard will tell you, professional Harvard bureaucrats don’t get to where they are in life by doing too much work. So what do they do when they’re confronted with a problem that proves intractable?

They throw money at it, of course.

They’ll send along someone who is friendly and personable. We’ll chat pleasantly about life and the world. The skull itself will be referred to only obliquely. After a certain amount of time a particular number will make its way into the conversation – abstractly, of course, but sizable enough to be interesting.

And why indeed should a private collector end up with the, *ahem*, item in question? Surely we could come to an arrangement more agreeable and convenient to all parties? At this moment I will be offered more money than I am ever likely to see in my entire lifetime. I’ll have an opportunity to become rich, as the saying goes, beyond my wildest dreams.

Unfortunately, I have never had any dreams of becoming rich, wild or otherwise. You see, if I were rich I would buy a boat, the largest and most ridiculous luxury yacht that I could afford. And that would be a mistake as terrible as it is inevitable because – knowing myself as I do – I would sail that

boat straight onto some rocks. I wouldn't be able to help myself.

After all, it's not like I know how to sail. Thargomindah is a twelve-hour drive from the ocean. And you know how life is – you're always busy. I don't have the time to get good at driving boats.

I would think about getting it insured, of course – I'd think about it every day. In fact, I bet I would wake up every morning with the intention of finding an insurance salesman that very day. But each and every evening I would lay down to sleep and remember with a jolt that I'd forgotten all about it.

Then I would kindly ask my pet macaw to remind me to contact an insurance salesman first thing in the morning, close my eyes and fall asleep in my hammock. Because it's not like I'm going to buy myself a boat without getting a macaw and a hammock.

I would wake up the next day, and my macaw raises the topic of insurance. I tell the bird not to nag me, and promise that I'll get to the insurance business after lunch. Then, after a light breakfast, I would probably go for a swim. Lunchtime comes and goes – but look here – why would I want to talk to an insurance salesman? I've got better things to do. I'm rich, and besides, I own a boat.

Soon, none of this matters because my boat, myself and my macaw are now far from shore, drifting haplessly. We'd be unable to do anything concrete about the insurance issue because we are too busy contending with a much more pressing problem, which is that we're lost. And now I'm learning first-hand what happens to people whose enthusiasm for owning boats eclipses their willingness to sit down and read a book about navigation.

And so it goes. A few days later, we're in a life raft, my pet macaw and I, watching the upturned hull of my boat smash itself to bits on those rocks that I mentioned earlier.

Just try to imagine how annoyed I'll be. Sure, we could blame the macaw for

not being more insistent about the insurance issue but who are we kidding? No, I have to let it go. It's bad enough that I'm losing my boat, along with my entire fortune. There's no need for me to lose an argument with a bird as well.

So that's why I have no interest in becoming rich. But that's the thing about me; no matter what I set out to do, I always set myself realistic expectations.

And so I heaved a sigh and shivered. It was curiously cold out there on the lawn. I looked at the Goldenson building, then behind me at the Armenise, and then back in the direction of Gordon Hall. Was there something I wasn't seeing? What, I asked myself for the hundredth time, was Harvard going to do when it realizes it's not getting its skull back?

# why do they keep interrupting me?

“Well, thankfully you changed your mind on that score,” said Wendell, eyeing me carefully.

“Of course, Wendell. That’s my point after all. That a man always has the option to change his mind.”

Wendell and Octavia appeared troubled for some reason. Still, there was probably no point in offering any reassurance. Astrid was watching me with a curious half-smile. I wondered whether or not she cared if the skull was returned to the library.

“What are you thinking about right now?” she asked, noticing my glance.

I looked away, feeling self-conscious. “Nothing much. I’ve had a strange morning is all.”

Wendell snorted. “A strange morning? You met with the Harvard Internal Security Group. Mornings don’t get stranger than that around here.”

“It was just a meeting,” I mumbled.

“They’re secret police, aren’t they?” Astrid asked Wendell.

“You ever hear of the Stasi in East Germany? They were the State’s internal security apparatus. Well HISG is our internal security group. They keep an eye on things inside the school...”

“But why would we need a Stasi?”

“Well, they’re not like the Stasi exactly – I mean, there’s no record of them poisoning anybody or anything. Do you know what an endowment is?”

Astrid nodded, but I shook my head.

An endowment, Wendell explained, is money that has been donated to the university for the purpose of investing to raise funds. Last year Harvard's endowment had been roughly 37 billion dollars. To put it in perspective, Google's net revenue in the same period was approximately 24 billion.

"Now, a university's endowment is a very different thing from the net revenue of a company, but the comparison reveals just how much money Harvard has in its piggy bank. With this much wealth and assets, it's obvious that we would need some sort of secret police to keep an eye on things."

"Is it?" wondered Astrid skeptically. "Because it all sounds pretty creepy to me."

Octavia nodded in agreement. "That's why we're not supposed to know about them. Hell, HISG doesn't even exist, officially. They crop up from time to time, though."

"Well, I wish we'd had this conversation sooner," I remarked grumpily. "If I'd known they didn't exist I wouldn't have turned up to that meeting this morning."

"What were they like?" asked Wendell in a hushed tone.

I shook my head and exhaled. "Well to be honest, when I went along to that meeting I had no idea what to expect..."

Well no, that wasn't true. I had expected something.

# the interrogation

Where are the doughnuts?

Sensitive meetings at Harvard almost always feature a box of doughnuts, and this meeting was highly sensitive. So much so that the invitation I'd received in my email went so far as to describe it as an 'informal chat.'

The absence of doughnuts left me perplexed. A priceless skull had gone missing! You'd think someone might have had the seriousness of mind to offer their only suspect some doughnuts. This is just frivolousness, I thought with dismay.

The room had a window looking out across Shattuck Street, half a dozen comfortable armchairs and a low coffee table with a few manila folders and a stapler.

My boss was already here, grinning as if everything was right with the world, which is how Hector always acts whenever things are not.

He introduced me to Karen from Human Resources, who was smiling like a cat at a dog show, as well as two miserable beings in gray suits who both looked as though they had been born without souls.

Lubyanko and Petak were emissaries from Harvard's Internal Security Group, I was informed. I felt myself frown. They looked precisely like the sort of monsters you'd expect not to bring doughnuts to an 'informal chat.'

Obeying some unspoken cue, we each settled into an armchair.

"Looks like there'll be snow on Christmas day," observed the suit named Lubyanko.

Karen clasped her hands together, enraptured. The other suit, Petak, seemed

avidly intrigued by this weather talk and went so far as to speculate that it might, in fact, snow on Christmas. Or, then again, he suggested, it might not. The other two nodded appreciatively at this insight.

“When was the last time we had a white Christmas in Boston?” wondered Hector.

All four pondered this awhile, ritually agreeing that there *had* been a white Christmas in recent years, though *when* precisely none could remember.

“Isn’t that funny?” said Karen from Human Resources, shaking her head with amazement. The others smiled and agreed.

I supposed that there was some sort of intricate coded-language behind the exchange, but I couldn’t make any sense of it. What did any of this chatter mean?

These offices belonged to Human Resources, I knew; that’s why I’d expected to only meet with people from this department. Had Hector known there would be two goons from Harvard’s nefarious security division in attendance? If so, why couldn’t he have told me?

I shook my head with annoyance. Of course, he wouldn’t tell me. Then again, just because Hector didn’t seem surprised didn’t mean he knew what was going on. Perhaps he knew less than I. Still, this all felt like an ambush. *Is* this an ambush? What is going on here, really?

Naturally, I had planned to appear surprised about everything – especially when anyone implied that I might know something about the missing skull. The presence of the ominous detectives from HISG would make my reaction disconcertingly authentic, I now realized. All I could feel right now was disquiet.

You probably should not have launched your career in crime by stealing a historically significant skull, I told myself.

I tried not to squirm in my chair and nodded gently, as if agreeing with whatever nonsense the others were chattering about.

You could have just stolen a stapler. That wouldn't have been a bad start. But no, you had to be ambitious, Shea. And now look at you.

“...wondering if you happened to know anything about that?” a voice wondered aloud.

“Hm?” I murmured.

“The skull,” Hector prompted. He was sitting to my left, regarding me with a slightly elevated brow.

“Whose?” I said to him. “Which?”

“Phineas Gage.”

“The one with the hole in it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s in the library.”

“Not anymore,” said Lubyanko. “It’s missing.”

“How is it missing?” I asked.

Ironically the answer to that question was far more interesting than my tone suggested, but I did my level best to sound breezily uninterested.

The two suits from HISG gave me funny stares that they’d probably learned in detective school. You know, the stares that insinuate that you had best tell them what a guilty, culpable wretch you are, or else they’d have no choice but to do something sinister and spiteful.

“Did you look for it?” I asked helpfully, when they didn’t reply.

“Yes. We did.”

“Well, where did you see it last?”

“In its display case in the museum, on the fifth floor of the Countway Library of Medicine.”

I noted an unpleasant edge in Lubyanko’s voice.

“Now that’s interesting. I might have seen someone acting suspiciously on the fifth floor.”

The two suits blinked in unison, apparently surprised. Petak lifted his notepad and pen, and made ready to jot down notes.

“There has been a man lurking about on the fifth floor of the library for a few weeks now. Many of us have noticed him. He enters the building once or twice per week and always on different days. Sometimes he appears in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon.

“He doesn’t speak to anybody – in fact, he will rebuff any attempt to make conversation. Instead, he steps into the elevator and goes straight to the fifth floor where he locks himself in an office for a few hours.

“Then,” I concluded, raising a finger significantly, “he leaves without saying a single word.”

“An office, you say?” Petak said, looking puzzled.

“He’s talking about the new director of the Library,” breathed Hector, staring at the ceiling.

Karen from Human Resources looked as if she was undergoing a fierce internal struggle. The two suits merely looked annoyed.

“Well, I could tell them about the ghosts,” I told Hector, “but I think we’re all supposed to pretend they don’t exist.”

“Ghosts? What ghosts?” Karen asked.

“I’m not the best person to ask,” I said evasively. “You should probably ask one of the librarians.”

Lubyanko frowned. “We plan to speak with the librarians. We just thought we should speak with you first.”

“You don’t need my permission. They’re very approachable.”

“They really are!” Karen enthused. “They helped me find a book the other day

—”

Petak cut her off. “We’re only looking to recover the skull. We don’t see any reason to make a big deal out of it. It was probably just a harmless prank.”

“You know what you should do?” I offered. “I reckon you should just get yourselves a new one.”

The pair of suits swiveled a little towards Hector, as if requesting translation help.

“Get yourselves another skull,” I continued. “That’s definitely what I’d do. This is Harvard Medical School – surely it can’t be too hard to lay your hands on another skull. Stop in at Anatomical Gifts – that’s the department where they keep all the corpses that have been ‘left for science,’ so to speak. They might have several skulls available.”

“Yes, we know what Anatomical Gifts is,” supplied Petak tersely.

“Well, I’m only trying to be helpful here.”

“Helpful is certainly one way of putting it.”

“Look, I’m sorry my suggestions aren’t up to your usual standards, but this meeting isn’t up to my usual standards. After all – where are the doughnuts? Yes, that’s right. I said it!”

The two suits rumpled a bit in surprise.

“What’s this?” asked one.

“You want doughnuts?” asked another.

“It’s too late for that now,” I replied crisply. “The damage is already done.”

Lubyanko grimaced unnaturally. “If you don’t mind us asking – what do you think this meeting is about?”

I took a deep breath.

“Well someone has taken the skull, like you said, and you want my advice about handling the librarians. Because I’m the resident expert at handling the

librarians, at least in the eyes of Central IT. Though I don't know why you have to drag us into this mess. We've got enough problems – I mean, have you ever met our CIO? But if you want my opinion, I don't think the librarians stole the skull. I mean, why would they steal something they already own?"

I sat back and crossed my arms, sincerely impressed with my own logic, which, to my thinking, was both sound and unassailable.

"Um, we particularly would like to know if you had any role in its disappearance."

I tilted my head and looked at him from a funny angle. Remember me mentioning that I'd been practicing my innocent looks? This was the one I'd decided was the most compelling.

"You think I took the skull?"

"Nobody is accusing anyone," Hector soothed. "It is just widely remembered that you often said you were going to steal it. And now it's missing, so..."

"You know it has a hole in it, right?" My question was rewarded with a measure of silence. I let it linger for a while, then asked in a meaningful tone, "Why would I want a skull with a hole in it?"

"What?" asked Lubyanko eventually. Or maybe it was Petak. People like these always look the same to me.

"If I wanted a skull," I explained patiently, "I could simply go over to Anatomical Gifts and ask for a nice one. A new one. I wouldn't want a skull with a hole in it."

I had to hand it to myself. Nothing I'd said was a lie. In truth, I really didn't want to have the skull of Phineas Gage in my possession. Taking it had been an act of necessity. Sometimes a man just has to do the right thing, whether he wants to or not.

"Let's approach this from another angle –"

“But why would I want a skull in the first place? It’s just so creepy! Do any of you guys have skulls? Like, on your desks or something?”

Everyone stared.

I leaned over to Hector and whispered, “I’m beginning to think these two guys are a couple of weirdos.”

“The gentleman doth protest too much, methinks,” muttered one of the goons in annoyance. I think it was Petak again.

“That’s brilliant,” I snapped in his direction. “Anyone who vehemently denies stealing something must, therefore, be guilty. Where did you go to detective school, genius?”

“Harvard Law School,” the goons replied in unison.

“They’re not detectives. These men are lawyers,” murmured Hector, looking away.

“I should have known they went to Harvard when one of them quoted a really well-known line from Shakespeare. You’re lawyers, huh? Why do you work here? Aren’t you supposed to be down in New York helping billionaires not pay any tax?”

Petak turned to Hector. “Is he always like this?”

Hector shrugged. “Actually he seems to be in a remarkably cooperative mood today.”

“Hey, man, be cool. I have a disorder.”

Karen blinked, scooped up one of the manila folders and started hastily leafing through it. “What’s this? You have a disorder?”

I nodded. “I do. I have a disorder, and it’s psychological in nature, isn’t it Hector?”

He really didn’t want to say it, you could see it in his face.

“He has,” he said stoically, “Pathological Problems With Authority.”

I nodded sadly.

“I was raised by my Nana, you see, and she used to say that I’d always suffered from problems with authority. Just born this way, she reckoned. It’s all psychological, you see.”

“Oh I’m so sorry,” sighed Karen.

“Nana did her best to cure me, of course. Tried everything. Beating me with a stick. Not feeding me. Throwing rocks at me. Nothing worked. She was a good woman, my Nan’. You’d have liked her, Karen.”

“You poor lamb! I can’t imagine how tough that must have been. But we don’t have a record of this?”

“I don’t usually like to talk about it. There is just so much prejudice against people with disorders that are psychological in nature, isn’t there, Karen?”

It wasn’t an accusing look that I cast in Hector’s direction, though it might have conveyed a feeling of somewhat diminished optimism.

“It can’t be easy,” Karen soothed. “Have you ever tried therapy?”

I shook my head sadly.

“It wouldn’t be much of a Problem With Authority if I could just go to an authority for help...”

She clucked her tongue with sympathy.

“The truth is, Karen, that I really don’t like talking about my problems. I like to get on with things, don’t I, Hector? It helps that I enjoy my job. I find it personally fulfilling to do something I’m good at. I keep telling Hector he should try to do the same, don’t I, Hector?”

“Does he receive good feedback from your clients?” Karen asked him.

My boss folded his arms and for some reason took a moment to check each corner of the room. “He’s adept at fixing computers. There are some letters from the library about him in his file...”

We all waited while Karen, leaning back in her chair and squinting, read a page out of my file. The grim lawyers seemed irritated, but neither interrupted.

“Hm,” she said, at last, wrinkling her nose. “These are very positive. Practically glowing.”

I shrugged modestly. “I owe it all to Hector’s leadership. Nobody with Pathological Problems With Authority could hope for a better boss.”

Hector seemed to want to say something but then appeared to think better of it.

One of the lawyers finally cleared his throat.

“If we could return to the subject at hand...”

I clicked my tongue with involuntary impatience. I really had no idea what they expected from me. The truth? Of course, I wanted to tell them the whole story, and explain to everybody why I had had no choice but to take the skull. I knew the full account would exonerate me. But would these folk let me finish? I doubted it. These were the last people in the world in whom I could confide. All they wanted was to have the skull back on its dusty shelf so they could move onto the next item on the day’s agenda. And then? The next item, and the next, and onward, all the way to retirement. The truth of my tale would be unnoticed and abandoned, like a discarded wrapper.

All at once I felt far from home. I was in a corner, surrounded by foreigners, and wondering if I knew what I was doing.

“You know what?” I commented out loud, distractedly. “I’m the only Australian on staff at Harvard.”

The others perked up; Hector frowned, Karen squinted, and the two lawyers became quizzical.

“I looked it up one day. There are a couple of Australians on faculty and a few dozen Australian students, but they’re typically only here for a semester or two. I’m the only one on staff.

“I don’t even know why I looked it up. I suppose it’s because that, compared with the rest of the world, there really aren’t that many of us. In isolation one reaches out for the familiar. A shared historical experience. Our heritage, our... our convict past...”

It was like finding a doorway in the darkness.

Lubyanko’s jaw tighten.

“It’s true that many of us are descended from convicts, so I suppose it goes without saying that when you misplaced something valuable you suddenly needed a private word with the only Australian on staff. Looks a bit odd, doesn’t it, but still –”

“To repeat: nobody is accusing anybody –”

“Yeah, yeah I know – nobody is accusing me of anything. You’re just talking to me for no reason whatsoever. How could that be discrimination? You don’t have any evidence, apparently, so why not talk to someone whose ancestors were criminals? That’s not harassment, is it?”

Here’s the thing. If you run through any building at Harvard shouting the word ‘fire,’ people will form an orderly line and calmly exit the building. Whisper the word ‘harassment,’ on the other hand, and you’ll see a lot of people running around, and falling over furniture like startled goats.

Karen and Hector were frozen in their chairs; they both look like they had accidentally taken a bite from the wrong sandwich.

The lawyers, doubtlessly lacking any real sensitivity, merely shrugged in unison.

“We’re talking to you because you sent out some emails a while back saying you were going to steal the skull of Phineas Gage.”

*Damn it.*

I don’t remember doing that but, as much as I hate to admit it, it did sound

like me. In my defense, this is precisely the sort of rookie mistake any fledgling criminal mastermind might make, and my advice to anyone who is working on a heist is to learn from my example. Lay out your groundwork carefully, that's my advice.

Fortunately, I am good at improvising.

"I was only saying that nobody was taking the security in the museum seriously. I kept telling people that someone could steal this skull – or in other words, that sooner or later somebody would. Didn't I, Hector?"

With seeming reluctance, my boss nodded. "He went on about it a lot a few months ago, it's true."

"Listen to the man. He didn't pay attention to me then. And before you blame him, remember this: nobody else did either. Nobody listened to me at all, so after a while I guess I started phrasing things like 'I'll take the damn skull just to prove the point,' but even then, things around the museum remained the same. So eventually I just gave up."

"And why did you feel it was your responsibility to warn everyone about the skull's precarious security?" Petak asked severely.

I was ready for this one.

"An IT guy sees users making security mistakes all the time. I see passwords written on note-paper taped to monitors. I see people going home with their workstations unlocked. You wind up being 'that guy' – the bloke who tells everyone to be careful. It's frustrating because you're only asking everyone to exercise a bit of common sense."

"Which reminds me: the next time you want to prevent a valuable exhibit from disappearing from your museum, at least point a security camera at the thing."

I shook my head disgustedly. To be honest, in that moment even I believed I hadn't stolen the skull.

“That seems like a helpful idea, thank you,” said Petak. “In the meantime, why did you think someone would be motivated to take this skull in the first place?”

“Are you asking me this as an Australian, descended from criminals and thereby more genetically selected for criminality?”

Hector sighed audibly. I elected to rise above it.

“Maybe they took the thing because they really liked skulls, you know? There are some real weirdos out there. Some folk can get overly enthusiastic about that sort of thing.”

Karen’s nose crinkled with distaste.

“Look here, what do we all know about medical students?” I asked them and began counting off points on my fingers. “They have an unseemly interest in the human body. They volunteer to dissect dead bodies. They have a clinical way of looking at people. They crave wealth, acknowledgment and societal respectability.

“You see what I did there? I just summarized a serial killer. Here at Harvard Medical School we are up to our elbows in these individuals. And now you’ve misplaced a skull so instead of investigating the students you decide to talk to the nearest foreigner.

“What I’m getting at,” I said, leaning back and crossing my arms, “is that I don’t think either of you is particularly good at his job.”

Lubyanko was looking at Hector accusingly.

“I don’t know,” said my boss, trying unsuccessfully not to smile. “He just made some interesting points.”

“Thank you, Hector,” I said, and I meant it, too.

Karen had gone back to reading my file, so I turned to the lawyers.

“Can we wrap this up because I’ve got computers to fix. And I’m sure you’ve

got plenty of creepy medical students to shakedown.”

“Yeah, I think we’re about done,” said Lubyanko grimly. He did not look happy, the poor man. Petak told me that if I should feel like coming forward with any more information to help their inquiries I could reach them through Hector.

Meanwhile, Lubyanko and I stared at one another. I could clearly see that, not only had he found my performance unconvincing, he was now certain I’d stolen the skull.

This was not very fair, of course; I’d put a lot of effort into this performance. Karen believed me. Hector – who cares what Hector thinks – my point is, why wouldn’t *they* believe me? Harvard lawyers are very cynical people, I suppose.

I’d have liked to tell them the entire story, but there were metaphysical truths at stake that were far beyond their comprehension. These men were cogs in the machinery. Functionaries. Loyal servants of the *status quo*. The mysteries of the universe meant nothing to them.

“Good luck with the rest of your investigation,” I said.

“Oh, I’m sure it won’t take much longer,” Lubyanko said breezily. I couldn’t help but wonder if anybody had ever punched him in the face before. I doubted it. There was something about the way he smiled that implied an unmerited feeling of safety. It seemed strange, really; I’m sure people thought about punching him all the time. But what are you going to do?

I stole the stapler instead. I reached across the table, snatched it up and walked out without another word.

It was a beautiful, crisp day outside – no sign of any overcast. I put my new stapler in my coat pocket and reviewed.

I was probably not going to be arrested for another few hours at least. That was reassuring, though I couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling that people were playing games with me. The quiet self-assurance of those two goons from

HISG had been unsettling.

Just then, I felt a creeping sense that I was being watched. I looked about covertly, even checking the rooftops around me. No one seemed to be around but I could sense it all the same; I was about to be arrested.

They had, by some means unknown to me, figured out my entire plan. I'd slipped up somewhere. I'd made a mistake, and now I was walking into a trap. HISG had been toying with me throughout that entire, ridiculous meeting. They could have me arrested whenever they liked, but the sadists wanted to watch me squirm first. Campus police were waiting inside the library – I could feel it.

I could run, of course.

Stowaway aboard a cargo ship bound for Cuba where I can get a job picking bananas. I can settle down with a local girl with dark, flashing eyes. We have no choice, after all; we are in love ... Of course, she's the daughter of a local politician who is able to offer me some protection from inquisitive immigration authorities. His daughter and I get married someplace picturesque. A crumbling chapel overgrown with bougainvillea overlooking the Caribbean, or something. I stumble over my vows in my meager Spanish, much to the consternation of stern matriarchs, who frown and fan themselves impatiently in the heat.

And after the ceremony, the wedding party moves to the town square where trestle tables have been set up in the shade of palms. I am lifting my glass and toasting Allita – my new wife, by the way – when the party is disrupted by the arrival of a dozen barefoot rebels carrying rusting Russian Makarov pistols. They tear me away from my sweet Allita, bind my hands, toss a hessian sack over my head and throw me into the back of some sort of flatbed truck. I am driven deep into the hinterlands, unceremoniously dragged into a small hut where the hessian sack is finally removed. I blink, of course, with dazed wonder at the face in front of me – a sunburned westerner with searing blue eyes and a baseball cap who, I quickly realize, can only be CIA.

After a brisk interrogation in which I reveal nothing, apart from my thirst for *agua con gas, por favor*, my captor drives me to a small airfield and shoves me aboard a decrepit DC10. A few hours later I am in Florida. Here I am dragged from one plane to another, a Lear, and then flown to Washington D.C. where I spend fifteen hours waiting in a holding cell with no word or explanation. Then I am awoken from my fretful delirium in the middle of the night, and dragged onto another plane bound for Guantanamo Bay back in Cuba!

Next? Twenty-nine months of awkward conversations with a seemingly endless number of earnest interrogators who are, by virtue of their appointment, entirely out of their depth, until it is finally established that I am not a former Pakistani intelligence officer who masterminded a string of attacks on American petroleum interests in North Africa. Don't ask me – the CIA moves in mysterious ways. Eventually I am finally released to Austrian embassy officials in Washington D.C., who don't even bother explaining to the CIA the geographic difference between Austria and Australia. They take me out to lunch instead, and we eat schnitzel and drink beer on a patio bar in Dupont Circle. We smoke cigars and laugh about life.

And yet, although in my heart I knew that the story would end well for me, the thought of fleeing to Cuba right now overwhelmed me with feelings of dread and apprehension. Distractedly I crossed the road and passed into the foyer of the Countway Library of Medicine.

I suppose it just seemed easier, really.

## kurt to the rescue

“So now you’re all caught up on my morning’s activities.”

The restaurant had become crowded over the past hour. Our plastic water cups had not been topped up by the waitress for quite some time; she could be seen rushing between tables, looking frazzled. A bustling mob had formed near the front counter where customers waited to take away their lunch orders.

“How would you even know what would happen if you fled to Cuba?!” Octavia demanded, her voice shrill over the hubbub of voices and clattering plates.

“Look, this is my story. I’m the narrator, and I can be an omniscient narrator if I want. It’s my right!”

“Of course it is,” said Astrid approvingly, putting her hand on mine for a moment. “I was thinking only yesterday how nobody strives to be omniscient these days.”

The touch of her hand left me flushed and lost for words.

Wendell was studying me. “You did seem a little irritable this morning when you turned up at my office.”

“Of course he was irritable,” supplied Octavia. “He’d stolen the skull of Phineas Gage and knew he was in serious trouble –”

I sighed. “Here we go. Let’s all start accusing me again...”

“You admitted you did it! Remember?”

All at once I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder, and a familiar voice growled in my ear, “He admitted what?”

It was Kurt, who worked the afternoon shift at the Circulation Desk. One hand held a bag filled with Japanese take-out, his other gripped my shoulder with iron strength.

“Hi, Kurt! I was just talking about the skull of Phineas Gage and –”

“Oh no you’re not,” he corrected, smiling with unnatural brightness. “You’re coming with me, remember? We have that thing we have to talk about.”

With little effort he lifted me by the arm onto my feet, murmuring, “Say goodbye.”

“But Kurt, I haven’t finished my lunch –”

He had grabbed my coat and scarf and was shoving me roughly in the direction of the door. Behind me, the faces of Wendell and Octavia registered astonishment. Astrid could barely conceal her mirth.

“Well, that was rude,” I told him when we were outside. “Brrr! It’s cold out here! Give me my coat. You know, I didn’t even thank Octavia for buying me lunch.”

“You don’t have to thank her for anything, believe me. Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the Countway, obviously. And along the way, you can tell me how you came to be sitting about with a couple of Harvard managers discussing your involvement in the theft of university property.”

“Yes, well, I can see how that might seem ill-advised,” I said, as we hurried along Tremont Street, “but I can assure you I know what I’m doing.”

“Oh really,” he replied in that patient tone a man might adopt after walking into a room and finding a good friend tapping on a nuclear bomb with a hammer.

“They believe I stole the skull of Phineas Gage, you see, so I reckoned I’d sit down with them and have a bit of a chinwag about it. Clear the air between us, so to speak.”

Kurt stopped and gave me a look. It wasn't a good look. It was the look a man might give to a friend who has just explained that he had tried to defuse a nuclear bomb with a hammer because he'd seen it work really well in a cartoon.

"Remember when we first met?" he asked. "It was your first day, and you asked me for advice about getting along here at Harvard. Do you remember what I said to you?"

I nodded. "You warned me not to talk to the managers."

"No good ever comes from talking to a manager, I told you. But if you absolutely have to talk to them, say only what they want to hear. Perhaps I should have emphasized, however, that should you ever take it into your head to steal something from, say, one of the Harvard museums, you do not tell them what they want to hear!"

We walked along in silence for a while. The truth is that I had no idea what to say. Kurt had my best interests at heart, of course, but how could I reassure him that I knew what I was doing? I had a plan, but it's true that there was an awful lot of nuance to it.

As we descended the concrete steps by the School of Public Health I glanced up at the library in front of us and noticed a familiar figure walking by the glass windows. It was my student friend, Piper, clutching a textbook tightly to her chest and browsing the magazine racks. It was good to see her wandering about the library for a change. I hoped I would get to speak to her today, if only because I might need to say goodbye.

Poor Kurt seemed troubled. He was completely in the dark about my plan to steal the skull of Phineas Gage, of course. I should have consulted with him closer, I realized; after all, the man had lots of tactical experience.

Five years ago Kurt had been sent to Afghanistan to shoot machine guns at people at the behest of a small faction of businessmen who had seized control of the United States' government.

"All I know is there were a lot of wealthy people in suits jumping up and down and waving flags," he had told me one day on his stool behind the Circulation Desk. "Their international petroleum holdings were super-important. It was for our sake, really. Their wealth would trickle down to us eventually – they just needed more wealth first.

"And apparently our vice president used to run a company that really needed forty billion dollars of taxpayers' money. Fortunately for him, one day some religious nutjobs crashed some planes into some of our buildings. The next day the president urged us to keep spending money and to brace ourselves for a long war against Evil.

"Now, I really didn't have any money but I am a patriot, so I went down to the local strip mall and enlisted instead. And off to war I went."

He drummed his fingers on the desk and frowned thoughtfully.

"Now," he admitted candidly, "on account of certain regions inside my brain being not fully developed, I found the experience of war very bracing. I was allowed to play with heavy ordinance and ride around in helicopters. Sometimes I even got to blow things up."

"Wow – did you blow up a lot of stuff?"

"A lot of stuff," he confided in a trembling voice. "In one day alone I blew up three bridges! No idea why, really. The impulse was simply irresistible.

"Sarge wasn't happy about it though – said we needed those bridges for supplies or something, I can't remember. The point I'm trying to make is that I was doing something I loved, learning things and making some money doing it. Plus, I was blowing things up in my spare time. It was a good time for me personally."

Unfortunately, his senior officers soon grew tired of Kurt's predilection for blowing up things near the base so they made him a Forward Observer with the sincerest hope that he would not be good at it.

An FO's job, he explained, was to sneak around in the wilderness gathering intelligence on enemy positions and movements. It also enabled him to call in airstrikes and artillery bombardments on Taliban camps, fortifications, old rusted cars, some unusual rock formations, a guy in his unit who wouldn't stop whistling, an armored personnel carrier nobody was using, even the fuselage of an old Soviet-era *mil-24* helicopter.

"All sorts of stuff," he said after a wistful sigh. "And then those head doctors got hold of me. They poked around inside my brain and decided I was enjoying myself far too much for their particular levels of comfort. So they sent me stateside to rest and learn how to pretend to be more like everybody else."

"How did you get to Harvard then?"

"Well, it's like this. Turns out one of the doctors at the VA hospital had studied here. And she liked me for some reason. For a while there I was a big part of her plan to upset her father, I think, but she wised up about me eventually. Then she pulled some strings and found a job for me all the way up here in Boston. Real life is pretty random, dude. People just don't like to think about it."

"Now excuse me a moment," he added softly, noticing the cluster of medical students who were waiting to check out books.

"Next please!" he boomed in an accusing and disconcerting voice that can make any patron pause and doubt their purpose in life.

"Next!" he roared pitilessly.

Off-balance and wobbling, the patron stuttered about a particular medical journal. But Kurt's fearless intuition had anticipated him.

"I'm looking for the, uh, *Journal of*—"

"*The Journal of Neurophysiology*," interrupted the former soldier, with the gaze of a basilisk. Next, he said five words in such a firm and emphatic way that no listener could possibly mistake them as a question.

“Did you check the catalog.”

“Well...”

“Did you check the catalog.”

“You see ...”

“Did you check the catalog.”

“The thing is...”

“Next,” my friend hissed, and the patron evaporated into a mist of shame.

Then, trembling with boldness and dread, a student crept forward.

“What,” my friend declared firmly. Then he added for no particular reason,

“Would you repeat that please?”

“I didn’t say anything yet –”

Kurt sighed and looked over the student’s shoulder. “Next!” The student limped away into a corner of the building to suck on his wounds and fret.

“Excuse me,” cried another. “I can’t seem to find any volumes earlier than 1998 for the *Journal of*—”

“*Clinical Oncology*, yes. They were moved temporarily while we renovate that floor. You want to go to level three on the south side of the library – this is south – look where my hand is pointing – do you see it? South. You want to take the elevator behind you, it’s just around that corner. Again, look where I am pointing – good. Now you’re on your way, now you’re cooking with gas.

“Next, you – that’s right, I’m talking to you, are you checking those books out? Norman can help you. Norman, help the woman, dude. And Norman, stop whistling. I know you didn’t know you’re whistling, Norman. Norman?! You’re still whistling.

“Wendell!” he yelled over his shoulder toward the office in the corner where his supervisor had hidden. “Norman doesn’t know he’s whistling again!”

Wendell appeared like a magic trick, offered the patron a nervous laugh, and

grabbed Norman by the collar. “Come with me, buddy. I have a lovely pile of books you can stack.”

Then, flinging a desperately conspiratorial wink in our direction, he dragged the hapless library assistant away behind the partition.

“I don’t know if it’s possible to kill a man with a stapler,” Kurt told the next patron, “but Norman makes me curious to find out. Are you checking out that book?”

“No,” said the patron, fleeing.

Kurt sat motionlessly, staring out into the atrium and remembering that one moonless night in Afghanistan when his knife became so slippery from the blood of Taliban that he had no option but to kill a man with a spoon.

I nudged him slightly, and he remembered that he was now a librarian. “Are you borrowing those out?”

“Yes!” declared his victim fearfully.

“Please don’t raise your voice at me,” Kurt uttered icily.

“I’m not!”

“And now he’s contradicting me,” Kurt said to me. “Why is he contradicting me?”

This patron suddenly recalled he had forgotten something, and disappeared.

“Medical students are a nervous folk,” my friend mused. “Why do you think that is?”

“It’s all that business with dissecting human bodies. I think it makes them weird. I keep telling people but nobody –”

“Shea!” he interrupts. “Are you okay, man?”

I blinked and looked around, and realized we were outside the glass doors of the library. Kurt was holding his lunch bag and looking at me with the same worried expression that had been in his eyes when he found me in the sushi

restaurant ten minutes earlier.

“I’m okay, Kurt. I was just thinking about some of the things you’ve said. Why don’t you go inside and have your lunch? I might stay out here a little while longer and clear my head.”

Kurt believed that I was crazy, I suddenly realized. It was not a comforting revelation. Wendell, in his ridiculous spectacles and woolen vests, had cast aspersions on my sanity more times than I can remember and I’d never given the issue a thought. Yet one uncertain look from Kurt was the existential equivalent of being kicked by a mad horse. I felt a strong compulsion to spend a few weeks in a desert somewhere, rethinking my life.

I pulled up the collar of my pea coat and shivered. Maybe Cuba wasn’t such a bad idea really. Looking away to the east I could see a narrow gap of sky framed by the edges of Gordon Hall and the Goldenson building. Over there – only a mile or so in the distance – lay downtown Boston. From there it would be a simple matter of boarding the first available bus to Florida.

And then? I’d probably have to steal a dinghy and paddle the rest of the way. Still, how hard could that be? I’d need to pick up a compass first, of course. A compass, and my dog.

Gertie would probably like Cuba. She has her frivolous moments, like all dogs, but her allegiances lay with the proletariat. She has no taste for dialectic, however; doctrine, to her mind, is an opiate of the powerless chattering classes. True social and economic change can only be brought into effect by direct action; all dogs must be allowed to sleep on beds, and there must be a fair and equitable redistribution of sandwiches.

Poor Gertie. She was such an optimist on the subject of sandwiches. She was also partial to sipping my tea whenever I happened to be looking in a different direction. Who knew a dog could be so partial to tea?

Tea, I thought. Now that’s an idea.

Humming cheerfully I passed the security desk with a friendly nod and took the stairs to the second floor. Here I turned right, wound back around the corner and passed through two large doors marked 'staff only' into the library's former IT department.

I was now in a spacious room with a table along one wall and four armchairs along the other. I called this area the IT lounge, a little ironically as there was no IT department in the library these days. Here I kept an electric kettle and some kitchen supplies I'd stolen from the staffroom.

With a start, I remembered my fear that the area would be overrun by heavily-armed police. I spun about wildly with fright, but the room was empty.

Leading away in front of me was a wide corridor with offices on either side; my office was nearest to the lounge and blessed with a large window and a view across Huntington Avenue. Across the hall from my office was another, which belonged to my friend Ned.

Ned and I had been friends ever since I'd given him that office. In fact, I'd given offices to all sorts of people that I'd met around the campus. It's true I didn't have the authority to donate offices to people but – and this is the crux of the matter – I also wasn't subject to any oversight either. Is it my fault that nobody was keeping an eye on me?

Besides, it was only natural that I would give an office to Ned once I learned his circumstances. He had been working out of an ugly cubicle on the other side of the campus for two years before he met me. The cubicle had a terrible draft, so Ned had acquired the habit of coming over to the library every morning and working off his laptop on one of the lounge chairs on the ground floor.

I had noticed him in particular because he didn't wear shoes. He arrived unshod, he left unshod, and nobody said anything about it. That is, at least, until one day when he happened to be hanging around at the Circulation Desk, joking with Kurt and me, when some species of administrator came wafting through the

entrance like a self-important mist. She noted my friend's bare feet and took it upon herself to remind him that employees and students of Harvard University were required to wear shoes at all times.

"I'm a pretty good statistician," Ned told her in a strange tone, then he paused for a long moment. "And by pretty good, I mean that if you are a statistician working in research these days you would probably have read at least two of my papers by now.

"But what a lot of people don't know about me is that I'm itching to get out of Boston. I want to work at Stanford, you see. Because I like California. I like the beaches there. The sand between my toes.

"And the truth is that the only thing preventing me from moving to Stanford is the fact my boss doesn't care if I wear shoes or not. I won't mind if you have a word with him about me. He's an important professor here, but I'm sure he'll make time to hear your complaint. It's true that he'd be pretty upset to lose me over such a small issue as footwear, but I won't mind because – California!

"And how much I like the beaches there," Ned added, staring with a strange intensity.

The administrator took a step back, looked about fearfully and disappeared into an elevator. That was the last any of us heard about the matter. I remember it like it was yesterday because I immediately turned to Ned and offered him the office across the hallway from mine.

"I don't have the authority to give it to you," I explained, "so we'll just have you move in and see what happens. If anyone asks, we'll pretend you've always been there. We can see how long we can get away with it. What d'ya reckon?"

Ned was speechless. He then hugged me, called me brother, and moved into his new office the next day.

That was four months ago, and Ned was now a fixture of the IT wing. Hearing me moving around in my office, he poked his head in.

“Hey, you had a visitor not long ago.”

“Were they campus police? Were they searching my office?”

“No – I mean, yes – only I don’t mean them. You warned me that people would be searching your office this morning, so I stayed out of their way. I meant that you had a visit from that guy. The really ancient one.”

“George Ripley?”

“I don’t know his name. He seems to know me, though. Told me I was the spitting image of a colonel he knew in the American Civil War, so –”

“George Ripley.”

“Well, you should track him down. He looked upset ...”

Upset? I didn’t like the sound of that. Fifteen seconds later I was in the elevator heading down to the library’s lowest level.

George’s office was tucked away at the back of Rare Books, behind a dozen tables covered with old papers, rusted tools and trays filled with buttons and bones. He wasn’t there! I trudged over to the eastern elevators, rode up to the sixth floor and marched back around to the staff room on the southeast corner. No one was there, apart from Brandon.

“Hey dude,” he said.

Brandon is one of those people who look like they brew their own beer. He wears a luxuriant beard and a habitual frown, both of which are probably the result of working for Central IT for more than a decade. Brandon is a system administrator, and I met him one day before a departmental meeting back in the middle of May. He’d been sitting nearby, chatting to people. I hadn’t been listening too closely, but something in his tone caught my attention.

“Why are you all taking our upper management so seriously?” he had hissed. “I wouldn’t trust those nitwits with any technology more advanced than an abacus. They would probably break it and blame us. Or worse, try to pass

themselves off as the originators of the whole ‘abacus concept.’”

Obviously, I’d had no choice. I introduced myself immediately and inquired if he happened to need an office.

Brandon was thunderstruck. Of course he needed an office. Didn’t I know those blockheads upstairs had assigned him a desk in the corridor just outside the Department of Anatomical Gifts? Watching gurney loads of cadavers rolling by every day was getting him down.

“It’s a terrible and constant reminder of man’s mortality,” he explained. “I don’t know much longer I can take it. Have you really got an office for me? I need an office. Please don’t be messing with me about this. I am so unhappy ...”

“Look,” I’d said to him. “I don’t have the authority to give you this office, so we’ll just move you in and see what happens. If anyone asks, we’ll tell them it was Hector’s idea. And we’ll just see how long we can get away with it, what’d’ya say?”

Brandon stood up, stumbled over and hugged me, called me “dude!”, and moved into the office beside mine the following day.

The IT wing had been so lonely before Ned and Brandon moved in. Now everything felt much better. I would miss these guys when I was down in Cuba.

Or in my jail cell, I thought with a sigh. Why did everybody have to go and make such a big deal out of me stealing the skull of Phineas Gage?

“Dude?” Brandon asked. “Is everything all right?”

“Not really,” I murmured, looking about the staffroom blearily. “Everybody is out to get me.”

“Nonsense. Who’s out to get you?”

“Well, HISG, for one.”

“Really? I thought they were just a rumor.”

“And not only them. The director of the library is out to get me, too, as well as

a cabal of high-ranking librarians. Hector must think all his Christmases have come at once.”

Brandon shook his head. “I doubt that very much. Hector likes you, as I’ve said before today.”

“Hector,” I corrected, “does not like me. He is, in fact, out to get me.”

“Well, perhaps he’s out to get you, but not because he doesn’t like you. He’s just bored. He has the most boring job in all of IT. He has nothing to do but sit about in that depressing basement office making charts all day. This cold war you’ve got going on between you is probably the most fun he’s ever had in that job.”

“None of this is my problem,” I reminded Brandon gently. “If Hector’s bored he can quit.”

“He can’t quit! Hector grew up in the slums of Coahuila, down in Mexico. Kids from there don’t typically wind up working at Harvard. His family is incredibly proud of him. You have no idea how devastated they’d be if he quit, dude.”

“Look here, Brandon! How would you like it if I spoke about your boss sympathetically in front of you? Because I could, you know. I could say he’s a good person at heart, though often misunderstood –”

He looked at me aghast. “Dude. Not cool.”

“I’ll see you later, Brandon,” I said on my way through the door, hoping it was true.

This time I took the stairs. When I reached the fourth floor I suddenly remembered Piper. Moments later I found her among the carrels, bent over her textbook. She looked up and frowned.

“I’m still not getting any of this,” she said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. She wore old-fashioned frames that made her look cute and slightly incongruous.

“You always say that Piper, but I think you understand it all far more than you think.”

She shook her head. “I really don’t, and I’m stuck here until I can figure this out.”

I was about to tell her about the skull and all the trouble I was in, until I noticed a handful of students were sitting nearby among the carrels, looking at me and apparently listening. Promising her I’d come back later, I returned to the second floor. I’d send an email to George and arrange an appointment.

To my surprise, the IT lounge now contained Octavia, Wendell, and Astrid, as well as four other librarians, all fussing and squabbling like a gaggle of displeased geese.

Poor George Ripley was seated in an armchair looking sad. Seeing me, he smiled weakly.

“G’day George!” I chirped brightly. “What’s going on?”

The librarians had apparently been informed by the authorities that civilization was ending any moment now and that, although nobody knew for sure who was responsible, they were all on the lookout for a man matching my exact physical description.

“What’s going on?” uttered Octavia through her teeth. “What’s going on? You’ve gone and gotten George fired, Shea, that’s what’s going on!”

## the tightrope thins

I am, of course, a consummate professional, so I knew this situation required diplomacy, tact, and just the right amount of finesse.

“You are all,” said I, in a calm and reasonable tone, “a bunch of loonies. And how any of you got this far in life without being eaten by leopards is a mystery to me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I will be in my office playing video games and ignoring your calls.”

I started in that direction, but George Ripley held up a hand.

“Why are you all blaming our IT guy? Don’t any of you know that he had absolutely nothing to do with any of this?”

The flock of librarians flapped and craned their necks towards me. Astrid stood apart from them, gazing at me in wonder.

“But you’re being laid off!” Wendell exclaimed. “We naturally assumed it was because the skull of Phineas Gage has been stolen.”

“It’s nothing to do with that!” cried George Ripley. “The skull went missing only a couple of days ago. I’ve known I was being laid off for months! I hadn’t said anything because I didn’t want anyone being upset on my behalf ...”

“Oh,” said Octavia awkwardly, biting her lip and looking askance at me.

“I’m just sad today,” continued George, “because the people upstairs finally got around to giving me the formal notification that I was being let go. It’s Christmas, you see. I suppose I had just expected better.”

“George,” said Wendell, “how could you have known you were being laid off months ago if they only told you today?”

The old man shrugged and nodded in my direction. “Because he told me.”

Once again, the librarians gaped.

“And I am very grateful to the young fellow,” he went on. “If he hadn’t given me a lot of warning I have no idea how upset I’d be feeling right now.”

“But why didn’t you tell us?” Wendell said to me.

I shrugged. “Well, partly it’s because you’re all so prone to grabbing pitchforks and running around blaming innocent people for things they haven’t done, but mostly I think it’s because none of it was any of your damn business.”

Astrid stepped behind George’s armchair and put her hands on his shoulders. “You did the right thing. This is George’s business, not ours. Your reticence is commendable.”

“It is,” acknowledged Octavia, a little peevishly.

In my heart, I didn’t know what I felt. Was I bothered by the fact that they’d underestimated me or was I pleased?

Then George announced that he’d like to have a bit of a rest, so I led him into my office and settled him in my armchair under the window. While Astrid arranged a pillow behind the old man’s head, Wendell went downstairs to fetch some blankets from the supply closet.

I unplugged the landline in my office so he wouldn’t be disturbed, then we filed out quietly and closed the door.

“Right,” I said, back in the IT lounge and settling into a chair. “I know everyone is eager to apologize for accusing me of getting George fired. So which of you would like to go first?”

“Come on,” said Octavia. “What were we supposed to think? The skull goes missing from the museum and the next thing we know the curator is being laid off!”

“I feel like we’ve come in a complete circle,” I said with a shrug.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re back to everything being my fault. Is it me? Or is it because none of you can see an Australian without thinking he’s swiped something?”

I looked around the room and spotted a stapler on one of the tables.

“I can’t believe you even let someone of my socioeconomic background into the building, let alone in a room with such an expensive stapler. You know what?” I asked, leaping up and lunging for it. “I’m taking that stapler so you can all just... Wendell, give that stapler to me! It’s mine!”

He put the stapler behind his back.

“Can you be serious for a moment?” he demanded.

“Yes, can you?” interjected a familiar and wearied female voice.

I whirled around. “You!”

A slender and, to my eyes, singularly unattractive figure stood in the doorway. Shoulder-length hair, looking oddly damp for some reason, fell limply around a square chin. Her nose seemed a little beakish. Frumpy cardigan, long skirt, and some sort of vile bead necklace and – would you believe – the same kind of unnecessarily vintage glasses that Wendell liked to wear. I felt myself shudder.

“Greetings, everybody. My name is Britney. Shea and I work together in IT.”

I glowered. “And just what are you doing here Britney?” My voice sounded flat and resentful, even to my ears.

My library colleagues were a little taken aback. Wendell and Octavia both gave me curious looks. I could feel my face was burning.

“Let’s say,” said Britney, as if to no one in particular, “that certain parties in IT thought I should come over and see if you needed any help today.”

“Do they now?” I hissed between bared teeth.

“Shea,” said Wendell quietly. “You’re being a little rude, don’t you think?”

“She,” I said, pointing, “is here to spy on me! And I won’t have it!”

“Oh come on,” he said, good-naturedly. “What’s there to spy upon? You’re sitting here being really candid – at least, I think you are. Was it Britney? Hi, I’m Wendell, nice to meet you … how is Britney being here any different from the rest of us being here?”

I was so powerfully annoyed I could barely think to answer. “Look,” I said after a moment of quiet fuming. “I don’t like people looking over my shoulder. It makes me feel nettled. I feel nettled, Wendell!”

I even stomped my foot for emphasis, but nobody was taking me seriously. In fact, if I wasn’t mistaken my friends seemed to find my discomfit amusing. The traitors.

Octavia introduced herself to the new arrival and offered her a chair. Britney sat primly, smiling warmly as she shook Astrid’s hand and murmured some pleasantries that I couldn’t hear over the roaring in my ears.

The room seemed alive with cheerful voices and grins. None would understand my predicament, of course. But the fact is that I had a very clever plan in play, and everything had been going smoothly so far. The last thing I needed was Britney here!

And if I haven’t mentioned her yet, it’s only because she didn’t fit within the afternoon’s plan. On the contrary, her arrival could potentially send the whole thing veering off course.

Worst still, Britney knew I was suffering. If that subtle, sardonic smile playing around her lips was any indicator, she not only comprehended precisely what was troubling me but was now, in this very moment, keenly anticipating the spectacle of watching me struggle to improvise.

And why should this preposterous individual, Britney, whose existence I would prefer never need mention, constitute such a danger to my entire plan? Well, obviously Wendell and Octavia and Astrid are awfully smart people. And observant! They notice mistakes, and the last thing I needed while I walked this

tightrope was to have Britney throwing smirks at me.

She was smirking at me right now, in fact. It wasn't fair.

"Anyway," I said, trying to ignore her, "what did you just say, Wendell?"

"You were talking about George being fired and all that. You seem to know a bit more about what's happening around the medical campus than you've been letting on."

Octavia and Wendell were looking at me with unease. Trafficking in institutional knowledge was their profession. The very idea that a scruffy foreigner was blundering about in their midst knowing all sorts of things that they didn't must have been disquieting, to say the least.

"Well, naturally I know more about what's going on around here than any of you," I said, sinking back into my chair and folding my arms crossly. "I'm an IT guy. Right, Britney?" *You annoying maniac.* "We go everywhere and overhear everything. We're the eyes and ears of the institution ..."

"So what did you hear about George?" asked Octavia.

"And why," demanded Wendell, "do I suspect that the skull's disappearance is in some way connected to his being laid off?"

"Perhaps it's because I've been cleverly hinting at it since the start of this story?"

"That's right," murmured Wendell. "You started the tale with him. I remember it."

"Wait, are you suggesting that George might have taken the skull?" whispered Octavia, glancing back at my office door. "Maybe just lost it in the collection somewhere?"

"Don't be silly. George wouldn't steal anything. And he's not losing his faculties. He's sharper than you or I."

"Well!" exclaimed Wendell in frustration. "I don't understand!"

“Perhaps that’s because you’re all too busy talking and interrupting to let me tell my story!”

“If you had said at the start ‘oh, by the way, George is being laid off today, and furthermore, it has something to do with the disappearance of the skull of Phineas Gage’, then we would all have listened with bated breath!”

I shrugged. He had a point.

“You’re right, Wendell. And going forward I’ll try not to let your incessant interruptions distract me so much, I promise.”

Octavia hissed with frustration and pointed her finger at me. “You are the most infuriating person I have ever met.”

I looked at her with pity, mingled with envy. “You’re only saying that because you’ve never met André from Paris.”

“Who?”

“André from Paris. Actually, now I think about it, I should have started this story with him –”

“Who is –”

“– because for you to understand what happened to the skull, and what is probably going to happen with George Ripley, then you all need to know about André from Paris. The day he arrived marked a turning point for me. Perhaps I should tell you about that day first.”

André had made me swear never to talk about him with anybody, but here, sitting before the expectant faces of half a dozen Harvard librarians, I could see I had no choice. These were desperate hours, after all.

# the autumn of my discontent

One morning in late October I awoke to discover the air had turned cold. I lay shivering under the sheets, wondering if I was ill. Then I noticed Gertie, curled up next to me, was also shivering.

It was a change of seasons.

My dog and I lived alone in a small, sparsely furnished townhouse in Cambridge. When I leave for work Gertie usually just lounges around the house pursuing her own interests. Whenever it suits her, she can go next door to visit her two canine neighbors via a hole in the rear basement wall and a gap in the fence. Sometimes Gertie spends half the week over there, only coming home at mealtimes and around 10pm, which is when she likes to take her evening's constitutional with me.

It's a pleasant little house with an odd musty smell in the bare rooms upstairs. Downstairs there's a small living room where an ancient couch lays under a lavish coating of throw rugs and cushions. A bathroom leads off to the side and a kitchen at the back. Through the door at the rear of the house is a small porch and yard. I've hung a wind chime out there, under the eaves. Most mornings Gertie and I like to sit on the back steps in the sun and eat breakfast together. I read the news, she warns squirrels not to trespass.

On this particular morning, I stood on the back porch trembling in the cold air for a while, then I took my breakfast back inside to the kitchen table, feeling like some sort of bourgeois failure at life.

That day on my way to work I noticed the leaves on the trees had darkened and curled, in some cases dried to yellow and brown paper hues.

“How long will this winter situation last?” I asked Kurt as I passed into the library, rubbing my hands in the warmth.

He shrugged. “It hasn’t started yet. Why?”

“Trying to decide if it’s worth getting a coat.”

He gave me one of his empty stares. “You should buy a coat. And soon.”

I shrugged off the suggestion as a lot of needless expense, but Kurt dragged me over to the library’s Lost Property box.

“These have been here for years,” he said, handing me a heavy, woolen jacket – a pea coat, he called it – as well as some gloves and a yellow woolen scarf.

“It’s a good fit,” he said, turning me from side to side. “This should get you through the fall.”

“The fall of what?” I asked him earnestly, wondering if he was talking about snow, but Kurt had lapsed into one of his enigmatic silences and would say no more.

The changing of seasons provoked a feeling of urgency. For months I’d been walking around with the knowledge that I would, that I will, that I absolutely must, steal the famed skull of Phineas Gage. But as yet I had no plan, and that fact gnawed at me. What sort of criminal mastermind was I if I couldn’t figure out a straightforward heist like this one?

I dropped my bag in my office, took the elevator to the sixth floor, and then walked to the staff lounge through the offices of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, even though they’d told me a dozen times to stop using their offices as a corridor and to next time go around the other way, thank you very much. In my defense, I was in a bit of a funk.

Reaching the staffroom, I slumped on a chair by the floor-to-ceiling window and brooded, watching the trams come and go along Huntington Avenue. Bostonians don’t call them trams, they call them ‘Green Line trains.’ But they are wrong, they are trams, and that’s what I’m calling them because this is my

story and besides I know what a tram looks like when I see one and any right-thinking person would agree with me.

“What’s up?” said a voice.

Brandon was stirring a cup of coffee and regarding me thoughtfully.

“I’ve got a new coat,” I said, standing and turning about so he could see it from different angles. “I stole it from the Lost Property. What do you think?”

“It’s very nice. So why are you brooding over there by the window?”

“It’s this business with the skull of Phineas Gage.”

“Still planning to steal it, then?”

“Intending to steal it. An actual plan eludes me,” I muttered, fidgeting.

“You seem irked by something.”

“I don’t have a plan, Brandon! I don’t have a plan. It’s annoying.”

He sank into a chair facing the window. “What a great view. It’s probably the best staff lounge on campus. I can’t believe they’ve let the library have something so good for this long. Gordon Hall must not know about it.”

“Why’s that?”

“Harvard leases almost half of this floor to *The New England Journal of Medicine*. But with a view like this, I’m surprised they haven’t turned this space into a corner office. How hard would it be to find someone on this campus whose ego would fit neatly into a room of this size?”

I shrugged and didn’t respond, imagining instead some colorful helium balloons drifting by, from which I clung below with one hand. In the other, of course, I was holding the skull. Then I realized that escaping via a balloon simply made no sense. The security guards might be carrying harpoons. Then where would I be?

“Alright,” he said at last. “So you’re planning a heist, and you’re stuck on a small detail.”

“Exactly. You understand the situation entirely. If by ‘stuck on a small detail’ you mean ‘missing an entire plan.’”

“Perhaps it’s too difficult to plan by yourself. Have you considered planning it with someone?”

I shook my head in irritation. “I didn’t want anyone trying to talk me out of it.”

“If I tried to talk you out of it, would you listen?”

“No.”

“Alright then,” he said with a fatalistic sigh, looking out onto Huntington Avenue. “Oh look. The Green Line train has broken down. Hey, where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered savagely, heading for the door.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I spun about.

“I’ve got to steal a priceless skull out of a fairly secure museum! And right now my best plan involves a zip line from the School of Public Health onto the roof of this building.”

Brandon turned his head and looked over at the School of Public Health, towering to the left.

“Well, that sounds like a good start. What’s the matter? Are you afraid of heights?”

“More like I’m afraid of falling. I don’t want to spend my last seconds of life thinking something like: wait, I’m sure I tied that knot properly...”

He coughed politely. “Why don’t we sit here and think up a better plan?”

Grudgingly I sat down across from him. “Alright, as long as it’s a good plan. A bad plan won’t do, I’m afraid.”

“Sounds good to me. So where do we start?”

“I don’t know. That’s where I’m stuck. What do you do when you get stuck, Brandon?”

“I ask my girlfriend what to do,” he replied. “She’s smarter than me, which makes life simpler.”

“I should get a girlfriend, shouldn’t I? Some sort of svelte, athletic accomplice who can join me on heists, wearing a black catsuit and everything. You know, for some reason I have always taken a strong interest in women. Especially the pretty ones.”

“You should get a girlfriend, then. Why are you frowning like that?”

“Well, now I have two problems, don’t I? Steal the world’s most famous skull *and* find a girlfriend. I’m not sure which would be harder.”

“You don’t have any possible candidates in mind?”

“As a girlfriend?” I shook my head, feeling despondent. “There is a certain person, but I can’t really see a way forward...”

The truth is that I had tried to engage that *specific person* in conversation on many occasions, with the hope of initiating some sort of emotional connection based on mutual respect. But the lady in question was always more interested in discussing the possibility of us eating in a restaurant somewhere. I’m nobody’s fool; I can take a hint as well as the next man. She saw me as a potential dining companion, nothing more.

“I don’t think women really go for me all that much.”

“Sure they do,” he said. “You have a certain... hapless air about you. I can see lots of girls taking you in. They’d adopt you like a stray cat.”

“Stray cat, huh?” I said, squinting at him skeptically.

“She might ask you to start shaving more often than once a week.”

“But you see, I like to conserve water...”

“And perhaps expand your wardrobe.”

“I just got a new coat!” I shook my head in frustration. “Nothing I do is good enough for her!”

“You’ll have to be nice to her family.”

“Provided we agree on every political point, I can foresee no problems.”

“And she might sometimes like to go to church.”

“I’m very tolerant of myths from the Bronze Age.”

“And she’d tell you this whole business with stealing the skull is complete nonsense and that you should take your career more seriously—”

“I have a career?”

“— and before too long she’d be explaining budgets and the necessity of savings plans. And she’d put you on strange diets and encourage you to exercise —”

“I’d stand up to her!” I cried.

Brandon regarded me in silence.

“Alright, I wouldn’t stand up to her. But I would explain to her that I know what I’m doing. Like this business with the skull. Stealing it makes a lot of sense – from a certain distance, that is. But sometimes men just have to do certain things. And, although those things may not always make immediate sense to others, we can feel ourselves being called to a higher purpose.

“Sometimes a man finds himself beckoned forth by some unseen reasoning. It is the call of destiny moving us, like a mad impulse, to perform a great feat or task. When a man finds himself standing in fate’s shadow what choice does he really have? At the end of the day, if she loves me … you’re right, she wouldn’t listen to a word of this, would she?”

“She would not.”

The door banged open, and a large man burst into the staffroom.

“What’s up, Rufus!” said Brandon and I in unison.

Our friend waved cheerfully and inquired about our respective days. I embarked on a description of my current frustrations *vis-à-vis* the skull, and he listened with solemn sympathy.

“Isn’t that life in a nutshell?” he observed at last. “From one simple task emanates an adventure of recondite learning. I too have journeyed along many an abstruse path that had looked, *prima facie*, an effortless peregrination through a familiar wood.”

“And it’s not just that,” said Brandon. “The real problem is that the whole thing has turned out harder than it looks.”

“How would you do it, Rufus?” I wondered. “You know … if you felt in some way compelled?”

“Hmm, to my understanding you lack an ingress. Well, it’s an operose exertion but quell the diaphoresis, dude.”

I shook my head. “Those aren’t even words, Rufus.”

“I’m saying that I have an idea.”

Brandon and I exchanged glances and leaned forward expectantly.

“Let my armies be the rocks and the trees,” intoned Rufus weightily, “and the birds in the sky.”

“I have no idea what that means,” I admitted, “but it sounds perfect. How do you come up with this stuff?”

“I’m quoting Sean Connery from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.”

“Well, it sounds useful enough. What does it mean exactly?”

“My invocation of context implies that you should turn to art. Nature’s greatest imitator.”

I mulled the point for a while and then assured Rufus that I was willing to follow his guidance; all he had to do was not talk a lot of nonsense.

“Let me be more clear,” he said. “Consider the cormorant.”

I nodded expectantly but, for some reason or other, Rufus seemed to consider himself utterly expressed.

“Wait,” I cried, as he went to leave. “What the hell is a cormorant?”

“*Phalacrocoracidae* is a family of approximately 40 aquatic birds. They can be found all around the world, even in some parts of Australia,” he explained, marveling at the incompleteness of my knowledge.

“Highly sentient beings, birds,” he added. “Need I remind you of the linguistic accomplishments of the African gray parrot?”

For the sake of my mounting impatience, I informed him that he probably didn’t.

“You must surely know that the corvid family, by which I mean the crow, raven or jay, is renowned for its remarkable cognitive ability?”

“We are still talking about my stealing the skull of Phineas Gage, right?”

Rufus nodded, waved to Brandon, and wandered out of the staffroom with his paper cup between his fingers.

I felt perplexed. What had any of that meant? I turned to Brandon and found him looking at the window, where long beads of water were stretching across the surface. Six stories below, Huntington Avenue was now awash with rain.

“Helicopters...” muttered Brandon wistfully.

“Don’t you start!” I said, rounding on him.

“You could use a helicopter to steal the skull.”

“Thought of that already. My concern is that when they make a movie about this, a helicopter will make it much more expensive to film. Besides, where would we get a helicopter?”

“Kurt’s got a friend called Randall, who has a friend called Dave. And Dave has a helicopter.”

“That’s right, I remember. Where did he get that, again?”

We hopped into the elevator and rode down to the ground floor to check in with Kurt, who was standing behind the front desk glowering at the patrons as they passed by.

“Dude,” greeted Brandon.

“Dude,” acknowledged Kurt.

“Where did Dave get that helicopter?”

“Dunno. He said he just sort of found it somewhere.”

What a world, I thought, shaking my head. I’m not rich enough to own a helicopter, of course, but if I were, I’d at least try to keep it safe from people like Dave. You’d think it would occur to a rich person to buy a padlock or something.

“Why did he steal a helicopter?” asked Andy, a colleague from Central IT who happened to be passing by.

Kurt shrugged. “Dude was feeling depressed. Said he needed a pick-me-up.”

“Did it work?” Andy wondered curiously.

“It did. Dave reckons that people wouldn’t get depressed if they knew how to steal helicopters.”

“Excuse me?” said a voice. Brandon and I turned around. A student stood behind us, clutching a book. “Will this take long? It’s just that I need to borrow this out.”

Brandon shook his head disgustedly. *“For crying out loud! Can you just relax?”*

“Wow,” said Norman, whistling in disbelief. “Students, huh?”

Kurt nodded bitterly. “So anyway, why are you guys asking about Dave’s helicopter?”

“Our IT guy is thinking of asking Dave to help him steal the skull of Phineas Gage. Just to get him onto the roof.”

“Dave is a good guy, and he’ll help you. But I’m not sure he’s a safe pilot. He got most of his training through playing video games.”

“Not to be negative,” I said, “but I am feeling suddenly unsure about the helicopter.”

“Have you thought about phasing through walls?” Kurt asked.

“You mean – dematerialize on one side of a wall, and materialize on the other?”

“Yes. Some sort of phasing technological device would be required, but it’s sound in theory.”

“I could talk to some people over at MIT,” I supposed.

Brandon was looking reflective. “What about hiring actors, impersonators... Something with a TV crew creating a distraction.”

“Smoke bombs, adaptive camouflage, ninjas,” offered Kurt.

“How about some nanobots,” declared Brandon. “A swarm of networked intelligent bots that we control remotely.”

“Well, drones are fashionable,” I agreed. “We could put one together out of some old computers...”

“If you’re using a drone,” said Brandon meditatively, “don’t forget to blame a randomly selected oil-producing country.”

“Does that still work? Surely even Harvard would be wise to that sort of thing by now...”

“What about sleeping gas? There’s bound to be some here. It’s a medical school and all that.”

“I’d be fine with it,” said Kurt. “Sleeping gas doesn’t work on me anymore anyways.”

“You could pump it into the ventilation system,” Brandon continued. “You’d have to fill the entire central cube of the building. It would be hard getting the

dispersal done correctly. By the way, can you not do this when I'm in the building?"

"Of course," I said, making a mental note to forget the remark. "That's just good manners. But how would I know the proper amount?"

"You probably need a consulting anesthesiologist."

"There should be lots of them around the campus."

"And maybe some sort of fluid dynamics specialist."

I didn't know any fluid dynamics specialists. I knew lots of librarians and medical scientists of every stripe. And now I thought about it, most of my mates were either system administrators or programmers from around the campus.

"Do we know anybody who does hard-core math?"

We all looked at each other, and everyone said at the same time: "Ned."

Waving goodbye to Kurt, Brandon and I went upstairs to the IT wing and found Ned sleeping in a beanbag on the floor of his office. I gently pushed him out of it with my foot.

"Ow," he murmured dreamily from the floor. "How is your morning going, Shea?"

I told him about my idea for filling the entire library with sleeping gas so I could abscond with the skull.

"The problem is," I said, "that there's a lot of math involved. You know math pretty well, right?"

"You know, technically I'm a statistician. It's an exciting field, you know."

"Hmm," said Brandon doubtfully.

Ned regarded him sadly. "Did you know, for example, that 78 percent of all statistics are just made up on the spot? Oops! Now it's 79 percent!"

We stared at him for a while, then at each other.

“There are other people we could talk to,” Brandon suggested.

“Come on, that joke kills at conferences,” said Ned, sitting up. “I’ll help you guys out. But we’ll need to take some proper measurements of the building. I’ll code something in Python and send it to the cluster to crunch the numbers. That’s a sort of a networked computation thing we have here. We might need to requisition some extra nodes though. It’s not strictly ‘medical research’ so I’d feel more comfortable if we ran this by the Research Group first.”

A little while later, we were all crammed into a small Thai restaurant in Fenway, discussing the project with Henry, a system administrator from Central IT.

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable with anyone running that sort of computation on our nodes,” said Henry. “Anesthesia is a fiddly business I hear. Couldn’t you just come back when the building was empty?”

That hadn’t occurred to me.

“Well,” I said. “Aren’t these noodles great?”

“What you really need is a diversion,” said Henry.

We all fell into a long, thoughtful silence.

“How about,” said Ned after a long while, “a nudist drumming circle? Would that work?”

“How many of this circle would be women?” Henry asked curiously.

“Um, none actually...”

“Well, that doesn’t sound like a very diverting diversion.”

“Hey, it’s just a bunch of friends of mine. We get together and drum.”

“Why nude?” Brandon wanted to know.

“What?”

“Why do you get together and drum nude?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. It’s just the way we do it, I guess.”

“And you know it sounds a bit gay, right?”

“You say that every time, and it’s not gay!”

“Alright, alright,” said Brandon. “It’s a good diversion, Ned. In fact, I think thirty nude men drumming in the foyer of the Countway might potentially create quite a stir.”

“And I bet someone would try to take a picture...” said Henry, retaining his composure valiantly. We all were, for the sake of Ned, who took his Tuesday nude drumming sessions very seriously.

“Which makes it all doubly effective,” said Brandon, “because the entire staff would have to converge on all witnesses just to enforce the strict ‘no photo taking in the library’ policy. It’d be total chaos otherwise.”

“Dude, nobody is taking any photos!” put in Kurt heatedly, and we recalled that it was his job to tell folks what not to do.

“They just ignore the signs, because, oh I don’t know, ‘we’re prissy Harvard students and rules don’t apply to us!’ ... These goddamn students, man!”

“Alright, alright,” I said, patting his arm. “No photos. No nudist drumming circle either. Which leaves us with no diversion.”

“Shea,” said Ned, “I’m beginning to think you’re not cut out for this cat burglary business. I know your heart is set on it, but you’ve been at this for months and ... have you figured out a name for yourself yet?”

“He has a point,” agreed Henry. “All cat burglars should have a name, for their calling card. It’s in the rules.”

They were right. After all, John Robie was *The Cat*...

“*The Nightingale*,” suggested Ned. “*The Dark ... Duck!* No, that’s just silly. How about ... *The Orange Ocelot*. No, that’s not right, either ... *The Tartan Ptarmigan*.”

There was a clamor of approval around the table. “I don’t own a single tartan garment,” I objected. “I’m also not Scottish.”

“The name should be Australian,” agreed Brandon.

They all stared at me fixedly, thinking.

I cleared my throat. “How about –”

“Nobody”, Henry interrupted, “gets to pick their own nickname, Shea. It’s a rule. Look it up if you don’t believe me.”

“I’ve got it!” announced Ned suddenly. “You are *The Blue Bandicoot*. It’s perfect! And it actually suits you.”

They were pleased with the appellation, and I could see that it wasn’t worth debating the issue. They’d forget all about it sooner or later, anyway. Let’s be clear, I refuse to be known as *The Blue Bandicoot*. I’m sorry to have to say this, but my friends are ridiculous.

I finished my noodles in silence and dawdled back to the Countway, feeling at a complete loss. I felt thwarted. At five o’clock I locked my office and walked all the way home. It was a little after sunset when I came up the back steps of my porch. As I entered my house, I knew at once that something was terribly wrong.

# andré from paris, part one

I did not turn on the light; I waited, my back against the door, staring intensely into the dark kitchen. The oven light burned like a nearby star, and the room was warm and fragrant with freshly baked bread. There was an intruder in my house, and – I sniffed the air – he or she was highly skilled at baking bread.

Who makes excellent bread, I wondered furtively. The answer arose in my mind immediately: the people of the Indochinese Peninsula, of course. As every Australian will tell you, the Vietnamese are unrivaled bakers. My people have been known to travel far out of our way on a sleepy Saturday morning to pick up a loaf of sandwich bread from an authentic Vietnamese bakery. The question I was asking myself, therefore, was this: what was a Vietnamese assassin doing in my house?

None of this makes sense, I thought, reaching for the seven-inch Santoku knife I kept in a block near the microwave. I have always held the people of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in high esteem. Why were they meddling in my affairs? Then I drew in a gasp.

My knives! Where are all my knives?

Someone had moved them! A murderous rage passed over me. It is one thing to contend with a Vietnamese assassin creeping around a man's house; but having to deal with a rearranged kitchen is just egregious.

My fingers felt about in the darkness, seeking some kind of weapon. There! I felt it with my fingertips – a potato peeler. Not my first choice but better than nothing. In close quarters combat I could give my kitchen-rearranging assailant a peeling he would never forget.

Then I was struck by an ominous realization. Where is Gertie? And why isn't she barking?

Down the corridor I crept, potato peeler ready, barely daring to breathe. My living room was filled with impenetrable darkness. Then I touched the light switch –

“Turn out the light!” hissed the figure on the couch.

“Sorry,” I muttered feebly, and we were in darkness once more.

My brief glimpse had confirmed the one thing that never changed about André from Paris, which was this: he always looks like a completely different person. Tonight he had short blond hair brushed across his temples, but I had seen him several times as a brunette and occasionally with a shaved head. He was smooth-shaven, though I'd become accustomed to him appearing with all manner of facial hair. His eyes, however, were unusually emotional and tired, somehow, as if he had traveled a great distance.

Gertie, of course, was laying across his lap and looking at me reproachfully. I was a little late getting home, after all.

As is our procedure, I removed the battery from my phone and tossed it on the coffee table.

“I suppose,” said André in the darkness, “that we should never mention that you came in here armed with a potato peeler?”

“Where are all my knives?” I demanded.

“I moved them. To prevent you from making a mistake. I know how you think, remember? You might think I was Fabian and –”

“Fabian would stab me. But he would never bake bread. Wait, is he here?!”

“*Non.* Sit down. And try to relax.”

That set my teeth on edge. “Relax, he says, as if the situation isn't unnerving. I am unnerved, you know! And glad to see you, of course, but you know how I

am. Your appearances always jar me – no, let's not sit in here, there's more light in the kitchen..."

He followed me down the corridor. My eyes were adjusting to the dimness. I was able to fill up the kettle and put it on the stove. Gertie skipped about the kitchen merrily, delighted with the novelty of our visitor. I filled her food bowl and sat down across the table from André's silhouette.

"Do you remember when we first met?" he asked.

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

In my late teens I went to Cracow in Poland. Not for any particular reason – Australians often find themselves traveling inexplicably to different parts of the world. It's unsettling for us, of course; mostly we try not to think about it.

It turns out that Poland is pretty cold during winter. The sky was always overcast, and the air was sulfurous. For some reason every day I was followed by a different cat. Sometimes a ginger tabby, other times a smoke grey Persian, occasionally a black creature with spindly legs and intense eyes. I don't know why the cat population of Cracow had deemed me a person of particular interest. Even stranger, they were not the only ones who followed me around.

I was sitting in a café in the old town square one day when a man entered and sat down at a nearby table with a copy of *Le Monde*. He was only a few years older than me and had long black hair and blue eyes. I remember he was wearing an old leather jacket over a dark turtleneck. He looked French. In fact, he was the most French-looking individual I had ever seen.

It was early in the day; we were the café's only customers, and the waitress, whom I had annoyed by asking for milk with my tea, was sulking petulantly nearby. I didn't speak Polish but I could intimate from her tone and general attitude towards me that she would not be bringing me any milk, on the grounds that it was wrong. I could see her off in my periphery, smoking a cigarette and scowling with eyes hardened by blue eyeshadow and a lifetime of having to

endure all these dissipated ‘tea with milk’ people. She ignored the other customer completely.

So I sat there instead, gazing across the town square and wondering idly if asking the waitress for more tea might provoke her to murder when I noticed the café’s only other customer was staring at me.

Our eyes met and, without any change of expression, he extended his right hand in greeting.

“My name is André from Paris,” he said, in English. I took his hand and introduced myself.

“I am Shea from Thargomindah.”

“You are Australian,” he stated.

“I am! I can’t believe you have heard of Thargomindah. Nobody else –”

“You walk like an Australian. That is how I knew.”

“Huh,” I said and sipped my tea in silence. How could he know how I walk? I had been in here for a while now...

“You seem a little weird, André. Why are you talking to me?”

His eyes returned to his newspaper.

“To tell you that you are being followed,” he said quietly.

“What?” I asked, peering out through the window. “Followed by whom?”

“By me.”

I laughed in spite of myself. “But why?”

Instead of replying, he stood and folded his newspaper under his arm. “I must go,” he said. “You will be contacted again very soon.” Then he vanished without another word.

What a strange person.

A week later I was in an empty carriage on a train bound for Warsaw when

the door slid open.

“It’s you!” I exclaimed to André from Paris, who promptly slid the door shut and sat down across from me.

“Keep your voice down,” he cautioned. “Now first of all, do you have questions for me?”

I paused to reflect. “You mean, apart from ‘what are you doing here?’ and ‘why are you following me?’”

“I am hunting somebody. I thought perhaps you were the person I sought. It seems I was mistaken.”

“Is hunting people something you do very often?”

“*Non.* Normally it is *I* who is hunted. This situation is different.”

Staring through the windows of the train carriage at the flat Polish landscape, André described his month-long search for an old friend who had gone missing. His friend had last been seen in the company of two Australian travelers. André – along with various associates – were investigating every Australian they could locate in the region. They soon discovered I was not one of them – I had arrived in the country weeks after their friend had disappeared – but André found himself following me anyway, out of interest’s sake.

“What’s so interesting about me?” I wondered.

“Well, you know the pickpockets who work near the railway station?”

“Ah,” I said, tensing uncomfortably. I could see where this was going.

“We observed you bumping into these pickpockets at various times. You slipped handwritten notes into their pockets, correct?”

Through the carriage window I watched frozen fields drifting by, an endless repetition of snow-covered rectangles stretching out to the horizon.

“This is one of those notes,” continued my fellow passenger, producing a familiar fold of paper. “It was handed to me by one of the pickpockets. Would

you like me to read it?”

“Not particularly –”

“I will read it. It is only four words. ‘Please disregard the bison.’”

I scratched my ear and made an effort to smile.

“What does this mean, please? This message about bison?”

I took a deep breath. “Be honest with me. Are you from the police?”

André shook his head. “*Non.* A curious bystander.”

“Well, look...”

He removed another note from the same pocket. “This one says ‘You are an unsuspecting test subject in a lifelong psychological experiment. Take all necessary precautions.’”

I winced.

“Here is another: ‘The serpent god saw what you did. You must flee the city before nightfall or all will be lost.’”

“Just look at those haystacks, will you?” I said, gesturing at the window.

“I liked this one,” he said. “‘Sir, you are being hunted by an aardvark. Anyone attempting to arrange a meeting between you and an aardvark *must not be trusted*. Especially if that meeting is to take place *after dark*.’”

I was cornered and knew it.

“It’s called reverse pickpocketing. I write funny little messages and slip them into people’s pockets for them to find later. Perhaps when they’re doing their laundry...”

“Yes,” responded André, tersely. “This is obvious. The question is – why?”

“Just a habit, really.”

“*What?*” he asked, suffering some variety of despair.

“You know how you just do something one day and it works? So you keep on

doing it, and before you know it, it's been woven into the fabric of normality? Like – I don't know, eating toasted sandwiches in the bath, or something. You never give the matter a firm look until one day, there you are on a train, getting the third degree from a stranger. And suddenly, something you've long regarded as room-temperature normality –”

“You must tell me the truth now,” he interrupted, fixing me with a meaningful stare. “Do you eat toasted sandwiches in the bath?” He looked a little fearful, as though he might shortly need to make a panicked exit from a moving train.

“I do not,” I assured him. “My point was – so what if I leave mysterious notes in people's pockets? Being stalked by an aardvark? People should be so lucky. For most of us, life is boring by design. Unless someone lacks common sense, in which case life is almost wholly composed of unnecessary and pointless drama – which is even more boring when you think about it. So you've got boring *here*, you've got boring *there*, and right here in the middle is –”

“You, leading some sort of mystification campaign against pickpockets?”

I shrugged. “Well, it keeps me from walking around, methodically knocking people's hats off.”

“*Au contraire*. I believe this *is* you methodically knocking people's hats off.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do? *Reason* with everybody?”

André offered an expression of sympathy and then, to my surprise, began to describe his own habits, and how these had led him to live a strange life. I learned that he only travels incognito and rarely sleeps in the same place twice. He has no bank account, no birth certificate, passport, national identity card and no library card for that matter. In short, he lives, as the Americans say, ‘off the grid.’

It all came about due to André's temperamental aversion to government authorities. He avoided them as a matter of routine, much the same way you or I might evade someone we dislike at parties. Over time his habitual avoidance of

officials had transformed him into something of an expert. By the time I met him he was wanted for questioning in four European countries. But not for any particular reason.

“They have assumed I must be doing something wrong,” he said with an exasperated shrug. “I am not in the system. I must, therefore, be caught, questioned, and processed!”

It was fascinating, of course. I couldn’t help but like him. He lived a rich and unusual life. By the time we alighted from the train in Warsaw we were already friends. To my dismay, however, André told me he would have to disappear for a while. He shook my hand and looked closely into my eyes. “This has been an enjoyable conversation. Please, if you can avoid it, never mention me to anybody. I will see you again.”

Before I could even say goodbye, he had vanished into the crowds.

A year passed, and then another. I often wondered about him but I was back home in Australia and, despite his final words to me, I never believed we would see each other again. And then one day, in that strange way that such things can happen, I was walking along thinking about him for no reason at all when I realized that André was sitting on a park bench staring at me as I walked by.

To say I was flummoxed is to put it too mildly. I was so surprised I could barely speak.

He waved my agitation aside with a smile and said, “I have come to check on you.”

“How?” I spluttered. “No, scratch that. What I mean to say is – *how*?”

He sniffed derisively as if answering naive questions was beneath him, and would only say that he had come to check on me, and visit some other friends of his. I invited him to sleep on my couch, and in return, he introduced me to a few people of his acquaintance. They were also mysterious – an assortment of urban explorers, hackers, graffiti artists, political activists, culture jammers and eco-

terrorists.

Time passed, and every now and then André would surface, each time in a different disguise. One time with dreadlocks and a Mexican accent, another in a tie and shaved head and speaking with a strong South African accent. Twice he appeared in the guise of a vacationing German accountant.

He would declare that he was checking on me and then, after a few days or weeks, he would vanish once more without warning. The months rolled by. He would come and go with such irregularity that I almost ceased to find his sudden appearances surprising.

I doubted he would find me in the United States, however. I often wished I could reach out to him, but the fact was I had no way to do it. He does not use email, to my knowledge at least, or even have a postal address. André from Paris is, above all else, uncontactable.

To have him here in my home in Cambridge filled me with immense joy and relief. Part of me couldn't believe it was him in my kitchen. For the first time, I was aware of how lonely I had been since I'd arrived in the United States.

# they're still interrupting, by the way

“I just need to know something,” burst in Octavia. “Is it this André person the individual who stole the skull of Phineas Gage?”

I exhaled noisily to stifle the sudden impulse to shout. “If you’ll let me continue, no, Octavia, he didn’t –”

“Then he doesn’t sound very relevant, if you ask me,” put in Britney, who was still there, listening.

“Nobody *did* ask you. This is my story, and I’m sticking to the essential details. So, if I say André is very relevant, it’s because he is.”

“Why is that?” asked Astrid, tilting her head curiously.

“I was just about to get to that...”

Wendell cleared his throat. “Another thing...”

“Listen,” I snapped, feeling manic, “have any of you read *Wuthering Heights*? Remember how Nelly tells the entire story to Mr. Lockwood, he just sits there patiently and listens to the entire narrative without interrupting her? And remember how Joseph Conrad’s narrator, Marlow, gets through two or three whole stories without inquisitive listeners trying to participate? All I’m asking for here is a little bit of shoosh.”

“Alright, alright,” said Wendell peevishly. “We’re just curious, that’s all.”

“Well, if you’re that curious you should pay more attention because an hour and a half ago André from Paris wandered into the sushi restaurant, ordered lunch and stood near our table, eavesdropping – somewhat rudely, I thought –

before wandering out looking extremely annoyed about something.”

“Oh my God!” cried Astrid, aghast. Wendell and Octavia stared at each other, eyes wide.

“If you think that’s weird,” I said, “then hold onto your hats – things are about to get a lot weirder.”

While I’d been talking my audience had grown to ten members of the Countway staff. They had filled up the other armchairs and were beginning to spread across the tables. Even Ned had emerged from his office and was now swinging his legs happily on one of the tables.

“Hey, Ned!”

“Dude,” he said, grinning at me. “By all means, please continue.”

## andr  from paris, part two

“Do you remember when we first met?” Andr  from Paris had asked me.

I roused myself from my reverie. “You were investigating a friend who had gone missing.”

“And here I am again. Only this time it’s a happier story. This time I found my friend.”

I felt abashed. “Sorry, Andr . I didn’t tell anyone where I was going in case it somehow got back to Imogen. I hope nobody has been too worried about me.”

“There was some concern that Fabian had caught up with you. Well, you know how carried away he can get. Our first thought that maybe he’d gone too far and left you in a ditch somewhere.”

I shuddered.

“But when we found him,” Andr  continued, “he was able to convince us he had no clue where you were. You know, you both need to put this nonsense behind you –”

“Yes, yes, I know Andr . But tell me – how did you find me?”

“I looked you up on the internet.”

“What?!” I stood up quickly, knocking over my chair. “What did you say?”

“You’re listed as a staff member at Harvard University. Didn’t sound like you, of course, so we made a few calls and … what’s the matter?”

There was a rushing sound in my ears, and the world around me became a bit wobbly. A gray fringe of cloud pressed in from all sides.

Those idiots! They put my name on the Countway website where anyone can

find me! What were they thinking?

I should have anticipated it, and demanded they respect my right to anonymity. But what could I have said? That I was being stalked by a beautiful, intelligent woman, who wanted to marry me? The conventional view of people in my circumstances is that we're ungrateful wretches. I should consider myself lucky that a woman of Imogen's caliber had deigned to glance in my direction. After all, she was beautiful. And smart. So logically I must be some sort of fool.

That was the problem. Everyone treated Imogen as if she were special; perhaps this was why she felt obligated to take charge of everyone around her. She had a knack for convincing people to bring her a nice cup of tea – the good stuff, none of that nonsense from a teabag. She seemed so genuinely lovely that nobody could ever think of a reason to say no.

In the beginning, I was grateful for her being so patient with me. She endured my many apparent faults with a heartbreakingly beautiful smile. Of course, it seemed only natural that she should reorganize my life. I needed structure. And I needed to wear particular clothes and to throw away certain garments that didn't meet with her approval. I had to be known by the right sort of people, and see some of the wrong ones less frequently. And, in some instances, never again.

I suppose she was right. I am a little different from most people. Perhaps I don't take my potential as seriously as I ought. I was touched by how much she felt sorry for me too; it felt tender and unfamiliar. The problem was that whenever I was making Imogen happy I tended to feel bored and miserable. She often talked about our future, but I couldn't muster any enthusiasm about any of it. We would travel the world, for instance, and stay only in particular hotels, whose owners were friends of her family. We would not backpack; we would wheel about good Milanese luggage instead. We would not hop aboard freight trains and see where they took us; her parents would buy us first class tickets...

“What is the matter?” asked André, putting a mug of tea on the table in front of me. I blew across the surface and sipped cautiously.

“She knows where I am. If not already, she’ll know soon enough. What am I going to do?”

He exhaled audibly. “Does it really matter?”

“I don’t like her knowing where I am, André. I don’t know why. It just makes me feel … unwell.”

André’s voice softened. “Forget about her, Shea. She is nobody. You’ve made a new life for yourself here. You are finally doing something for yourself. You should feel good about that. You’re doing so well.”

“Do you really think so?”

His silhouette described an exaggerated shrug. “Of course! Why not?”

“Maybe,” I said, feeling uncertain. “I’m not sure what I’m doing here, André. Other than not being with her. She always made me feel so horrible.”

My friend said nothing for a long moment. He seemed to be scrutinizing me.

“I didn’t know you came here to get away from the girl. We thought … Fabian, of course…”

I groaned quietly and covered my face with my hands.

“He hasn’t found you yet, has he?” continued André. “That’s very interesting. I’d have thought he’d have found you long before now.”

I felt agitated. I’d felt safe here in the United States all this time, and somehow I managed to forget how to be careful. When André had appeared earlier in the evening I’d thought nothing about it; his ability to pinpoint my exact location in the world had always verged on the preternatural. The thought that anybody else might be able to find me was another matter entirely.

“He knows exactly where I am, doesn’t he?”

“Well, he would, yes,” confirmed André, his voice hardening. “And I think it is high time you two stopped being such children. The both of you need to sit down together and work out a truce.”

I laughed humorlessly. “André, there will never be a truce between Fabian and I. Not until one of us –”

“Childish!” he almost yelled, startling Gertie, who came out from under the table to look at us. “This is beneath you! I tell you, you need to sit down together and find a way of putting this behind you or else –”

I got up from my chair and backed away from him distractedly. He could never understand of course. I gazed away, absently tracing a scar on my shoulder, beneath my t-shirt.

“You’re right. We should do that. I’m willing to give it a try. The problem is that the next time Fabian and I see each other he’s going to have a knife in his hand, and – trust me on this – he will not be in the mood to listen.”

In fact, he could be outside right now. I crept softly into the entry, confirmed the door was locked, then I drew the bolt across the door to the basement. From now on, whenever I came home I would check every room carefully.

“It is a stupid situation,” André said sternly when I came back to my chair. “But you are now warned that he can find you. I have done my duty as a friend. We will not speak of this anymore.”

I extended a hand across the table, he took it and we shook.

“So where have you been this past year, André?”

He smiled wryly. Of course, he could not confirm where he had been, but he would admit that, in the course of the past ten months, a man matching his description had been followed at a distance by local police in Lisbon, Barcelona, Marseilles and also Stuttgart. The man had always escaped before the authorities were able to effectively throw a net over him. As usual.

André’s Interpol file is filled with numerous police reports that describe near sightings of an elusive fugitive. The file contains no photographs, just a single composite sketch created with the assistance of a cooperative train conductor in Brussels.

I know this because I've read André's Interpol file; he showed it to me once. The only factually correct data in the entire stack is the suggestion that the name 'André' might be an alias, and that he might not be from Paris after all. That composite sketch is actually of a Ukrainian engineering student called Yuri. André had given Yuri a keg of beer in exchange for lurking around near the train yard looking suspicious, so my friend could slip away to meet a girl.

Because Europe was becoming difficult for him, he moved east and spent several years far from France. He spoke Arabic like a North African, Farsi, Urdu and could make himself understood tolerably well in Sanskrit whenever the need arose. He had friends everywhere, and for all I knew had never stayed a single night in a hotel. But of course, little about André is ever certain.

Meanwhile, his ability to avoid the authorities had started to madden certain parties. My friend was now wanted for questioning over his suspected ties to a terror cell of Basque separatists.

"A regime of radical nationalists? I would rather see an end to nationalism of all kinds," he complained bitterly. "Anyway, how was I to know she was Basque? That's what happens when you kiss the wrong girl in a nightclub."

MI5 in London suspected he was an agent of the General Directorate for External Security in France, tasked with discrediting the reputation of the British dairy industry, with the purpose of sabotaging British cheese exports.

"I was overheard in Wales talking about the inferiority of a slice of processed cheese on my baguette," he clarified, thoroughly irked. "The other condiments were perfectly acceptable."

Mossad, who had never laid eyes on him either, suspected the appellation was the codename of a Syrian businessman committed to raising grassroots support for the creation of a new state called Palestine.

"Einstein described nationalism as an infantile disease, the measles of mankind," quoted André with bitterness.

The Syrians, who had also never laid eyes on this André from Paris, were on the lookout for a new Israeli spy they suspected of sabotaging the creation of the very same state of Palestine.

“Nationalism is just a tool for manipulating people. Wave a bit of colored flag and obey the politicians. Please,” he muttered in disgust. “We should all unite as one people, instead of kneeling before these false idols.”

Both Israel and the Palestinians wanted him dead, or worse – handed over to the Americans for questioning. The Australian Secret Intelligence Service, however, had looked at the matter more carefully than everybody else and decided that André was most likely one of theirs. They dutifully sent a package of data to Langley, Virginia, that delicately implied that the elusive figure was from neighboring New Zealand, and attached a somewhat confusing map that suggested that New Zealand was a small village only twenty minutes from Baghdad.

The CIA, however, who had no good intel on André from Paris, or anyone else for that matter, decided he was undoubtedly a key target in the global War on Terror. They passed his Interpol file to their counter-terrorism group, who then attempted to plot André’s movements over the last ten years on a map. When that became too bewildering, they realized André must be a member of that elite group of rogue cartographers who went around intentionally making maps too confusing to understand. They’d been hunting those damned miscreants for years.

Then, six months ago, a description of the man known as André from Paris was purchased for an exorbitant sum from an Iraqi businessman who operated a taxi company in the outskirts of Baghdad. The description was sparse: ‘a man with brown skin of Middle Eastern appearance,’ but it was also an exact match of a local businessman who happened to own a rival taxi company in Baghdad.

A memo leaked by the website Wikileaks a month later confirmed that André from Paris had been killed in one of five successful drone strikes that targeted

locations near Baghdad overnight; among the dead were six other men of similar, Middle Eastern appearance who were, it was surmised, André's security doubles. The Pentagon briefed the President, who praised the joint agency effort that had led to the elusive terrorist, codenamed 'Soaring Kiwi,' being brought to justice with the barest minimum of collateral casualties.

The real André from Paris learned of his own death while he was in Mexico taking a Thai cooking class at a community college in the guise of a Norwegian exchange student named Sven. The following day he crossed the border into the United States on foot carrying only a six-pack of Budweiser beer and dressed exactly like the sort of Texan civilian who goes out with his buddies on volunteer border patrols and gets himself lost.

My friend was picked up at midday by a farmer who happened to be a fifth-generation American of Mexican descent. He and the old man soon became friends, and they spent the rest of the day exchanging stories and eating tacos at someone's cousin's house.

Two weeks later, after arriving in Cambridge via some secretive route or other, André surveilled my movements over several days to ensure I was not being watched by any government agency or private intelligence contractor. Then he picked the lock to my back door and spent an hour befriending my dog, Gertie. She usually thinks very little of people but decided, apparently, that André wasn't too bad.

My friend then checked the house for eavesdropping equipment – because you can never be too sure – and rearranged my kitchen for maximum efficiency. Then he swept the floors, baked some bread and settled down on the couch to cuddle Gertie and wait for me in the darkness.

This was all he would tell me.

"Tomorrow," I said, "You are putting my kitchen back the way you found it."

André shook his head and changed the topic. "You know, I have often sent

people to keep an eye on you over the years.”

“Because being your friend puts a person in danger?”

“There is that. But I also believe you are a danger to yourself.” He pointed at me accusingly. “You are always doing things. Creating mischief. Causing trouble.”

“No, I’m not,” I said.

“What is the first thing you did when you arrived in the United States? I will tell you. You wrote down on the declaration form, under religion, that you worship a Sumerian god called Ereshkigal.”

Gosh, I had forgotten about that; I should keep a diary. “How would you know about that?”

“They put it in a database. My friends in Russia have access to this database. I have many friends, and one of them is keeping a close eye on you.”

“Comforting,” I muttered. “But the point is this: Yahweh was a Sumerian god before the Hebrews made him their own. Which means that the three big monotheistic religions are all worshiping an ancient Sumerian god. I read about it in a book at the airport.”

“You are up to something here. I can always tell.”

“You mean, up to something at Harvard?”

“Oui. Harvard. Why have you come to this finishing school for the American upper class? Are you gathering intelligence? Stealing data? Why are you here?”

His questions confused me. Why would he think my motivations were of a covert nature? I realized now that André’s life was taking a toll on him. He lived his life in a world of shadows. Most of his friends were dissidents of some variety. He wouldn’t know many people who weren’t up to something that the authorities wouldn’t frown upon. The fierceness with which he asserted his suspicions, however, made me feel very naturally defensive and uncooperative.

“André, is this an interrogation?”

# spies!

“You’re spies!” interrupted Astrid excitedly.

“No they’re not!” snorted Wendell, though regarding me with suspicion.

I looked around the IT lounge and noted we’d been joined by a few more librarians. I stood, stretched, and went over to fetch a bottle of water from the bar fridge. There’s probably no point even trying to set matters straight, I thought as I draped myself lazily across my armchair.

“It makes sense,” Astrid enthused. “I mean, it sounds far-fetched, but this is Harvard, after all. How unlikely is it that certain governments would place sleeper agents here. Just to keep an eye on things. The research we’re doing here at the medical school. The students...”

“Why would anybody spy on the students?” Octavia asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Well, they’re just students now,” Wendell speculated, “but who knows who they’ll be in twenty years? This would be the time and place for foreign governments to dig up dirt on the leaders of tomorrow. Not that I think it’s actually happening. But you never know, do you?”

“Alright, let’s say you’re both right,” said Octavia, pointing a claw at me, “then would someone please tell me why the Australian government would send him of all people!?”

Everyone apparently thought this was supremely funny. I crossed my arms patiently. I’m a very patient man.

“Maybe,” said Astrid, suppressing a smile, “the Australian government didn’t send him. Maybe he’s a Russian secret agent...”

Ned slowly raised his hand. Octavia turned to him and shook her head. “You don’t need to put up your hand. We’re not in school.”

“Oh, sorry. Well, I just wanted to say that I’ve read that there are different kinds of spies. Some steal intelligence. Others plant false information. There are *agent provocateurs*, and agents whose sole purpose is to create disruptions...”

The frustrating thing about Americans is that there’s no point in telling them just how paranoid they are; they can never see it. They will only gaze at you narrowly and wonder what your angle is, and whether you’re working for the Russians or the Chinese.

“Well if Shea and this André character really are spies then why would he be telling us so much about it?” Wendell demanded.

“Easy. He’s hiding out in the open, obviously,” said Astrid. “Or perhaps he’s just not very good at it.”

Britney regarded me disdainfully. “I don’t think he’d make a good spy.”

“Yes I would,” I retorted. “I’d be excellent. As long as nobody told me what to do and I didn’t have to follow anybody’s orders, I’d be the best.”

“This André from Paris,” interrupted Wendell, in that thoughtful tone of his, “has a very nebulous background story. It seems to me that Shea is connected to it in some way, and has been for several years.”

Octavia was glaring at Ned again. “Remember how I just told you that you don’t need to raise your hand?”

“Sorry,” he said, giggling sheepishly. “I just wanted to say that, well, our IT guy isn’t your ordinary IT guy. He’s highly skilled.”

“Thanks, Ned. That means a lot to me –”

“So obviously,” he continued, ignoring me, “the operative known as *The Blue Bandicoot*, must have received special training somewhere ...”

*Damn it, Ned.* “You have to cut out this Blue Bandicoot business, man. It’s

never going to take off.”

“Dude,” Brandon said. “We’ve gone over this. If you want to be an infamous cat burglar, you need a name.”

“Who came up with Blue Bandicoot thing, again?” asked Astrid.

“Not me,” said Ned, his eyes glittering. “But you have to remember, the true identity of the Blue Bandicoot has always been a mystery!”

“Nobody will ever call me that, Ned. You’re out of your mind.”

Octavia was only half listening. “Anyway, it sounds like you tried to crowdsource your plan to steal the skull, but it didn’t work. No one here – none of your friends, especially – were destined to be much help.”

“That’s right,” I agreed. “They’re smart, but not much use when it comes to planning heists, it turns out.”

“But it sounds as if your friend André is the perfect accomplice,” said Octavia crisply. “His background fits. He has connections in the underworld and certain useful skills...”

Ned suddenly collapsed into a fit of laughter. That’s when I noticed that his eyes were bloodshot. “Ned, are you high? Did you come to work high again?”

“I’m not admitting anything. Hey, it’s Christmas everybody! Merry Christmas!”

I’m not usually given to hugging other men, but I climbed out of my seat and went over to hug him anyway.

“I love you, dude,” he murmured into my shoulder. “I am having a great day. Thanks for doing this!”

“No problem. Now, I need you to sit here in the corner and try not to distract me, alright? I’ve got some serious concentrating to do. Or else I’m going to wind up in jail.”

“You know what, man? We need to hang out more. This is our brief time in

this universe, you know? Screw Harvard, dude. Let's go hang out in a field. Stare at the sky and talk about stuff ...”

It was too cold today, of course, but I promised Ned that, if I weren’t in jail, we would make time to hang out in a field sometime, perhaps in the spring.

“Anyway,” I said, returning to my chair, “I had just asked André whether this was an interrogation, remember?”

## andr  from paris, part three

“I hate to feel interrogated,” I told the shadowy figure in my kitchen.

My friend now lapsed into a tense silence. Some part of me hesitated to describe my plans because the man lived such a precarious life; compared to the gravity of his daily circumstances my heist felt, well, a little trivial. On the other hand, there was no evading his curiosity either; he would pester me, I knew, until he’d got to the bottom of it all. It was just his way.

“Alright then,” I finally muttered. “I’m going to steal the skull of Phineas Gage.”

“The what?”

“Phineas Gage. You know, construction guy who had his head punctured by a railroad spike.”

“Never heard of this person. Was he a spy?”

Andr  suspected everyone was a spy.

“He was not a spy; he’s famous for surviving a massive brain injury. And also, an encounter with a 19th-century doctor, which, let’s face it, was probably a lot more dangerous.”

The side of Andr ’s face that was illuminated by the oven light registered confusion, and so I explained that, in earlier centuries, doctors treated head wounds with leeches or even by amputating their patient’s feet. For Phineas to go willingly to a doctor meant he was either in an overly optimistic mood or else suffering a severe lapse of judgment brought about by brain trauma.

“John Harlow – the doctor who operated on Phineas – said that after the accident his patient was a changed man. Harlow said he began to use bad

language, and, apparently, ‘told wild stories.’ He also remarked somewhere that Phineas had become moody and unable to complete tasks.”

“Interesting,” observed André. “So the accident turned him into an ordinary man. So did the doctor know his patient before the accident?”

“No,” I said. “But somehow his account became very influential. After Phineas’s death, a variety of experts subjected the question of his changed personality to wild speculation. More than a century after his death scholars are still describing Phineas’s descent into degeneracy and gross profanity. He was a man in the grip of animal passions! He was also a drunkard and a sociopath!”

“Is there any evidence of it being true?”

“None at all. We hardly know anything about him. The first and only account is from the most unreliable of narrators – John Harlow, a country doctor trying to make a name for himself on the national lecture circuit.”

“Why can’t narrators just be reliable?” André muttered in a disgruntled sort of way.

“And is a psychology textbook really the best place for baseless conjecture?” I demanded hotly. “The field of medicine is already rife with impressionable men and women who, let’s face it, are highly unreliable at the best of times.

“You hear about it all all the time; a man goes in for an appendectomy and comes out of surgery missing a leg or with an ear attached to his nose. The doctors always try to pass it off as a clerical error, of course, but we all know it’s because they got carried away and couldn’t help themselves.”

“Returning to the skull for a moment,” André interrupted. “It is an icon shrouded in myth, no?”

I nodded emphatically.

“Some of the things that experts have said about Phineas since his death are so unkind that you could almost say that the accident with the railroad spike wasn’t the worst thing ever to happen to him.

In the faint light I could see André's face become grim; I knew he felt a certain empathy.

"You see, no matter what the librarians say," I concluded, "it seems to me that the skull of Phineas Gage is a great symbol of historical appropriation. In fact, if it were up to me he would be made the patron saint of being lied about. You know, by people with an agenda."

André frowned and shook his head. "Wouldn't that be Jesus?"

"Well, yes, technically... Look, you have a point there, but in fairness it's not Jesus's skull up there on the fifth floor of the library, being a tourist exhibit. It belonged to a railway worker – a blue-collar bloke. Or in other words, in the eyes of several generations of Harvard doctors, a complete nonentity."

"Oh, so this skull is in a Harvard museum, you're saying."

"Yes! That's the point of this whole story! Listen, it's in a cabinet about three floors above my office. In a sort of trophy case. Something for tourists to gawk at."

André turned his chair to the right so he could face the oven, and I was able to watch him thinking in its glow. Eventually, he turned and nodded.

"It sounds as if we should steal this skull."

Then the alarm on the stove rang shrilly. André removed the bread from the oven, pried it from its tin and left it to cool for half a minute on a rack. I hunted down my knives and retrieved some decent cheeses from the refrigerator. Then we both set upon the loaf without another word. We tore it apart, smeared it with chunks of cheese and wolfed it down hungrily until the loaf was gone. Finally, we slumped back in our chairs with contented sighs.

Gertie watched us balefully. We'd given her none of the bread because she'd already had her dinner, though this seemed to be an irrelevant detail in her mind. It was clear from her face as she looked at me that she had never before suspected such evil existed in the world.

At last, André asked me the question I'd been waiting for all evening. "How did you get hired by Harvard?"

I slapped my palms enthusiastically on my thighs. "Right, where do I start?"

"At the beginning, please."

"Very well," said I. "Well, first of all – and I've never told anybody this – but Nana always said my father was either an American astronaut named Neil Armstrong, or a British actor named Cary Grant..."

"You tell me that story every time I see you. Listen, why don't you just start by telling me how exactly Harvard came to hire you?"

# my job interview

Being hired by Harvard is not an easy undertaking, but it was especially difficult for me because when it comes to job interviews I only know two rules.

The first rule is to never raise the subject of workplace fires. Because although it is true that fire is beautiful, terrible and also cleansing, it has been my experience that interviewers will not rally around the topic with an interested fervor.

The second rule is to never tell the truth under any circumstances. This is the one that always gives me so much trouble.

As you know, I spent my formative years with my Nana in Thargomindah. And the thing about Nana was that she could never stand a liar. I don't know whether it was because she was a retired Medicine Woman who lived according to some sort of Witch Doctor Code of Ethics, or if it was because she resented the way most people refused to talk openly about the secret infiltration of all major world governments by a race of alien lizards. Either way, Nana never let me tell fibs.

Usually when discussing the human temperament, people frame the debate in terms of nature versus nurture. But what about people like me, whose guardians used spells, bewitchments, and hexes as parenting techniques?

Am I naturally honest, or did Nana make me drink one too many magical potions made from ground up lizard bones?

What I do know is that honesty is a terrible trait for anyone wanting to be successful in the modern world. My tendency to tell the truth gets me into more scrapes than I think is fair. And it makes applying for a job a real nightmare.

If my interviewers had only taken the time to ask me why I should be hired I would have felt compelled to explain that I was faced with a mounting necessity to earn money. And that if I didn't find a job in the United States I would soon have to return home to Australia where I faced almost certain matrimony.

If they had asked if I thought I should be placed in a position of trust, I would have said yes, though I couldn't guarantee my justification wouldn't touch on the subject of workplace fires. Of course I know I'm not supposed to mention 'workplace fires,' but it would eat at me until I did.

And besides, fire really is beautiful and cleansing; what's so wrong about that?

The first thing I had to do was write a resume. What a horrible chore that was. It was also ironic; after all, if I'd wanted to get in the business of writing fiction I wouldn't have needed a stupid resume!

What I needed was a job, and it had not escaped my notice that there were other people about who needed jobs, too. My competition would be sending in elaborate resumes so I would do the same. Now, everybody knows that very few resumes are little more than lies from top to bottom, and I was determined to adhere to the genre as strictly as I could. I mean, Harvard's HR department wasn't going to take me seriously if I couldn't lie as well as everybody else.

But the real struggle came when I sat down to write a cover letter. I've never been good at those, but I knew it was all about pretending to be their ideal candidate. Under no circumstances could I reveal to them that, owing to an unfortunate psychological disorder, I had a tendency to subconsciously sabotage any organization that hired me.

So I went into a bookstore and flicked through a handbook that had been written on the subject of writing cover letters. I learned that to do it properly all I had to do was praise myself a great deal. But what kind of employer, I wondered, would trust what I have to say on the subject of my own merits? That

sort of hiring protocol would skew the advantage to narcissists, wouldn't it? Surely nobody wanted to work with a bunch of self-absorbed neurotics? Strangely, the handbook seemed to suggest that they did.

I was in a bind. If I didn't find myself a job I would have to go back to Australia and face a lifetime of mortgages and responsibility. What was I going to do? I squared my shoulders, gritted my teeth, braced myself for hardship and swallowed a pill so bitter it made my Nana's wallaby potions seem like the nectar of the gods, and I got to work on a cover letter.

I worked on it all through the night, and when the sun came peering blearily over the rooftops, it found me exhausted on the back step of my porch, clutching my dog tightly and having one of those 'what am I doing with my life?' moments.

The cover letter lay finished on my kitchen table like a deceitful magic spell. It conveyed a breezy confidence that suggested that I was the sort of man who could, should circumstances require, seize the controls of a Space Shuttle from a fainted pilot and land the thing right next to Gordon Hall with a minimum of fuss or damage to the landscaping.

I'd outdone myself. There was even a bit in there about how I had taken home the bronze medal for competitive crocheting in the last Olympics. Would it work? Of course not. The world is better organized than that. But I typed up the letter dutifully and sent it off as an email, anyway, because I really had put a lot of work into it...

Then I forgot all about it.

A week later, Harvard wrote back and invited me in for a chat.

*What?!*

I didn't take that seriously, of course. People like me don't get hired by Harvard. It was a clerical error, obviously. Convinced that I was not going to be hired, I went along to meet them.

I remember it was a Tuesday. It had been tricky for me to even find the Medical School which was located across the river in the Longwood area of Boston. A decrepit Green Line tram took me out of the center of the city past Fenway Stadium. Walking down Longwood Avenue in my four thousand dollar suit, I passed an improbable number of hospitals and at least nine Starbucks cafés until I finally located the Vanderbilt building.

Here I was greeted, led down a curving flight of stairs into basement offices, and into what was apparently an IT Department. Then I was shaking hands with a few people and, moments later, sitting at an overly large conference table with five strangers: two from Central IT, two from the Department of Human Resources and one from the Library.

What on Earth am I doing here, I wondered to myself, staring at the drapes and a crimson coat of arms on the wall. They chattered at me. I offered a compelling impersonation of a man who was listening. The minutes tiptoed by.

They were too impressed by my fictional resume, apparently. I think that's just what happens in job interviews. People sit about staring at fictional resumes while the interviewee hopes nobody asks too many questions about it. I remember we talked about all sorts of other things that weren't related to the job. Someone mentioned Australia, for example, and how much their friend, brother, or parents had enjoyed their honeymoon, conference or vacation there.

I could barely focus. All I could think about was my Nana; if only she could see me right now at Harvard University wearing a four thousand dollar suit. She would be so angry.

After a while, I began to discern a sort of theme developing amid all their chatter. The keyword seemed to be 'role.' A role is a character, inhabited by actors in a play; I'd seen a few plays, so what they were saying was finally making sense to me. They wanted me to act for them, every day, and they were outlining the kind of performance they would particularly enjoy.

Whenever the Human Resources people mentioned the librarians, however, I noticed their shoulders tensed, as if fearful that librarians might burst into the room at any moment and start shushing people.

“They’re such good, commendable people,” they enthused. Heads around the table nodded eagerly. “Nobody wants to irk them. Why would anyone?” Nervous, staccato laughter.

It made me uneasy, in fact.

The librarians, they insisted, should be made to feel calm and tranquil. Perhaps even happy – wouldn’t that be wonderful? For the librarians to be happy?

At the far end of the table, sitting up straight and surveying us all coolly, was a regal, steel-haired woman in her mid-fifties. Later, I would hear the librarians speak of her as The Necromancer.

She coughed gently, and the room lapsed into silence. Curiously, no-one at the table, apart from myself, looked in her direction. This struck me as very strange.

“Many in Central IT seem to be stubbornly unaware,” The Necromancer announced, “that our library’s technological infrastructure is complex and multiform. We require not merely a Desktop Support Specialist, but someone who can work with a myriad of people in a unique environment.

“So far the ‘one size fits all’ support model imposed upon us by Central IT has been of little benefit to our library. Besides, Central IT has been, on the whole, insensitive to our needs. This is why we’re looking to bring in someone from outside their prevailing ‘culture.’ This is also why we are selecting someone ourselves, someone who might match the particular requirements of our organization.”

I bit my lip; I had no idea what she was banging on about, of course, but the fact of the matter was that I really did need a job. Because if I had to go back to Australia...

Did I ever mention that Imogen wanted me to take up yoga?

So, steeling myself for combat, I offered my best smile and studied the room carefully. On my right slouched a man with a bored face, wearing khaki trousers and a blue polo shirt. Apparently, he was one of the many internal directors of Central IT, and he showed no curiosity toward anything The Necromancer had to say.

His subordinate, Hector, seated to his right, was a thin, Hispanic man wearing a baseball cap and light sports coat over a dark polo shirt and jeans. He was staring at the table in front of him with a fatalistic smile. The Human Resources folk were grinning. They had been grinning all the way through the interview, and I had begun to worry that they were trying to stave off some secret, ingrained feeling of melancholy.

Nobody had said anything for a little while, and I realized that The Necromancer was waiting for my response.

“Well,” I said, “I grew up in a small, isolated town out in the bush. We used to look forward to going into town just to go to the library. I was raised by my Nana, and my Nana used to work with aboriginal communities.”

For a moment I considered explaining Nana’s theology but decided it would take too long. “Nana often talked about how aborigines used something called an oral history. Our civilization was different, she’d say, because we used writing. So whenever she took me to the library – which was quite often, when I was a kid – she was taking me to a repository of our ancestral knowledge, or so she said.”

“She sounds like a very wise and interesting woman,” said The Necromancer.

“She was. And a very spiritual woman, too. Nana taught me that all knowledge was sacred and that, from a certain perspective, libraries were sacred places. In a way, libraries are the fire about which our civilization huddles and warms itself. And I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed this, but the thing about

fire is –”

“Precisely!” exclaimed The Necromancer. “I couldn’t have put it better myself. It is unfortunate that in certain places libraries are no longer held with the esteem they merit.”

Hector, I now noticed, was studying me. Something about me, evidently, was not quite right. He scooped up my resume from the table and began to read. “What’s your objective, professionally?” he asked. “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

I glanced at his boss, a director in Central IT, but the man had forgotten my existence. He was waiting for the meeting to end, with the patient expertise of a man who had had decades of practice of doing nothing at all.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said with a careless shrug, brushing the matter aside. “I’m sure I’ll find some way of making trouble somewhere.”

The Necromancer laughed curtly and stood.

“Excellent,” she growled. “Perfect, in fact. We could do with some trouble around here.”

And then, after wishing me all the best, she vanished. The interview was over.

The director of Central IT lazily shook my hand, yawned and swayed, then wandered out the door. Hector cast a final, doubtful glance in my direction and followed.

That left me chatting with the amiable Human Resources people. They had a certain aura about them that I liked; a sparkling light of enthusiasm and joy, probably from having spent so many years of their lives congratulating themselves and others for the resplendent circumstance of being employed by Harvard University.

Here we were in a garden where the prestige-hungry go to graze, a verdant hillside where the status-anxious yearn to meander and stare into its reflection pools, like Narcissus among his flowers. And so their sleepy eyes glazed over

with pleasure when I told them that, speaking as a recent immigrant, I was just glad to find myself in the midst of such good people.

They put their hands on their hearts and became misty-eyed. And if neither broke into a rousing verse of *The Star Spangled Banner* it was only because such a secular song felt too profane to them in these hallowed halls.

A week later they sent me a formal job offer. I couldn't help but feel that somebody was making a mistake...

## a recalibration of truth

Wendell snorted softly. I pretended not to hear.

“I don’t agree,” said Octavia. “You’re an excellent IT guy. Dedicated and hardworking, when you’re not wandering about the library acting like a prize lunatic.”

I exhaled stoically. It was time to take a short break. The crowd stirred and stretched. Wendell, with the authoritative tone of a high school teacher, asserted that we would resume in approximately ten minutes. Various parties went off in the directions of restrooms and coffee. I looked in on George, who was still snoozing comfortably in my armchair.

“How is he?” Astrid whispered from the doorway.

“Not dead. Don’t worry, I checked.” My attention drifted down to the carpet by the wall, where some of those old cathode ray tube monitors lay gathering dust.

The case nearest to me had fallen away a little from its front panel. I studied the thing curiously, then tapped it gently with my foot. The rear housing had been unscrewed. It fell open, like a cracked Easter egg.

Inside the case was nothing at all. No components, no power supply – no cathode ray tube, either.

I looked at Astrid and bit my lip.

“That’s odd,” she said softly, staring. “It’s empty. Why are there no electronic thingies in it? Did you remove them?”

I nodded dumbly.

“Shea? What’s the matter?”

I closed my mouth and didn’t reply. If I said anything, I would have no choice but to lie. And I didn’t want to lie to Astrid. In fact, I wasn’t even sure I could.

“Oh no, don’t tell me!” she exclaimed suddenly. “Is that where you have been hiding the skull of Phineas Gage?”

I made a wild gesture at George and pressed a finger to my lips. The old man stirred a moment, then let out a lofty snore.

She crept up close to me, bringing with her a fresh fragrance of lemons. I closed my eyes and saw sunshine and white sheets hanging on a line, set against a backdrop of eucalypts. Baskets of strawberries in the foreground, children laughing from offstage. Chubby puppies were bound to come tumbling across the lawn, it was only a matter of time...

“Did somebody take it?” I heard her whisper into my ear.

Baskets of strawberries, I thought determinedly. Freshly baked bread wrapped in cloth...

“Someone worked out where you hid the skull, didn’t they?” she continued. “And rather than hand it in, they’re keeping it for themselves. Is that what you’re saying?”

“I’m not saying anything,” I said, opening my eyes. I felt vulnerable and exposed. “The less you know, the better, Astrid. For you and me both.”

A shadow moved across the doorway. Britney scrutinized me like a bored shark and gestured that I should follow.

Giving Astrid my bravest smile, I followed obediently. The librarians were crowding about in the lounge, chattering interestedly among themselves.

Britney was waiting for me just inside the doorway of the storeroom.

“So,” she said, conversationally, her voice low and almost masculine. “How is it going?”

“I’ve made some mistakes,” I admitted. “Not least of which was believing that you wouldn’t show up here in the midst of everything.”

“Obviously I was going to stop in, Shea, and see how you were getting along.”

“But it wasn’t the plan –”

“It was *always* the plan. Despite your arguments. I was never going to let you do this by yourself – what if something went wrong?”

“It’s not that I’m ungrateful, but if something *did* go wrong, I wouldn’t want you anywhere near me! I don’t mind sticking my neck out, but if something happened to you? I wouldn’t forgive myself.”

Britney turned sharply. Astrid was approaching, almost crouched with apprehension. Naturally, I suspected she was eager to cross-examine me about that monitor in my office. I couldn’t have been more mistaken.

“We haven’t been formally introduced,” she said, extending her hand to Britney. “I’m Astrid. And unless I’m very much mistaken, you are André from Paris, correct?”

I nearly lost my balance. André, being roughly one part *sangfroid* and two parts *International Man of Mystery*, never wavered; he took Astrid’s hand firmly in his and shook it. “Most observant. I have crossed international borders in this disguise. Did I make a mistake somewhere?”

“I don’t think so. I just put two and two together. But we can talk about that later. Listen, the both of you – there’s something you need to know. And I’m not supposed to tell anyone, so you have to keep this to yourselves.

“Wendell has ordered security to guard all exits in the building. You can’t leave, Shea. Not without being arrested. They’ll assume you’re trying to escape. The guards aren’t to leave their posts – at least, not until you’ve returned the skull.

“Shea? Where are you going?”

“Just for a little walk,” I said, over my shoulder, making for the door.

Later, Astrid would tell the others that I panicked. I’d hidden the skull in my office, but someone had found it and taken it. I knew I’d be blamed. She’d been there, after all; she’d seen the realization on my face. And the flash of fear.

In a moment I was out on the second floor of the atrium, sprinting to the far side of the library. Then, skidding to a halt, I practically dove into the stairwell. Down the steps I went, two at a time. A moment later I was in the foyer, making for the front door...

Astrid was mistaken, of course. It hadn’t been fear that she’d seen in my face. The truth is that I almost always flinched when she stepped close to me. I have no idea why really.

I was in luck. The security guard was looking in the other direction. Sauntering with my head down, I passed through the metal detector and out through the glass doors.

The librarians told me later that they didn’t blame me for trying to run. If Astrid was right, then what choice did I have?

It’s maddening to think about. The fact is that, when I slipped out of the library, I was thinking about neither the skull nor my own self-preservation. I was thinking about Wendell and his stupid neckties...

Hurrying along, my head down and staring at the pavement, I didn’t see the four large shapes converging from all sides until the very last moment. By then it was too late – I was on the ground with someone’s knee pressed into the small of my back. Cold metal bracelets snapped around my wrists.

Gruff voices snarled and laughed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” someone demanded, nastily.

“Just out for a stroll,” I panted. “You know something? I think I’ll go inside now.”

And then something heavy struck me hard in the temple. One of the guards must have accidentally kicked me. You know these things can happen.

I didn't hear very much after that. My mind became oddly muffled. Hands grabbed at me, and I was hoisted upright, then I was dragged back through the library doors. Far away, agitated female voices rose up in my defense. Someone – I think it was Octavia – was demanding someone let go of something. I wondered dimly if the object in question might be me.

My limbs were oddly heavy, my thoughts disconnected and strange. I could feel the heels of my boots being dragged across the carpet. Onlookers, I noted detachedly, watched with horror and alarm. Kurt was threatening someone in a diabolical tone. There was Astrid, looking pale with shock.

Why, I wondered vaguely, did they have to kick me in the head? But that's authority figures for you. It's what they do...

There's a little room on the ground floor of the library, right by Wendell's office, where they keep the toner cartridges and paper for the photocopier. Years ago, Kurt had dragged in an old vinyl couch, to better facilitate his afternoon naps. Nowadays we called it the Nap Room. And that's where the security goons dumped me.

I lay on my side, arms painfully bound behind my back, listening to some kind of hushed argument going on outside the door. I couldn't understand a word, but I already knew which voice was going to win.

She came in a little while later, a pillar of white-hot fury. For a horrible moment, I thought Octavia was going to yell at me.

“Take the handcuffs off him,” she hissed. A security guard obeyed, flushed and mute with resentment.

“Now get out of my sight.”

I didn't feel like moving; I was far too nauseous. And the couch's slow, uneven rotation wasn't helping matters in the slightest. All in all, Octavia

seemed to be asking a lot of me. Eventually, I surmised that she'd been talking to the security guards, who now seemed to have disappeared.

Wise of them, I thought. That's what I should do too. The vinyl was cold against my face. Let me shut my eyes for a moment.

## the second thief

When I awoke, an old gentleman was sitting beside me on the couch.

“Allo’ George,” I said, sitting up gingerly and yawning. The clock on the wall informed me that it was just after four in the afternoon. Outside, the sun was turning in for the night.

“We’re alone,” said George in a hushed voice. “We can speak freely,”

“Good,” I said. “So you’re probably wondering –”

“What the devil you were playing at? Yes, actually. Why did you have to go running out of the library like that? Everything had been going perfectly well!”

“Oh, come on George, what would you have done? Don’t you remember what you said when I told you the director was going to fire you?”

The old man paused to recollect. “I believe I said I was going to punch him in the snout.”

“And you would have, too, if I hadn’t been there to talk sense to you. So imagine if some uppish middle manager told you that, for whatever reason, you were no longer allowed to leave the building without his permission.

“You see? What choice did I have? It was time to take a stroll. Besides, who does Wendell bloody-well think he is?”

George exhaled slowly; he could see my point.

We sat in silence. Time went wafting by, and my feelings of indignation about Wendell subsided gently into a subtle melancholy. I had made a terrible mistake, I knew. I’d allowed the machinations of a single, scheming middle manager to ruin my entire plan.

“What have I done, George?” I asked at last, in quiet despair.

“You took a bit of nasty knock on the head, or so I hear.”

“I’ve had worse,” I muttered, grumpily.

He nodded knowingly. “That time in Tripoli, in ‘43. Bloody savages, weren’t they? Still, didn’t think you remembered any of that, old boy.”

“George, the thing is – I *don’t* remember,” I admitted flatly.

“Yes, well, it was a nasty business. I wouldn’t want to remember it either. Still, never mind. On with the story, as they say.”

I shook my head slightly, and a sudden pain rattled about cruelly in my skull. “Don’t see how, George. The story is at an end now. And truth be told, I’ve made a pig’s breakfast out of everything.”

“That’s enough of that sort of talk,” he admonished. “That won’t do at all.”

“I let you down, mate. I let us both down.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “I disagree wholeheartedly. We are still firmly on track.”

I looked at him askance. “But I bungled it, don’t you see? Like that bloke who did the Mona Lisa job.”

“No,” George corrected with a polite but firm shake of the head.

“It’s time to throw in the spanner. The plan’s gone south.”

“No, it hasn’t.”

“I’m telling you, the plan has come to grief. It’s gone out the window. Gone belly-up and sideways. It’s dead in the water and gone to the dogs. It’s off the rails and will never fly.”

“Don’t talk rot, Shea,” said the old man, seemingly unperturbed. “Aside from this business with you getting kicked in the head, everything has been proceeding very nicely.”

The man wasn't making any sense, and I began to wonder if he'd finally lost his marbles. Our entire plan hinged on everybody listening to me yap all afternoon. How was that supposed to happen, now that I'd been arrested?

Noting my bewilderment, George gave me a whimsical look and leaned in confidentially. "A lot has changed while you've been sleeping, Shea.

"For example, did you know that, not twenty minutes ago, I was awoken by a horrible ruckus? Yes, a real hullabaloo, it was. Well, my immediate thought was that the Germans were marching into the city. And then, not a moment later, two Gestapo chappies burst in on me and started turning your office upside down. Can you believe it? This is a library for goodness sakes!"

"Well, naturally I asked them what the devil they were playing at, but soon gathered they weren't taking inquiries at that time. Kept on rummaging about, looking for something or other. That's when young Astrid marched in and tried to set matters straight with all and sundry..."

"Oh dear," I said, fearing the worst. "What did she say?"

"Well, it turns out that Astrid had just learned that you'd been guarding a certain skull in your office. For safekeeping, don't you know? Then she pointed to that big whatsit device on the floor –"

"The monitor case? The empty beige box?"

"The very same. And she tried to explain that you had been keeping the skull hidden there, for safe-keeping."

What happened next had surprised George. Astrid told those 'Gestapo chaps' that, not only had I been hiding the skull in my office, but also the identity of a second thief. In fact, she had surmised my dilemma; I had joked recklessly about 'swiping the skull of Phineas Gage' one too many times.

According to Astrid, I was finally aware of the danger I was in. She also suspected that someone in the library had planned to steal the skull, knowing that I would take the fall if they did. She also believed that I had discovered the plot,

somehow, and had taken action to save myself.

I whistled appreciatively. “She worked this out by herself? It’s almost worrying, isn’t it?”

“Well,” continued George. “The Gestapo chaps didn’t see it that way. They decided she couldn’t have surmised all this detail without being in on the heist herself!”

*Oh dear, what have I done?* I stood up, painfully, and felt a dull ache spread across through the front of my skull.

“Where are you going?” demanded George. “Sit down and stop being so hasty. I was there, remember? Do you think I was going to let anything happen to her?”

I sank to the sofa dizzily. “Well, don’t leave me in suspense man!”

“I took care of everything,” said my friend, placing a finger to the side of his nose.

I thanked him politely and exhaled with relief. For a while we sat quietly, mulling over the issue in our minds.

“George,” I said, eventually, “what do you mean, took care of everything?”

The old man settled back and told me the rest of the story, just as he’d told the Gestapo.

“I’d been snoozing away since lunch, when – sometime around two o’clock – I awoke to find someone creeping about in the dim light...”

The blinds had been pulled down, of course, but whomever it was, the person wasn’t me; George could hear me out in the IT lounge, where I was telling a story about a cafe in Poland ‘or some such place’.

Through half-closed eyes, the old man watched the silhouette stoop and feel inside the monitor case. Then the figure removed something large and round. By the light of the doorway, George could see it – the grinning skull of Phineas

Gage. He then watched the thief tuck the skull away inside his jacket, peek through the crack in the door and, a moment later, vanish.

“Well, that’s interesting. What did they say to that?”

“Well, one of the chaps wanted to know why I hadn’t raised the alarm. I told him ‘because I wanted to have a nap.’ And that I’m very old, don’t you know?”

“Besides, I said to the chap, I wasn’t worried because, as Astrid had surmised, my friend Shea already knew the identity of the thief. None of us had any reason to worry, I assured them, because *you* had the matter firmly in hand.”

“You might have exaggerated a bit there, but we’ll let it pass for now. What happened next?”

“Well, this one chap had his knickers in quite the proverbial twist. Said he wanted to know *how* I knew that. So I told him that ‘I simply did.’ And, as far as I was concerned, ‘that was *that*,’ what’s more, I was feeling tired and would like to go back to my nap, thanks very much.

“Then the blasted Jerry told me he did mind, *thank you very much*. So I told him I didn’t much care for his tone, and he said he didn’t care. And he called me a senile old coot for good measure.

“And then young Wendell burst in like a partisan at a *Wehrmacht* picnic, looking suitably miffed, let me tell you! Sent the first Hun packing. The second tried to stand his ground, but Wendell was having none of it. Dragged the lout out by the ear.”

“Bloody hell. I’d have paid good money to have seen that.”

He patted my hand supportively, then remembered Tripoli, sighed, and made me promise that the next time Jerry poked his head into the North African Theatre I’d take Wendell along to see them off. I made a solemn vow that, should such an unlikely event arise, the three of us would go together and knock the Hun for six.

Reassured that civilization was in good hands, the old man visibly relaxed.

“George,” I said. “You didn’t tell anyone what the thief looked like, did you? I mean, that bloke you saw in my office?”

“No, I kept mum. Less said the better, I should think.”

He was a good bloke, even if he did have a bee in his bonnet about the Germans occasionally. On the other hand, at least today he wasn’t rattling on about ‘that perfidious Bonaparte character.’

“Changing subjects for a moment, you wouldn’t happen to know anything about my status, *vis-a-vis* Octavia and company, would you?”

The old man brightened and revealed that matters on that front had improved significantly.

“The arrival of a second thief into the mix has set imaginations on fire. Tongues are wagging from here to the top floor. The general interpretation of events is that you’ve been telling the truth all day long.”

Of course I had. Everyone knows I’m terrible at lying. But I gathered from George that if among certain parties my name had been mud, it now bore closer resemblance to a trusted name in household disinfectant. Albeit one that worked most reliably in the dark.

“Which is not to say they’ll be letting you off the hook without your answering some hard questions first. Wendell is chafing at the bit, trying to decide who this second thief might be. And Octavia seems a tad displeased that you’ve kept the culprit’s identity under your hat.”

From George’s testimony I gathered that the Skull Recovery Committee now stood firmly behind me. We had been united by a common enemy, though Octavia seemed to be approaching the limits of her patience. If I failed to reveal the name of this second thief in a prompt, businesslike fashion then I should not look surprised when she attacks me with a stapler.

I wondered, suddenly, how André was faring in his ridiculous disguise. And, above all, what was Astrid thinking this very minute? The ache in my brain

seemed to be making a discreet exit from stage. Pulleys were whirring, and a sunlit backdrop was rising into place. Already I could hear the softly-stirring strings of hope awakening.

Soon I was arranging a new scene in my mind. Hope turned to certainty and then, after a moment of calm reflection, devious resolve.

I had been to the bottom of a murky abyss. Some might like that sort of thing, but it's not really my cup of tea. Fortunately, and thanks to George Ripley, I had been transported back to the bright surface of the world. And here I was determined to stay.

Nobody would be locking me up today. No, I had a much better idea. Mostly it was the same plan as before, though now adorned with one or two minor, diabolical adjustments.

George somehow sensed something different in my mood. "There he is, the Shea I know. Welcome back, young fellow."

"Nice to be back," I whispered, feeling the old smile creeping back to where it belonged.

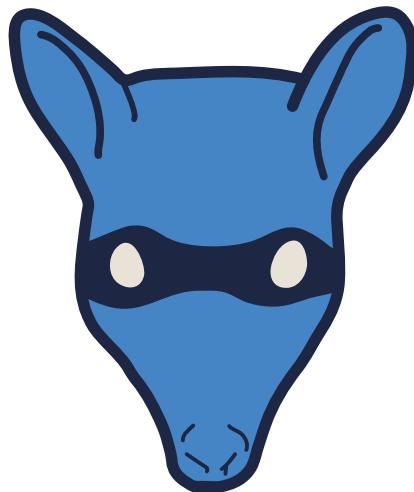
"Well?" he prompted. "What are you going to do next?"

*I am going to wreak such terrible mischief, just you watch...*

"Same old thing," I replied brightly. "I'm going to save the library."

## PART 2

# Rise Of The Blue Bandicoot



“It is no use to blame the looking glass if your face is awry.”

— Nikolai Gogol, *The Inspector General*

# the high ground

I've never been one to loiter on the moral high ground. It's a nice place to visit, I suppose, but you wouldn't want to live there. The problem is that nobody can inhabit the moral high ground forever. Sooner or later, everyone makes a mistake. And when they do...

"Let's just say I'm disappointed," I said to Wendell when he came shambling into the Nap Room, an avatar of awkwardness and remorse.

Security had dumped me in there an hour or so earlier. I'd been exonerated and was free to leave whenever I wished, but for some reason I didn't feel like going anywhere. Eventually, the librarians grew tired of waiting for me, I suppose, and sent in Wendell to coax me out.

"Which is curious," I continued, warming to the theme, "because my expectations of you as a person can only be described as *modest*. And yet, you've managed to disappoint me anyway. But let's be clear, this isn't because I have Pathological Problems With Authority. I don't think I can regard you as an authority anymore. I think of you more as a kind of plague."

He looked wretched. Earlier in the day, he had instructed campus security to prevent me from leaving the building, a brazen act of bureaucratic ineptitude that led to my being kicked in the head. Curiously, anyone looking at Wendell right now would think it was he who had suffered the blow.

He was speechless, apparently, and clutching the end of his necktie miserably, like he wanted to chew on it.

"He's a plague," I repeated to Octavia, who had just entered.

"He is," she agreed, "but he's apologizing to you now, Shea, so try to enjoy

the novelty of the occasion.”

“Hello Astrid,” I said, as she joined us. “Do you have any chips? Because what I’m going to do is sit here and eat chips while Octavia and Wendell entertain me with an explanation as to why I shouldn’t have Pathological Problems With Authority.

“How am I feeling, you ask? Are you asking me if it hurts where I got kicked in the head? Or how I feel about having been kicked in the head?

“Or are you asking me how I feel about not being allowed to kick Wendell in the head? Because that’s the real injury...”

And I was about to add something else that was fair and just and entirely reasonable when Astrid leaned in close, pressed her fingertips to the side of my forehead and inspected me closely. Her nose wrinkled with concentration.

I have no idea what I’d been about to say, actually.

I like to think myself cool-headed, but what I am above all else is a realist. Which is how I know that if, due to some mad caprice of Fate, I should ever have to disarm a bomb alongside Astrid, then ... Look, obviously I know I’m not supposed to cut the red wire, but the problem is that she is going to brush the hair out of my eyes at some point, and when she does ... well, I hope you’ll remember us fondly.

“He seems okay,” she said to others, which wasn’t how I’d have expressed it.

Wendell looked subdued. Octavia was looking about as apologetic as she’s capable of being, which is to say not very much. It would be more accurate to say she looked irked – powerfully irked – and at somebody who was not me for a pleasant change. They stood in tense silence for a while, and then Octavia nudged her subordinate forcefully in the back.

“I may have overstepped,” he admitted *sotto voce*.

“Look, he’s being entertaining,” I said to Astrid. “Are you sure you don’t have any chips?”

Twisting and squirming, Wendell gave the matter one last effort. “What I don’t understand is why on Earth you tried to leave the building!”

“Can’t a man pop out to get a sandwich, anymore? Should I always expect to get kicked in the face by a jack-booted thug?”

I was being tricky. Astrid had told me, in the strictest confidence, all about Wendell’s beefed-up security arrangements. I had tried to leave anyway.

“Obviously Shea had to flee,” she said, suddenly. “He had just learned that the skull had been snatched from its hiding place in his office. He didn’t have it anymore, don’t you see? What was he supposed to do? Trust us to believe him?”

I looked at her, feeling heartfelt gratitude. Bless her heart, she couldn’t have been more wrong. The real reason I had tried to leave the building was that I had just been told that I mustn’t, which is the surest way to get me to do anything. Telling me not to jump off a cliff is just another way of saying, ‘So long, Shea. Say hello to God for us.’

Besides, who does Wendell think he is, preventing me from taking a walk?

Then the man did something I could never have anticipated. He stepped forward and stuck out his hand. “Friends?”

The two ladies looked on with eager interest. I stood, took his hand and we shook.

“Friends,” I agreed.

“Good boys,” said Octavia. “No more fighting, okay? Now, let’s all go upstairs, and you can finish the rest of your story.”

I followed her out into the foyer. Kurt was leaning on the Circulation Desk, eyeing me with a fair degree of worry. When he’d seen me last, I was being dragged by in handcuffs. I can’t imagine how Octavia had kept him away from me. Threats and warnings, probably.

“Everything alright, chief?” he asked, his face inscrutable.

“New revelations have come to light,” Astrid told him brightly, falling behind to share the news. While the rest of us trudged up to the second floor, I could hear her describing how George had seen someone take the skull from my office – with his very own eyes! – while I was telling stories in the IT lounge, in front of half the library!

George hadn’t gotten a good look at the individual’s face, unfortunately, but everybody was pretty sure that I knew who it was. Some were speculating that this Second Thief had seen an opportunity to take the skull because they knew I’d be blamed. The current theory was that I had gotten wind of the plot, somehow, and decided to preemptively steal the skull myself. And that I’d been hiding it in my office for safekeeping all this time.

Why hadn’t I told anyone who the thief was? “Maybe Shea lacked proof,” Astrid conjectured. “Or perhaps he didn’t know. It’s possible that his confession was part of a Byzantine plot to flush that second thief out...”

I rounded the top of the stairs, and Astrid’s gossip faded from hearing. It was a real pity. I should have liked to have heard more of the tale.

Still, it was all nonsense. There had been no mysterious Second Thief poking about in my office; there had been only me. George had made up a story about someone pinching the skull, to save my skin. And Astrid’s skin too; the nefarious Harvard’s Internal Security Group (HISG) had decided that she was far too insightful not to be guilty of *something*.

The truth was that I alone had stolen the skull of Phineas Gage. There had never been a Second Thief unless you count George, I suppose. But hadn’t I told the librarians that he was working with me on the heist? He’d been in on the whole plan right from the start, and nobody had given the matter serious attention. I suppose that’s the trouble with most people. They always underestimate the elderly.

Everyone eyed me when I entered the IT lounge, but nobody stopped talking.

The room was crowded now and – speaking of accomplices, there was Britney, or rather, André from Paris in disguise. His head shook in silent wonder, though I couldn't determine whether the gesture was made in admiration or annoyance. I had gone off script an hour or so ago, and gotten myself arrested. Right now he probably didn't know whether to hug me or yell at me.

It had been a long and lazy afternoon. It was the final workday of the year, and most of the staff would usually be on their way home by now. Today, everyone had decided to stay on a bit late. Unofficially, we were having our holiday party. The air felt restless, and a little festive.

I sank into my armchair and paused for a long moment; the voices in the room began to hush. “It’s occurred to me that I didn’t finish telling you all about André.”

From the sidelines, Britney gazed at me in exasperation mingled with amazement. Then my friend Ned, who was seated behind her - or him, I should say, spoke up. “I’m not sure I believe this André from Paris character really exists.”

“He does exist,” I replied, thinking *he’s sitting beside you, you fool!* “In fact, André is absolutely pivotal. Let me explain.”

Wait a moment. Where was I? In my kitchen, I think, all those months ago. It was the evening of his arrival, and we had just finished dinner ...

# andr  has questions

The kettle was rattling on the stove; Andr  turned down the gas and filled our mugs. My kitchen became fragrant with Pennyroyal tea.

“The universe is a strange and chaotic place, Shea.”

“It is a bit of a mess,” I agreed. And so was my kitchen table. It was covered in crumbs from our feast of cheese and homemade bread. I was about to wipe it down when my dog, Gertie, caught my eye. And after all, what’s the point of having a dog if she can’t help out with household chores?

So we left her to it and went out to my unlit living room and settled contentedly, side-by-side, on the couch with our feet on the coffee table like a couple of well-nourished savages. We slouched there for a long while, musing in the darkness.

The lights were switched off because that’s how Andr  prefers it. There’s no point arguing about it; if you do, he’ll just get huffy and leave.

It is the way with some people. Some are tall, some are short. Some are bold and others timid. Some are straight-forward, and others elusive. And Andr  is, quite simply, *very* elusive.

He always travels in disguise and only uses cash. He avoids security cameras as a matter of routine and has never had a bank account or a registered address. It wouldn’t surprise me, now I consider the issue, if Andr  had never even *been* to Paris.

There was one unfortunate consequence of this overly-cautious lifestyle of his, which was that he had inadvertently aroused the interest of certain government agencies. They hunted for my friend everywhere. He’s never done

anything particularly wrong, mind you; I think it just bothers them that he can slip through their nets. He is wanted for questioning all around the world, though what those questions *are* is anybody's guess. Probably: 'Why are you doing all this?' and 'Won't you please stop? You're driving us crazy..."

I'm always glad when he reappears in my life, though. I was especially happy now.

"Now listen, André, I've just been wondering ... You wouldn't happen to have any ideas about –"

"I'm not going to help you steal this skull," he said tersely.

"What?! Oh, come on, André. Why the hell not?"

"Do you even know why you want to steal it, Shea?"

"Of course I do. I'm going to save the library."

I could hear him exhale. "And this is your best plan, is it?"

"I don't have a plan, yet, which is why I need your help..."

"Alright, then. You're trying to save the library. So have you," he asked in a wearied voice, "considered doing what everybody else does when they need to save a library? And have a bake sale?"

"Look at you!" I retorted, irritably. "Criticising my reasoning as too 'outside the box.' I should take that most obvious, orthodox approach, should I? Says the man who travels the world without a passport..."

"My question stands!" he retorted. "What are you even doing here, Shea? Not just here, at Harvard, but in Cambridge? Of all the random places in the world, why here?"

It was easy to explain. On the plane over from Australia, I was seated next to a professor of some sort who, in the interest of alleviating the journey's tedium, asked me about my plans.

I told him the truth; I have never had any luck dating Australian women. After

giving it a bit of consideration, I'd decided that my best course would be to get myself a nice, sensible American girlfriend instead. I saw myself finding some pretty little number who wears baseball caps and chews bubble-gum all day.

"Ideally she will have a parochial family who resents me for being a foreigner. Her dad will be one of those conservatives who thinks Australia is a communist-infested country in Europe. And he can listen – with a sinking heart – to me talking about social democracy at our first Thanksgiving dinner together.

"Meanwhile, her mum can pretend not to understand 'all that politics stuff' and just busy herself in the background, perhaps even baking me a pumpkin pie. I will expect her to follow her own grandmother's recipe assiduously. You see, I've never had pumpkin pie, and I want my first impressions to be good."

After Thanksgiving dinner, I will probably help myself to one of her old man's cigars, if he has any. His wife, meanwhile, can take her daughter into another room and, with lots of concern in her eyes, ask her if she's sure about me, because – if that's the case – she is one-hundred percent supportive of her daughter. *But only if she's sure!*

"And her daughter can just hug her and say *of course, she's sure!* And then can burst into tears. My girlfriend will cry because she's so happy, and her mum will cry because her daughter is talking about moving to Australia to run a wombat ranch.

"Which isn't a thing, by the way, but American parents don't know that, do they?"

"What I meant," said the professor "was – what are you going to do for work?"

"Oh, I was thinking of getting a part-time job as an air traffic controller. You see, I'm pretty good at video games."

"And where will you be living?" persisted the professor.

That was a matter to which I hadn't given much thought.

Muttering something about a man needing to have more specific plans for his future, the professor suggested I visit a place called Cambridge.

Then we had a little argument. His position was that Cambridge was in Massachusetts, while I contended that the town was in England because I had read about it recently in a book. He claimed there were two places named Cambridge, and I told him that he was either confused or attempting to make some sort of complicated joke at my expense. Or else he was delusional, in the way Americans can be about certain things, like when they say they're a democracy when they're really living in an oligarchy, run by billionaires, who are in the pockets of a race of alien lizards.

“You see,” I said to André, “in Australia, we name all the cities and towns uniquely. I’m from Thargomindah, which is in Queensland. There is only one Thargomindah in the world.”

“There’s a town called Cambridge in Tasmania,” said my friend, in an unhelpful and ridiculous sort of way.

“My point, André, is that when I stepped onto that plane, I did not know that 35 different states in the US have towns named Springfield. Or that there are nine towns named Springfield in Pennsylvania alone. That knowledge was still in my future.

“Now, continuing on. When I finally arrived in Los Angeles, I was frisked, searched and harangued by an immigration official, who seemed to think I was some sort of spy or saboteur –”

“Welcome to my world.”

“– but eventually they spotted a Sikh walking through the crowd and lost interest in me. I thought about walking into town, but someone told me that the center of Los Angeles was a bit of a long way to go on foot. And I was still feeling a bit agitated by that know-it-all professor on the plane, so I decided to buy a flight to Massachusetts and check if there really was a Cambridge there.

And guess what? There was! Who'd have thought?"

"So you decided to stay?"

"I liked the trees here."

"The trees are pretty."

We enjoyed a moment of silence, thinking about trees.

"And?"

"That's the end of the story, André."

"This is ridiculous – now we are going backward! At this rate, we'll be neck-deep in nonsense about your birth, and how a drunken doctor misused the forceps..."

Gertie leaped up on the couch, twirled about a few times and lay down with her back pressed up against my leg. I ran my fingers through her shaggy fur.

"Funny story. Did you know that when I was a baby ..."

He waved me to silence. "Yes, I know that your father was either Neil Armstrong or Cary Grant, or your Nanna was a nutter; whichever seems the most likely. Now stop talking nonsense and let me think."

"About what?"

"About the incongruity of you working at Harvard, obviously. It's not making sense to me."

Like most people, André had assumed that a famous university couldn't possibly make strange hiring choices. What he didn't know, for instance, was that Harvard Medical School had also hired my friend Kurt to work at the library's Circulation Desk. A veteran of the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, Kurt had been discharged because his enthusiasm for explosives had made everyone in his battalion uncomfortable.

And then there was the curious case of Hector, my boss in Central IT. A man of less-than-average computer knowledge, Hector spent every day at his desk

doing exactly nothing. How does he do it? How does he manage to be so idle? And yet, Harvard had found no reason to fire him. On the contrary, Hector was doing very well in his career, and there were even rumors of a promotion swirling around our department...

“Ever since I learned you were working at Harvard,” said my friend, “I have sensed that there was something diabolical behind it. No, I am not talking about you or your intentions. You are like the knife that has been swept up by the maelstrom. Well, you know I am an existentialist. I’m an atheist, Shea, and man of reason, and yet ... this unsettles me. It makes me wonder if there is such a thing as Fate.

“You are being complicated again, Shea. Yes, you are – don’t argue with me about it, I am not in the mood. The very fact that you have stumbled into a place like Harvard University has made me question my entire conception of the universe.”

“But I already know the real reason I was hired,” I said, feeling embarrassed suddenly. “Or the unofficial reason, at least.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, before I do, you have to understand that over the past four centuries Harvard has spent untold billions trying to convince us all that it is some kind of academic utopia.”

“And is it?”

I felt suddenly apprehensive. “When I turned up at the library on my first day – well, nobody was expecting me.”

# nobody tells me anything

“I really do work here now,” I promised the security guard, but he was having none of it. He puffed out his chest and pointed over my shoulder at the glass doors behind me.

Fortunately, an earnest-looking African-American in a blue button-down shirt and necktie was passing by; he paused and stared at me with naked curiosity. Then he looked at papers I was clutching, noted the letterhead and sighed.

“Nobody told me you were coming,” he muttered. “Which is normal, of course, as you’re about to find out. You know the motto of Harvard, right? *Veritas*, which is Latin for ‘truth.’ The unofficial staff motto, however, is *nemo nuntiat mihi aliquid*, which translates as ‘nobody tells me anything.’”

“My name is Wendell, by the way,” he added, and we shook hands.

I peered about at the vast atrium. There was something a bit funny about it, and it took a moment for it to register.

“Wait, I think I might be in the wrong place. You see, I’m supposed to go to the library.”

“You’re in the right place,” he soothed. “This is the library.”

I wasn’t sure he was serious. This didn’t look like a library – it looked like the foyer of a four-star hotel. And one that hadn’t been renovated since the 1970s.

“Not to be impolite, but where are all the books?”

Wendell glanced over his shoulder, leaned in and whispered. “Hidden.”

“Hidden? From whom?”

“*The Administration!*” he hissed. “They don’t like us having too many books,

so we hide them around the edges of the building. The good news is that the building's architect also seems to have had an aversion to books, and –”

“Wait, you have to hide the books from the Administration?”

“Don't worry, it's not too difficult,” he admitted, smiling modestly. “They hate coming over here, you see. We're not important in the scheme of things, and –”

“What do you mean, not important? Libraries are important, aren't they?”

He smiled and slapped my shoulder. “A library is the cornerstone of civilization! That's why I became a librarian, after all. What I meant to say was that libraries are no longer essential to Gordon Hall. We don't earn them any money, you see. We just cost them money.

“They'll probably never forgive us,” he added forlornly.

I'll admit that I found this puzzling. Wouldn't everything be an expense to a university? How did universities make their money, anyway? Student fees or something? Government subsidies?

“The good news,” he continued, lowering his voice confidentially, “is that we have a few spies in Gordon Hall – library sympathizers, you might call them – so we're usually warned in advance before anyone comes over from next door.

“And when that happens, we always make sure that someone is here to greet them. Our guest will then be escorted into an elevator and taken straight to the administrative wing on the fifth floor.”

“Why's that?”

“We don't want them looking around. You see, Gordon Hall takes a very dim view of the way we waste space here.”

I looked about at the empty expanse of the atrium. “What?” I asked dumbly.

“There are a lot of bookshelves on the second, third and fourth floors. Those floors are premium real estate that could easily be converted to office space.

Very profitable, in other words.”

“Ah, office space is profitable, is it?” I said, a little dazed. “Because they rent it, I suppose?”

“Sometimes. They’ve rented out half the sixth floor to The New England Journal of Medicine. And most of the other half to Harvard Health Publications. Mostly they just give away the office space to labs. In fact, they could fit four or five labs on any floor of this building. So, from the second to the fourth floor, you could probably fit twelve to fifteen labs.”

“Don’t labs cost Harvard money, too?”

“Oh no. Labs are almost entirely funded by grants, both government and private.”

I nodded knowingly for a while. Then I gave up. “I don’t really follow. Are you suggesting that Harvard takes a cut from those grants?”

“Fifty percent. So if you’re a foundation donating a hundred million dollars to cancer research at Harvard Medical School, then the researchers in the lab will receive only fifty million. The rest will go to, um, ‘overhead.’”

“Extraordinary!”

Wendell nodded. “Each of those labs might potentially be raking in dozens – even hundreds – of millions of dollars just in NIH grant money alone. So we don’t like Gordon Hall’s accountants sniffing about the library. They’re always on the look-out for office space, you see? For labs.”

“Can’t scientists just go someplace else? Where they don’t have to hand over so much money?”

“Of course they can. But there are advantages to being here. For instance, Central IT issues everyone here with a domain-specific email address – hms.harvard.edu – which we can use to send smug little emails to the people we went to high school with – you know, to the people who bullied us. Or that teacher who said we would never amount to anything.”

“Bloody hell! That doesn’t sound too bad at all.”

“It’s pretty good,” agreed Wendell. “And, what’s more, they give us free tea and coffee in the staffroom.”

“Free tea? If they’d told me that I’d have taken the entire interview process more seriously. This is going to be a sweet gig. So, if I should hear about anyone from Gordon Hall coming over to the library...”

“Treat it like an emergency and tell somebody. Remember – you might be saving someone’s job.”

There was a sudden sound of voices all around us. I looked around, perplexed – the atrium was empty! Wendell was pointing upwards. "They're up there on the fifth floor.

I whistled. “What amazing acoustics...”

Wendell nodded sadly. “Perhaps we should head up to the IT wing. It’s less noisy up there.”

We climbed the sweeping staircase to the second floor, wound to the right and passed through two large wooden doors labeled with a ‘Staff Only’ sign.

That’s me, I thought with a shiver. *I’m Harvard staff.* Wendell and I were now in what appeared to be a defunct IT department.

“Do I get an office, do you know?”

“You get six offices. You can take your pick.”

“Really? There are six empty offices here? I thought real estate was invaluable?”

“It is. So don’t tell anybody. Everyone’s forgotten about this area, and it won’t last forever.”

“You think people ... will invade?”

He nodded. "You're catching on. When people find out about these empty offices, another department – probably one that earns a lot of money for the

medical school – will swing in and take all this space away from the library. And then you’ll be lucky to have a cubicle in the basement.

“In fact, I wouldn’t even tell Central IT about these offices if I were you.”

“Don’t tell Central IT – got it.” I looked around. “Hey, what happened to this place? It looks like it was abandoned in the middle of a workday.”

“Centralization happened,” he said, shrugging.

When it comes to IT infrastructure, Wendell explained, universities tend to drift in one of two directions; they either run a myriad of small IT groups, scattered about the campus or else they centralize. One big group that caters to the entire school.

“Right now, Harvard Medical School is going through a phase of centralization. Little fiefdoms, like our former IT department, are being shut down everywhere. Most of the library’s IT folk took their severance, and pried their way into six-figure corporate jobs, using the Harvard brand as a crowbar. The rest let themselves be merged into Central IT.”

Wendell paused and scrutinized me. “I should warn you. Some of the librarians are a bit paranoid about Central IT. They think they’re trying to take over the library.”

“And are they?”

Wendell shrugged. “Doubt it. Even if they are, it wouldn’t matter. In ten or fifteen years, they’ll do something stupid, and Gordon Hall will get annoyed and dismantle them. Their infrastructure will Balkanize into small competing fiefdoms once again. And so it goes.

“All the same, if Central IT *does* secretly plan to take over the library, we hope you’ll let us know, Shea.”

I nodded. “Fair enough. Though for what it’s worth, if I *am* the spearhead of an invasion force, nobody has told me yet. Then again – nobody tells you anything around here, do they?”

Wendell beamed warmly, shook my hand and vanished without another word. I gazed at the junk equipment that was laying around me. This area, I thought to myself, would probably make a pleasant IT lounge.

A corridor ran off to my right that was littered with beige PC cases and CRT monitors. I could see half-a-dozen Hewlett-Packard LaserJet printers, too – sad, yellowing boxes that had seen their last paper-jam.

Behind an unlocked door at the end of the corridor, I found a server room filled with rack-mounted machines of every vintage. Most were shut down and covered in dust, but three or four were still running.

The IT department seemed to have been abandoned near the turn of the millennium and in some sort of panic. Combing through the stacks of battered technical books on the bookshelves I found a *Getting Started with Windows 98* and two copies of *O'Reilly's Introduction to Perl, 2nd Edition*.

This was stuff from a bygone era – not a single book had been published in the 21st Century. What had happened here? Why was the equipment so out-of-date? What was going on? And how many other departments were like this one?

“Hello?” said an elderly voice. “Is anybody in here?”

An ancient man in a cardigan with mismatched-buttons was peering from behind the STAFF ONLY door.

“Just me, the new IT guy,” I said.

“Oh thank goodness, you’ve finally arrived. I’m having problems with my computation device. It just won’t turn on anymore.”

“When did the problem start?” I said, feeling like a doctor with a new patient.

“January,” he said.

“What?”

“Yes, it’s such a bother. I’ve been unable to get anything done for ages now ...”

“Since January?” I extended my hand. “I’m Shea.”

“Just call me George Ripley,” he said, “I dropped the ‘Sir’ the day I read about the October Revolution in *The Times*. I say, don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“Don’t think so,” I said breezily.

“The Battle of Lepanto, wasn’t it? You were on one of the galleys, commanded by the Knights of Malta, I think. I saw you on the eve of the battle, up on deck telling stories to the officers. It was late summer in 1571, I think...”

“Honestly I can’t remember where I was then,” I said, sincerely and factually.

“Good thing we weren’t on *The Capitana*, eh? Only three men made it off alive, and you know about poor Pietro Giustiniani, of course. They had to remove five arrows from him, but I’m told he recovered...”

“You know, Mister Ripley,” I said, “you might have me mistaken for someone else.”

The old man nodding knowingly. “I completely understand. We all like to put troubling memories behind us. I have had friends swear they saw me at Dunkirk, but all I remember is eating tinned ham and Daddies Sauce with some RAF pilots at a pub near Tangmere. That’s the tricky thing about getting older. Your memory starts to play funny games with you.”

“George,” I said, somehow aware that I wanted us to become lifelong friends, “how about we go look at your computation device?”

# reach and responsibilities

Ever since I was a small child growing up in Thargomindah, I've been tinkering with machines. I was always taking apart washing machines and refrigerators, trying to figure out how they worked. It used to make our neighbors so angry, they had to start locking their doors at night.

Computers back then were mysterious boxes that nobody seemed to understand. They were obviously magical. How could anyone resist the urge to open them up and peer inside?

Now I'm grown up, and computers are much less mysterious to me, of course, but I still think of them as magical. They're like old friends. They make sense, and they're comforting. Sometimes things go wrong with them, of course, and then it's merely a matter of some routine deduction and head-scratching. Eventually, a solution will suggest itself; you fix the situation, and things begin to hum pleasantly again. All it takes is a little patience and curiosity.

Fixing computers is, for me, a meditative and generally enjoyable pastime. Dealing with someone whose computer has stopped working minutes before an important presentation – and who is quietly seething at you, because you are somehow responsible for all the bad luck and entropy in the universe – well, that's another matter.

People can be irritating. One day, I was called to the fifth floor in an emergency – a user had shifted her computer to a different desk, and now the internet didn't work. I plugged in the ethernet cable and began to walk away.

“That's all you had to do?” she exclaimed incredulously. “Wow. I could do your job.”

I didn't reply. Ten percent of the job is knowing you have to plug in the ethernet cable. Ninety percent is mustering the fortitude to not say, 'If you could do my job, you wouldn't have needed to call me.'

Most days were easy. And I particularly enjoyed getting the IT wing back in order. I found lounge chairs and an old sofa down in the basement and brought them up in the elevator one evening when everyone had gone home.

Next, I turned one of the spare offices into a storeroom and moved all the old computers and monitors inside. I was dismantling a pile of ancient printers when I discovered a bar-fridge hidden underneath. I carried the printers into the storeroom, then dragged the fridge out to the common area.

It was looking a lot more like an IT lounge.

"I like what you're doing with the place," said a voice. A mop-haired man with a bushy beard stood framed in the doorway.

"Hi," I said cautiously.

He raised the Harvard ID that hung from a lanyard around his neck and introduced himself as Henry. He had come to remove a server from the room at the end of the hall.

We shook hands, and he nodded gruffly at me. "Where did all the old equipment go?"

I led him down the corridor and showed him my new store room.

"Look at all this cool stuff," he exclaimed fondly. "That's a Silicon Graphics workstation. And that's an external CD-Burner with a SCSI interface, I'd forgotten about those. Look at the sticker on this workstation: a Pentium 90. And this one here is a 386."

I felt a melancholy rising inside of me. The detritus of a bygone decade lay in ruin around us. We lapsed into reverential silence. Someone had once unwrapped these machines, pulled them from exciting cardboard boxes and foam packages, peeled away the protective plastic and plugged them into wall

sockets. Someone had stood here before us, relishing the faint whine of a computer spooling up for the first time. They had felt the thrill of confirmed functionality. A new machine flickering to life.

And here lay the refuse, dead and forgotten in the dark. Impending toxic landfill.

“So,” Henry said, looking into my eyes, “you’re the new Desktop Support guy, huh?”

“I guess.”

“How’s it going ‘round here?”

I shrugged. There had been a lot of work to do. The librarians hadn’t adjusted well to Central IT’s alleged ‘take-over’ of their infrastructure. Wendell had been right; some had resented my department as some sort of invasive species. Instead of contacting me when problems arose, some kept quiet and tried to manage as best they could.

I felt like a new country doctor in a village that pined for some predecessor or other – you know, the *much better doctor*, who had died in the war or something. Except, from the librarian’s perspective, they were French citizens, I was German, and the year was 1943.

After a month or so, however, word began to spread that I was not your average goose-stepping stormtrooper. Librarians began to emerge from the woodwork with requests for help. And then things became a bit busy.

Fortunately, my coverage extended to Harvard Health Publications, a neutral country occupying approximately half of the sixth floor. They were oblivious to this alleged war raging between the library and Central IT, and their world felt, overall, much less dramatic and fraught. Regrettably, I had far less to do for Harvard Health Publications; being an IT guy means going where the strife is, I suppose.

“I’m almost caught up,” I told Henry. “I worked right through a couple of

weekends just to make my life a bit easier going forward. Shouldn't be too hard from now on.”

“You really didn't have to clean up this area. You just have to fix their computers, alright? Cleaning up is the library's responsibility.”

“You're probably right, but the problem is – who else is going to do it? If I didn't do something, I'd be tripping over everything.”

“Meh,” said Henry brusquely, though seemingly pleased by my initiative. On his way out he handed me a business card, and I learned that he was a senior system administrator from Central IT.

“Would you do me a favor?” he asked abruptly.

“Sure.”

“Keep an eye on Hector for me. Let me know if you ever see him talking to the CIO.”

I shook his hand with a nod and watched him disappear into the server room.

But who was Hector?

# the hector problem

The name was familiar. For about ten minutes I assumed it was the hostname of a machine in the server room. In the context of my conversation with Henry that seemed to make the most amount of sense. So I went back to my desk and tried to find it on the network using *ping* and *nmap*. No machines were called Hector. There was no Achilles, Patroclus or Paris, for that matter. And then, after half an hour of wondering, I remembered the Hispanic bloke at the job interview.

Suddenly, it dawned on me that the man was my boss.

Wait. I had a boss? I don't need a boss. Why would I need a boss?

Hopefully, this Hector character had forgotten about me. This thought cheered me immensely. Perhaps I could get through this entire adventure at Harvard without having to endure anybody telling me what to do. Wouldn't that be fantastic?

Unfortunately, I would have no such luck. Two days later, I received a polite email from Hector requesting that I stop by his office. With the weight of the world on my shoulders, I crossed the Quad and descended a flight of stairs into the basement of Vanderbilt Hall.

“Where have you been, my man?” exclaimed Hector in a friendly sort of way, trying to engage me in a complicated gangland handshake. I pulled my hand away, as if from a snake.

“You’re not going to try to high-five me, are you?” I asked, sinking into one of the armchairs in his office. “Australians don’t high-five.”

“Alright. Why don’t you take a seat?” he said to me, closing his office door.

“Way ahead of you,” I said, patting my armrests.

“Yes,” said Hector primly, taking the other chair. “So – what have you been up to?”

Hector is from Maine. Or Kentucky or Texas or somewhere; he told me once, but I’ve always found it a challenge to listen attentively to people in authority. Actually, now I think about it, he’s from Mexico.

His office is sparse and boringly furnished, but there is a black-and-white poster of a man wearing a numbered blouse and an oddly-shaped helmet, doing something sports-related. Near the ceiling was a small window that let in a meager trickle of sunlight. In comparison, my office over in the library was twice the size of Hector’s and had a floor-to-ceiling window offering a view across Huntington Avenue.

I remembered Wendell’s advice about not telling anyone in Central IT about my office and felt a surge of gratitude.

Hector cleared his throat. “Ahem. I said, what have you been up to?”

“Oh, sorry. I’ve been fixing computers.”

“We haven’t seen you much down here.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Why is that, do you think?”

I studied him closely. He was all smiles, but his shoulders seemed a little rigid.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked him.

“Not at all, not at all. I was just wondering – you’ve been here, what, a month now? You haven’t stopped by yet...” His voice trailed off as if he had said something that required a reply.

“Okay,” I said. “You’re saying I should stop by more often.”

“Sure, if you’d like,” he said with a pleased smile. “If you think that would be

useful, stop by and check in from time to time. We can have a chat, see how it's all going."

*Who would that help?* I looked up at the little window near the ceiling.

"I'll come by all the time, if you like," I said, without looking at him.

"Sure. Or not, if you're too busy. But you can always stop by, my door's always open."

I glanced in its direction, looked back to him and pointed at his office door. It was closed.

"Figuratively speaking," he said.

"Should we talk now?"

"If you like."

"What would you like to talk about, Hector?"

"Anything you want."

I stared around the room. "Do you have some topic ideas?"

"Hey, how about your first day? How was that? Who was your first client?"

"George Ripley. He's the curator of the museum. The museum is on the fifth floor, but George's office is in the basement. Because 'bureaucracy,' I suppose." Was this enough detail? I studied Hector's face, but couldn't determine an answer. "I walked into George's office, touched the power button – the machine did not post – so I checked to see if it was plugged in. It was not plugged in. I rectified the problem."

I remembered it well because it was my first actual 'thing to do' in the library. And also because I still found the foreign-looking prongs on these 110v plugs quite the novelty. Anyway, after I inserted the plug into the outlet, the machine began to hum and click through its ram test. George Ripley told me I was a genius. I shook his hand and returned to the IT wing via the stairs.

On my first day, I dealt with four similar issues, none of them challenging. By

mid-afternoon, I decided to take a break and install Arch Linux on one of the computers in my office.

“What’s that?” asked Hector.

“Linux,” I repeated and spelled it for him. He wrote the word on a pad of paper, told me it sounded interesting and that he’d look into it.

I didn’t mention that I’d also installed a few minor pen-testing tools on that machine, or reveal that I’d scanned the library’s subnet for open ports, and managed to break into a few of the library’s workstations remotely, without really trying. Or that I’d now fixed those machines, and created an inventory of machines in the building. It just didn’t seem like the sort of behavior that Hector would understand.

“We’re getting good reports about you from the library,” he said, two-lines forming between his eyes. “You seem to be doing a great job over there.”

“Good. Maybe I should be getting back ...”

“Fantastic! This has been fantastic!” he murmured mildly. “You know what? Why don’t we do this more regularly?”

*What?* I glanced at him sharply. *For god sakes, why?* “Sure, Hector.”

“We can put something in the calendar. How about we meet, um, every two weeks –”

*Bloody hell!*

“– and we can catch up, see what’s going on...”

I was out of his office before he could high-five me.

Two weeks later, an email appeared in my inbox, notifying me that I had a meeting with Hector in fifteen minutes.

I stomped out of the IT wing and descended into the foyer, muttering, “stupid ... stupid ... stupid ...”

“Everything okay?” Kurt yelled from behind the Circulation Desk.

“Everything’s fine!” I hissed savagely, striding over to him. “I just have to sit down with a manager and pretend his job has merit and purpose.”

“I hate managers, man,” he said soberly.

“Isn’t Wendell your manager? You seem to like him well enough.”

“True, but he’s never asked me to do anything, not even once. He lets me do my job and leaves me alone. Let’s face it, dude. He’s a unicorn.”

“You’re lucky. I’ve got a manager on my back who requires teaching, and I don’t have time to do it. I have enough to do, without having to teach my boss to stay in his office and play solitaire.”

Kurt was sympathetic. “Let me know if I can help. My black ops training can be applied to all sorts of situations.”

I thanked him but thought it would be better if I solved the Hector problem on my own. It was a bright, sunlit day in mid-May but I felt nothing but gloom as I approached Vanderbilt Hall.

“Hey! What’s going on!” exclaimed Hector ecstatically when I dragged my feet into his office.

“Eh, ya know,” I muttered, slumping into the same armchair I’d slumped in a fortnight earlier.

“What have you been up to?”

I exhaled the slow, weary sigh of a man whose boss didn’t know what his job was. “Fixing computers.”

Hector stood, pushed the door closed, and sat down in the armchair beside me. I tried not to scowl.

“So what’s on your mind?” he said at last.

I stared at him a little while.

“Alright. Well, if you must know, I’ve been thinking a lot about Hitler.”

He blinked.

“More specifically,” I continued, “I have been thinking about how much I don’t like him.”

Hector’s shoulders relaxed. “That’s good. Mind you, if you’d said the opposite I would have to spend the rest of the afternoon filing paperwork with HR.”

“The thing I don’t like about Hitler is that he built a massive infrastructure for killing large numbers of people –”

“Yes. That’s the usual reason.”

“ – and then he didn’t kill any clowns.”

Hector raised one foot in front of him and turned his knee, ostensibly to inspect his sneaker from a different angle. Eventually, having ensured that he hadn’t managed to get muck or dirt on it during his morning commute, he put his foot down and patiently waited for me to continue.

“Don’t get me wrong, Hector. What I’m saying in no way contradicts the broadly accepted view that the man was a monster. It’s just that thinking of him in conventional terms masks the true nature of his particular brand of evil.”

“He really wasn’t a good guy, was he?” murmured Hector with a regretful tone, with that peculiar North-American aversion to saying anything that might sound negative.

“He was not,” I agreed. “He set up a vast industrial complex, tasked with killing people. And then, once that infrastructure was in place, he gave no orders that were specific to circus clowns.”

“You’re saying,” said Hector, “that even the least reasonable of despots would take a moment amid the general rounding-up of innocents to do something about circus clowns.”

“Exactly. I mean, who likes clowns?”

“Well, Hitler, apparently.”

“Ah-ha! That’s the thing, isn’t it? I don’t think Hitler *did* like clowns. I mean, he might have been a monster, but he was still an ordinary human being, beneath it all. Something we would all prefer to forget.”

“So you’re saying he didn’t like circus clowns.”

“Correct. Hitler loathed clowns as much as the rest of us. And yet, when he had the power to remove all clowns from Germany, he was like – screw it, let them live.

“Because,” I concluded, “that was the sort of jerk Hitler was.”

“You know, this conversation is making me feel a little uncomfortable.”

“Come on, Hector. Even Harvard Medical School’s Department of Human Resources wouldn’t object to two employees having a frank conversation about why they don’t like Hitler.”

“True. But why are we discussing this particular subject, again?”

I lifted a finger significantly. “You asked me what I was thinking about, remember? And I am addressing that question, as per your request.”

“I see.”

“Good,” I said, hoping I had made my point.

We sat in silence for a while. I noticed we had both crossed our arms and were looking up at the ceiling.

“What would you have done,” he asked, after a long while, “if officers from Hitler’s SS ordered the arrest of all the circus clowns in Germany. And you were living there at the time, and actually knew where a clown was hiding?”

“Hector, I hate clowns, but I wouldn’t hand one over to the SS.”

“Is that because you recognize that deep down, even clowns have a right to live? Or is it because,” he asked, scrutinizing me, “you have Pathological Problems with Authority?”

Well, he was going to figure it out eventually.

## andr   interrupts

“Problems with authority,” mused André from Paris in the darkness. “Not heard the phrase before.”

“It probably doesn’t come up much in your circles. Although, I suppose if the CIA ever tracks you down –”

André snorted with derision.

“– then you would hear the phrase quite a lot at your trial. But, wait, the CIA doesn’t do trials anymore, do they?”

“They do. They’re called trials by drone strike. You see, apparently when you know – deep down – that you’re the good guy, well, an actual trial in a court of law, with a jury and evidence – well, that’s just a lot of needless red tape, isn’t it?”

We stood and stretched, and Gertie leaped from the couch and did the same. We followed her out through the kitchen, put on our coats and let her outside. The air seemed strange and chilly. André scanned the shadows, stepped out onto the porch and lit a clove cigarette. His face flared brightly in the flash of his lighter, then vanished again in the darkness.

“Drones are a lot easier than doing it all the old-fashioned way,” I said softly. “In the early days of this country, their method for detecting dubious types like yourself was to drown a person, and see if they survive.”

“I thought that was a modern technique?”

“Not at all. I heard there’s a whole museum about this stuff up in Salem. Did you know my nana used to warn me about going to America? She reckoned the entire country brought bad luck to practitioners of the magical arts. Something to

do with the Native Americans getting completely fed up with the early settlers and cursing them, I don't remember. Between ourselves, I'm not really a good listener. Besides, I thought she was just overly superstitious. I mean, you know how witch doctors can be..."

"Do you know how the British interrogated captured Germans during the Second World War?"

I shook my head.

"They played chess with them. They knew that torture didn't work – pain just makes prisoners say whatever their interrogators want to hear. Instead of that, the British played board games with their captives. They established a rapport. Made friends with them. And their prisoners told them everything they needed to know.

"You see what I'm saying?" André concluded, puffing his cigarette. "It always pays to be nice. And also to be good at board games."

"Well, what if the CIA just doesn't have anyone on staff that is good at board games?"

"Or," he offered, "has read any history books about the Second World War?"

"Well, in their defense, education budgets in the United States have been slashed over the past thirty years."

"Why did they do that?"

"Well, it turns out that building drones is a costly business, especially when you're building drones that can reach suspects in every single corner of the globe. It's not just the ordinance and payload; there's the guidance systems, miniaturization of computer systems. Software and satellite systems, electronic countermeasures ... It all costs money, André."

"Well," he said philosophically, "let's hope the Americans never have to fight an opponent who is good at playing board games."

He retrieved his pack of clove cigarettes from an inner coat pocket and offered it.

*What the hell.* I took one. “So what I think you’re saying is that, if the CIA had a much smaller budget, they might have caught you by now.”

“Sometimes people with too much money assume that all their problems can be solved by throwing money at them.”

“We are talking about Harvard right now, I gather?”

“We are,” said my friend. “And I think I have an idea that might help you with your problem with the skull.”

“You do? That’s excellent! I’ve also had an idea, you see, and –”

He shushed me and looked about wildly.

“Talk softly! And I have only a rough outline of a plan. I need a few more details from you. Why don’t you go ahead and tell me the rest of the story.”

I realized I was twirling the clove cigarette in my fingers absentmindedly. I lit it and inhaled deeply. Then we sat down together, side by side at the top of the stairs leading down into my backyard. Gertie darted in and out of the shadows by the back fence, sniffing and exploring.

“Alright,” I said, pulling the collar of my pea coat up around my neck and shivering. “I’ll tell you the rest. But just so you know, things are about to get weird.”

# shenanigans

By the middle of June, I was fed up with all these meetings with Hector. In my defense, I felt like they were a waste of my time and energies.

Besides, what I liked most about my job was being a free agent, roaming about the campus in a self-directed sort of way. Hector did his best to keep the meetings informal, but the tacit understanding seemed to be that I should explain my activities to him as if he might be capable of offering insight. This felt, to me, both unwholesome and distasteful.

So one day I decided to make our meeting the very last.

“So what have you been up to?” Hector asked cheerfully when I arrived.

I slouched deeply into the armchair nearest the door and said, “fixing computers.”

“Nice,” he replied. “Why don’t you talk me through one of this week’s issues?”

“There’s a machine down on the lowest level of the library that wouldn’t turn on. I fixed it.”

“Awesome. What was the matter with it?”

“It was unplugged.”

The seconds ticked away. I thought about how this was my final meeting with Hector, and how delightful the world really is when you stop to think about it.

“Why do I feel as if you’ve told me this same story before?”

“Because it keeps happening, man. The cleaning lady keeps unplugging the power cable in George’s office so she can vacuum it. She never remembers to

plug it in again.

“And before you ask me – yes, I have spoken to her about it. She just looked at me as if I was speaking gibberish.”

“Alright,” said Hector. “What else —”

There was a knock at the door. I glanced at the clock on the wall. Perfect. Everything was on schedule.

“There’s a package for you at the front desk,” said someone from the Help Desk. “The delivery guy needs you to sign for it.”

Muttering under his breath, Hector vanished.

By my estimation, I had only thirty seconds, but it was plenty of time to sit in his office chair, grab the mouse attached to his computer, open up his calendar and cancel all our recurring meetings. He wouldn’t realize for weeks – even months – and by then, he’d assume that he had canceled our meetings for some good reason that he could no longer remember. And that would be – wait! *What is that?*

Right there in the calendar. Hector had an appointment tomorrow – I read the words on the screen, then re-read them. And then I looked away from the monitor, looked back and read the words a third time.

I was struck with a sense of wonder. All thoughts of canceling the meeting fluttered away, like a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

When I’d first met Henry, he had said that if should I ever see Hector conversing with our CIO I should let him know. From time to time I still wondered at its incongruity.

And, unexpectedly, I had found evidence that suggested that Hector and the CIO were indeed having some sort of conversation – outside of work! I forgot, suddenly, all about my plan to delete our recurring meetings. I closed the calendar in a daze and crept back to my chair.

Hector returned an instant later with a bouquet of meadowsweets and a perplexed expression.

“I think my wife sent me flowers,” he murmured apprehensively.

“I’m sure there is no reason to read too deeply into it,” I said.

Looking rattled, my boss yanked open a drawer and retrieved a small paper bag. From this, he removed an ordinary-looking blueberry muffin. Then, from another drawer, he removed a plastic plate. He placed the muffin on the plate, set it down on the table between us, and tossed the empty bag into the trash.

“Do you know why we hired you, Shea?”

I blinked. “Because I tricked you, fair and square.”

“We hired you,” he said, ignoring me, “because the director of the Countway seemed to like you. And now, in general, all the librarians seem to like you.”

“Well,” I offered modestly, “they are a little crazy.”

“Their reputation around the campus notwithstanding, you have one job to do, and that is to keep them quiet.”

“I wish you’d told me sooner. You see, I’ve been fixing their computers...”

“Yes, I can see how it could get confusing. Let me explain it this way. You don’t work for the Countway, you work for us.”

“You mean, Central IT?”

“Yes,” he said with a soulless smile.

“Hector,” I said, “Are you going to eat that muffin?”

“Yes,” he replied, sliding the plate away slightly. Then, after glancing between me and the muffin, he scooped it up with his fingers and took a bite.

“*Durh urgh a grr ur gurring?*” he mumbled, spilling crumbs everywhere.  
*Understand what I’m saying?*

We gazed at each for a little while.

“You’re saying you want me to fix computers up at the Countway.”

“Sure,” he said, shrugging. “If it keeps them quiet, fix computers at the Countway.”

Hector stood, and opened the door for me. I snatched the remainder of the muffin and was gone before he could say another word.

Back across the Quad I went, immersed in thought. I am generally not prone to brooding, but there had been something distinctly unsatisfactory about Hector’s manner. And in my heart, I knew it was partly my fault.

You see, sometimes when you have Pathological Problems With Authority, you find yourself unconsciously avoiding your supervisor. This can have a detrimental effect. Part of you wants them to forget that you exist. However, in your absence, supervisors sometimes get ideas above their station. They imagine, for instance, that they are somehow essential in the grand scheme of things.

Take Hector, for example. A moment ago he had told me to *do* something.

I believe that no good can come from allowing supervisors to tell us what to do. It’s basic common sense. The problem with Hector is that he acted like a nice person. Not occasionally, but all the time. I could see why my colleagues in Central IT had indulged him.

The problem with dealing with bosses who act like nice people is that they’re easy to please. It is too easy to inadvertently make them happy. And after that, they assume you did it on purpose.

And is that helping them at all? Of course not.

Still, as tempted as I was to blame myself, I knew that most of the blame lay with Hector. It’s not as if I hadn’t tried to warn him. I had put up a hundred little signs, each informing him that he was approaching a minefield. More than that, I had hammered those signs firmly into the ground and painted the words in bright red paint.

‘Minefield! Danger! Alert! Do Not Cross!’

But Hector had refused to take heed. Instead, the man had put on big, floppy clown shoes and went skipping across the meadow, as if this was all a big joke.

I was so agitated that I barely recognized Henry when I passed him in the library foyer. He invited me to lunch, but I waved him off, explaining I had to plot somebody’s demise.

“Whose?”

“Hector’s,” I growled. “The plan is still in the early stages, but so far, all I know is that it will involve bees. Lots and lots of bees.”

“What has Hector done?”

“He’s given me advice, Henry,” I told him flatly. “You see? I can’t work under these conditions. I can’t have a boss thinking he can tell me what to do. Don’t you see? He has to go. Let go of my arm!”

Henry was gripping my arm like a vice. For a Linux system administrator, he sure had a firm grip.

“You can’t use bees. And while we’re at it, you can’t get Hector fired either; we need him,” he intoned, jutting out his beard like some sort of Wise Elder. “He’s part of a delicate balance of power inside Central IT. And besides that, he’s not as bad as you think he is. Hector’s the sanest middle manager on our payroll.”

With a wrench, I shook my arm loose.

“It’s all my fault,” I muttered. Then I explained how I had gone to Hector’s office with a plan to cancel all our meetings, even going to the lengths of staging a cunning diversion.

“I let myself get distracted. Hey, remember how you asked me to keep an eye on him? And to let you know if I ever saw him talking with the CIO? Turns out he’s got a recurring calendar appointment with him. They play golf on

Saturdays. I don't know what that means but –”

“What!? Golf!?” Henry half shouted. “He's playing golf with the CIO!?”

I nodded.

“He can't be playing golf with the CIO! Biff Clutterbuck is a very impressionable man! Hector needs to stop this – he needs to stop this at once!”

I was taken aback. “What do you –”

“Thank you for telling me,” he said, gazing into the middle distance. “Don't worry, I'll attend to the matter personally. If you see Brandon, please let him know I need to see him immediately. He knows where to find me.”

And, without a backward look, Henry went striding out of the library, like a man on a sacred mission.

Well, I thought. That was peculiar.

I needed someone to talk to, of course; someone sufficiently removed from my situation to give me some good, disinterested advice. I wandered about for a while looking at the Countwegians and frowning until I was struck with a brilliant idea.

Moments later I was on the fourth floor.

“There you are Piper,” I said, sitting down beside her. Piper was a medical student who haunted the fourth floor. “Day by day,” I said, “my life grows stranger.”

“That's an eerie coincidence,” she replied, closing her book and looking at me narrowly. “Because I have noticed that, day by day, you become stranger.”

“It's all very well to mock. You don't have to work in a lunatic asylum.”

“Right. I only dream of working in a lunatic asylum.”

I was nonplussed. “What?”

“Not that we call them that anymore. And Shea? I'm a psychiatry major. Try to pay attention, and don't screw up your face like that.”

I inspected her closely.

“Not to be unsupportive, Piper, but you don’t look the slightest bit reptilian.”

She looked upwards thoughtfully. “Every woman,” she observed, as if to herself, “should flirt with an Australian male at least once in her life.”

“My nana always said that psychiatrists were usually lizard people,” I explained.

“Yes. Your nana,” she said, pushing her glasses up her nose and squinting at me. “You have mentioned your nana before today. She sounds perfectly reassuring and reasonable.”

I groaned with impatience. “Are you – or are you not – going to let me describe a great deal of nonsense to you, that has no bearing or relevance to you personally?”

“Well, if you put it that way...”

“Over the last few months, I have discovered that my employer – Central IT – has a unique internal power structure.”

“Go on.”

Although the rest of the school is run almost exclusively by apparatchiks – career politicians, highly specialized in the art of bureaucratic incompetence – our own department was led, unofficially and covertly, by a team of highly-skilled technocrats.

The Committee, as we called them, were the sort of people who made free international phone calls from pay-phones when they were teenagers in the 70s. Some of them still claimed to have boxes stuffed with dot matrix printer paper – DARPA files they’d stashed in long-term storage under false names, back when they were looking for evidence of extraterrestrial collaboration with the military-industrial complex. This was, apparently, before the Men in Black turned up at their doors and warned them to get square jobs or else.

The Committee disseminated their decisions across the department via a network of middle managers. We didn't call them directors, by the way; we called them the commissars.

The commissars had about as much understanding of computers as your average 12th century Tibetan yak herder, but they did have the rare ability to communicate fluently with all the other apparatchiks around the campus. And, because none of us wanted to learn how to do that, that meant we were stuck with them for good.

Two of the commissars were real-life computer scientists who could both comprehend and translate edicts from the Committee. They existed to make the commissars seem relatively knowledgeable. You know, for the sake of appearances.

“And yet,” Piper interrupted dramatically, “things are not what they seem!”

I regarded her levelly. “You’re in a silly mood today, Piper.”

“I really am. I think I’ve been in this library too long.”

I nodded emphatically. “Meanwhile, my story continues...”

I described to her my escalating conflict with Hector, which had led to my discovery that he has been sneaking off to play golf with his boss. This piece of information, minor as it seemed, was significant to the Committee. I just wished I knew why.

Was it intuition, or something deeper and more mystical? And why had my friend Henry – who is a member of the Committee – been so discombobulated to learn of it?

She smiled sympathetically. “I like you working in the library. It brightens my day. And it sounds like your job security requires you doing a bit of digging. You should probably find out what’s going on.”

Nodding sullenly, I pushed off down to the second floor. Brandon’s office was next-door to mine. I knocked on it.

“It’s open!”

Brandon was laying on a beanbag. He was violently killing people in a video-game.

“What’s going on?” he said, his eyes not leaving the screen.

“Sorry, you’re busy, I can come back...”

“Stay. I welcome the distraction...”

Brandon was spending the month of June playing video games in his office after his group’s supervisor had ambushed him, rather unpleasantly, in a departmental meeting.

“There are forty terabytes of data, Brandon,” his boss had said, smiling smugly, pointing with a laser pointer at the screen of an overhead projector, “sitting right here on this file-server. I need you to take that data and sort it according to the schema in the same folder.”

“They’re called directories on Linux servers,” Brandon had corrected.

The rest of his group had laughed uncomfortably.

“Whatever. Either way, it should take you about a month to get it all organized.”

“Will it?” Brandon had replied in a tone that should have sounded dangerous to his boss.

Unfortunately, the man had a Masters in Business Administration; Brandon would have preferred the 12th century Tibetan yak herder – because at least you can teach them things, he said – but sadly they’re in short supply these days.

As it happened, it took Brandon only a few hours to write a script to do the job that his boss had requested. When he submitted the script to the cluster, he assigned only a few nodes, just enough to ensure the job would be completed in roughly four weeks.

An hour later Henry had stopped by our offices in the IT Wing.

“I saw that job you submitted to the cluster,” he said. “You know we have enough spare nodes right now – we could increase the amount and have it all finished by tomorrow if you like.”

Brandon shook his head.

“Dude. You were at the meeting – you were sitting right beside me. He said it will only take me about a month, remember? And besides – *The Sims 3* came out yesterday.”

“Oh Goddamn it,” moaned Henry. “Why did you have to tell me that?”

And so we ordered pizza and spent the rest of the day playing *The Sims* in Brandon’s office. That was three weeks ago; it was now the middle of June and Brandon was midway through a recently released game called *Prototype*.

“We need to talk about Hector,” I told him.

“He’s a cool guy, that Hector. Consider yourself lucky. I have to deal with a guy with an MBA. He’s from Yale or somewhere. Nice boy but about as sharp a sack of wet mice.”

“Look, man, I know you say Hector is cool, but don’t you realize he’s gone off the reservation? Today he actually told me to do something!”

Brandon mashed the keyboard for a while. Virtual blood splashed across the monitor.

“That’s hard,” he said at last. “Believe me, I know what you’re going through. But like I say, for a middle manager you could do a lot worse than Hector. And I’ll tell you why.

“Unlike *some* of our other managers, Hector is smart enough to realize that he’s in over his head. So he very wisely does nothing all day except make charts and graphs.

“And he’s very good at getting the commissars to think he’s busy while not interfering with the rest of us.”

I trembled with impatience. Brandon just wasn't getting it.

"Mate, then why does he think he's supposed to be reining me in? How do I teach him to leave me alone?"

Brandon shrugged indifferently. "He'll get bored after a while and forget about you. My advice is to wait him out."

"I don't know, man," I said, levering myself off his desk and heading for the door. "I'm telling you, he's getting too big for his boots these days."

Then I remembered my conversation with Henry a few minutes earlier. "I was just telling Henry about how Hector's started playing golf with our CIO."

Brandon sat upright and pressed the ESC key on his keyboard. Then he turned and looked at me for the first time.

"What did you say?"

"Playing golf. Sorry, should have mentioned it sooner. Henry just said —"

"With Clutterbuck?" he cried, rolling off the beanbag and stumbling to his feet. "Hector shouldn't be playing golf with Clutterbuck!"

"That's what Henry said."

"Clutterbuck's a very impressionable man!"

I wrung my hands and couldn't think of anything to say.

"That's bad! That's very, very bad!" Brandon swept on, pacing his office. "You need to tell Hector to stop it immediately!"

"He's not listening to me, Brandon! In fact, he's giving me advice!"

"Why is he doing this? Doesn't he realize that Clutterbuck is the commissars' responsibility?"

I knew, just like everybody else in the so-called lowest-strata of Central IT, that Hector's position was mostly decorative. His role, along with all the other mid-level managers in our department, was to keep the commissars distracted, usually with a myriad of dauntingly meaningless charts and spreadsheets.

Brandon had explained it to me over lunch, not long after he had moved into the office next to mine. He described how Hector always used nonsense words and made-up jargon when communicating with the commissars. His job was to cast a veil of obfuscation over everything. Neither Hector nor the commissars would ever admit he was using made-up words; this both preserved the illusion and kept everybody happy.

In fact, Hector's sole responsibility was to conceal from the commissars that 90% of Central IT even existed. Because, rather obviously, what they didn't know couldn't hurt the rest of us.

"You promised me that Central IT belonged to the proletariat," I said to Brandon, "but Hector's imperiousness is a sign of subversion. He's disrespecting the chain of command. He needs to get back in line and remember that we're all comrades..."

Brandon conceded that I might have a point. "The Committee has become a bit lax about punishing insubordination among the managerial ranks." He broke off and shook himself as if rousing himself from a dream.

"You know something? This is all my fault. *Braid* came out in April.

"Then *Plants vs. Zombies* came out in early May. Then came *Killing Floor*. What am I supposed to do? It's been a great year so far in PC game releases."

"Get a hold of yourself, man!" I cried, grasping the front of his hoodie. "Pull it together – all of Central IT needs you to focus! Don't you see? The managers are trying to take over, and you're in here playing video games!"

"It's not just me," he cried defiantly, pulling away. "The rest of the Committee are gamers too. It's not our fault that the PC gaming industry is crushing it!"

"It's the nineteenth of June," I said. "Can you try not to buy any more games, at least until the autumn?"

"Don't worry," said Brandon, looking chastened. "I'm not buying anything

else, believe me!”

Then he gave me a look.

“What?” I demanded.

“Nothing. I just bought a game called *Minecraft* this morning. It’s still in alpha, but I do want to check it out for a few hours after work. But after that, no more games. I’m done.”

I was relieved; after all, a game about building mines didn’t sound too enthralling. I could breathe easier knowing that Brandon wasn’t going to get addicted to anything else.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We’ll get the middle managers back in line, I promise.”

“You know, I wasn’t here back in the day when the managers ran Central IT but –”

He held up his hand and shivered. “Those were dark days. Mention them not!”

“And the commissars?”

“Don’t you worry about the commissars. Most of them are psychologically incapable of noticing that they’re figureheads. They don’t suspect that they have no power. We’re actually very proud of them. They’re the best stooges money can buy.”

“What about the CIO?”

Brandon laughed. “You clearly haven’t met Clutterbuck. He’s the least of our problems.”

It’s true that I hadn’t even laid eyes on our CIO. According to Brandon, these days Biff Clutterbuck was too busy with his Japanese ceramics collection to come into work more than a few times a month. By Henry’s estimation, he was the best CIO that Harvard had ever seen.

“I’ve got to go,” said Brandon, looking at his phone. “Henry has called the

Committee to an emergency meeting.”

“Hey, wait! What am I supposed to do about Hector?”

“Don’t worry about him. Our middle managers get moody from time to time. Try to be understanding, and remember: Hector just wants to feel useful.”

Giving my shoulder an encouraging squeeze, Brandon vanished.

I spent an hour in my office trying to think up ways to make Hector useful, but regrettably, there was nothing heavy around the Countway that needed to be lifted or moved.

The only idea that came to mind was getting him to come over and paint my office. I had no problem with that, though it would require he come back a week later and repaint it the original color. It was a solid plan, marred by one unfortunate flaw: it would require that I see him twice.

At around four pm, the landline in my office rang. It was Hector.

“What now?” I growled.

“An interesting thing just happened to me,” said my supervisor.

“Finally! You must be feeling so relieved. Goodbye, then.”

I was about to hang up when I heard him say: “Biff’s secretary just called to cancel our game tomorrow.”

*Holy hell.* “Your golf game got canceled?!”

After a moment of silence, I could hear Hector clear his throat. “You see, Shea, the awkward issue here is that I didn’t tell you what kind of game was canceled.”

*Oh dear.* I was momentarily bereft of words.

“You went and looked at my calendar,” he suggested calmly. “Didn’t you? When I stepped out of my office?”

“I might have, Hector. In fact, I am now reminded that I did. In my defense, I couldn’t help myself.”

There followed a lingering pause.

“So you’re probably wondering why I’m calling,” he remarked conversationally.

“You mentioned that something interesting happened to you...”

“It was more of a realization. You see, I was sitting here a few moments ago, mulling over the fact that I’ve been playing golf with Biff for three months and nobody in our department knew anything about it.

“Then it occurred to me that perhaps you had seen it in my calendar. And suddenly, the game is canceled. Within hours. All this suggests to me that you talked to someone.”

I shook my head in wonder. “You mean, did I talk to the cabal that is secretly running Central IT?”

I had gone too far, of course; I heard a sharp intake of breath in my ear.

“Hector? Listen, I’m sorry the CIO canceled your golf games. I’m sure it was nice to feel important, but the fact is – Hector? Are you there?”

A chill passed through me. He had hung up.

# the librarians interrupt

I stifled a yawn and stretched, blinking into the faces of my colleagues. The number of librarians in the IT lounge had swelled over the past hour to more than twenty.

“I don’t get any of this,” said Ned, squinting with perplexity. “Why don’t you want your boss to play golf with his boss?”

“His bosses’ boss,” corrected Brandon, “And there is so much that is bad about it, I can’t even begin … listen, Hector isn’t what anybody would call knowledgeable, but he knows enough to sound like an expert. Especially to a professional Luddite like our CIO.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?”

“It’s terrible!”

Brandon was up on his feet, waving his arms about emphatically. It was, he insisted fiercely, the duty of everyone in Central IT to ensure that nobody speaks to the CIO except for the six commissars. “It’s their job! It’s what we pay them for!”

“But why –”

“He’s an impressionable man, Ned. And curious, about so many things! There is no worse quality in a CIO than curiosity.”

Ned studied him carefully. “You’re a member of the Committee, aren’t you? That’s what Shea said …”

Brandon waved the matter away. “Yes, yes, but that’s irrelevant. We were all upset about Hector trying to schmooze with Clutterbuck, but ultimately we – the Committee, that is – decided not to inform the commissars. Because if they

found out they were being sidelined by a junior manager, they'd have made his life hell. And we like Hector, you see, and ...”

I exhaled noisily and shook my head with disgust; Brandon took no notice.

“We have high hopes for him,” he continued. “We’ll bump him up to the rank of commissar eventually, but first he has to learn what the job actually entails. After all, we don’t want any activist commissars on our hands. We need commissars to do the job, such that it is. We don’t want him meddling with our infrastructure.

“Above all, what we don’t need are any great leaps forward. Back in the nineties, someone very much like Hector tried to launch a cultural revolution within our ranks. It nearly ruined us.”

While Brandon was chattering, I was counting heads. There were twenty-six librarians in the room! It was getting ridiculous, but it was Christmas after all. And looking around the room, I could tell the librarians thought that Central IT’s troubles were highly amusing. The idea that another department at Harvard might have an even sillier political situation was quite shocking.

“I have a question,” a voice piped up from the back of the room. “How does this all relate to Phineas Gage’s skull going missing?”

The question elicited a murmur of approval and agreement, and all heads turned back in my direction. A dozen pairs of eyes regarded me now with level skepticism.

“Look, I’m getting to that,” I replied, “so if you’ll just –”

Astrid interrupted. “I want to hear more about André from Paris. Where did he go? Is he coming back?”

There was a mischievous gleam in her eye; André was sitting beside her, wearing a dress. He made for a somewhat unattractive woman, which is possibly why people didn’t study him too carefully.

Astrid was the only person here who was in on the secret. The others had

assumed ‘Britney’ was from another department. But why, after all, should anybody assume that a notorious fugitive might be hiding in their midst?

“I’d like to hear more about the missing skull,” asserted André/Britney, pointedly.

“Well, alright, but wait … has anyone seen Octavia?”

“She went off to check on George,” Wendell said, a little sadly. “He’s downstairs, packing up his office.”

“I was hoping Octavia would duck out,” I admitted. “You see, I don’t think Octavia would be pleased to learn that her words were the catalyst that drove me to steal the skull of Phineas Gage.”

Astrid gasped. Wendell, on the other hand, assumed an expression of sinister delight.

“Please, Shea,” he said, leaning forward in his chair. “Don’t leave anything out.”

“Well, even though it happened back in June, I remember it clearly. It was the Monday that followed my fateful meeting with Hector…”

# problems with authority, as said before

I was fixing one of the public computers in the Russell Reading Room, a spacious area on the eastern side of the building filled with lounge chairs, magazines, and print journals.

“Hey you,” said Octavia, appearing from nowhere. “How are you doing?”

I knew better than to talk to her, of course. Octavia is the Countway’s most senior librarian; if I aggravated her too much she could have me fired. And, to be frank, aggravating her didn’t require much effort.

Unlike many others, Octavia was not one to bask proudly in the institution’s inefficiencies. A natural dissident – and an outspoken critic of the sort of the lazy, half-measure approach to everything that is, practically speaking, the informal policy of Harvard University – Octavia was regarded by some as a fearsome personality.

“Go away, Octavia. I don’t like you.”

“Yes, you do like me,” she said wearily, sitting beside me. “And you should be thanking me. I was just in a meeting where, among other things, I made sure you were not put on the library’s new Innovation Committee.”

I flung my hands up in the air. “I can’t be on a bloody committee! I fix computers! And that’s literally *all* I do.”

“Well, that’s not all you do.”

“You’re right. I fix computers and alienate my supervisors,” I retorted grumpily.

“Oh dear. So what’s happened now?”

I exhaled with annoyance and told her about how I had learned my boss was playing golf with the CIO of Central IT. Henry had asked me to tell him if Hector went anywhere near Biff Clutterbuck, and that’s what I had done. And now, the golf games had been mysteriously canceled.

Octavia, who had worked at Harvard for more than thirty years, was unmoved by my story. She merely looked at me shrewdly.

“So how did your boss react?”

I thought about his tense, clipped voice on the phone, right before he hung up on me.

“I think I should probably start looking for another job.”

“Nonsense, you did some outstanding work,” she said, looking pleased. “I’ll be sure to let The Necromancer know about this, don’t worry.”

“Great. I could use a good reference for my next job application.”

“Your boss is not going to fire you. Remember, you don’t work for Central IT.”

“Well, that’s funny. At our meeting on Friday, Hector actually used the phrase ‘you work for Central IT.’”

Octavia waved her hand dismissively. “On paper you do – that’s just a formality. In reality, you work for the library.”

You’re crazy, I thought to myself. You’re crazy, every single one of you. But don’t let on, Shea. Don’t let them know that you’ve figured them out.

“You’re crazy,” I told her, wincing slightly.

“I am not crazy,” Octavia declared, “and furthermore, do you know why the library hired you?”

For some reason, I suddenly remembered the blueberry muffin I’d stolen from Hector. My coat was draped over the back of my chair; I reached into the right

pocket and felt around. Was it there? It was! A squished, three-day-old muffin. I offered it to Octavia, but she wasn't feeling all that hungry.

"I don't believe," she continued, "that you fully understand our library's situation. You see, The Necromancer had been placed in a difficult predicament... Gordon Hall is not happy with her. And that's not a good thing, Shea."

They had hired The Necromancer with a mandate to eradicate waste and get rid of dead wood – which is an American corporate idiom, she explained, for 'superfluous, useless staff.'

The Necromancer soon discovered, however, that the library was actually short-staffed and under-budgeted. After stalling for as long as possible, she returned to Gordon Hall with a request for money.

Fearing that their Great Reformer had gone rogue, the accountants in Gordon Hall raised a pen and struck her entire IT department from existence.

"Because – take that library!" summarized Octavia.

"Hmmm," I mumbled. The muffin didn't taste too bad. I thought that the IT department had been closed years ago. The equipment and books that I'd found had been so old ...

"Next, Gordon Hall arranged a meeting between The Necromancer and the burgeoning Central IT department. Welcome to centralization," said Octavia, shrugging with annoyance.

The library's web and file servers were now to be remotely administered by some jackbooted thugs from across the Quad.

"No offense," she added. "But Central IT! I mean, have you ever met Biff Clutterbuck?!"

I shook my head and stuffed the rest of the muffin into my mouth. Octavia looked at me with distaste.

“Anyway, we had some databases that we can’t even find anymore. And our IT department had been working on some reference library tools. No idea what happened to those. Long story short, it’s a calamity.”

On the Desktop Support side of things, Central IT wanted to send someone over from their staff right away. But, as The Necromancer pointed out – and very rightly, according to Octavia – external departments should not be allowed to choose who can work inside the Countway.

Surprisingly, Central IT agreed and suggested that The Necromancer choose their new employee for them.

“Which doesn’t really explain why she chose me.”

Octavia leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms.

“It’s tempting to believe that all bureaucrats are stupid, isn’t it? That an Ivy League university is somehow cut off from the rest of the world? Sheltered from reality? You know, we bureaucrats didn’t go to Harvard. We’re from harsher realities. Impoverished rural towns and inner-city schools. We worked our way up to get here, just as you did, Shea.

“And what, you think The Necromancer couldn’t, in a single instant, spot a troubled young man with a massive chip on his shoulder about his humble origins? Wasn’t there a line in your resume about you winning a bronze medal at the Olympics for crocheting?”

I felt it in an instant, of course. I was a beetle pinned to a piece of board. Twitching helplessly, I watched her write out my species on a slip of paper and paste it carefully beneath me. I would fly away if I could only breathe...

“What The Necromancer needed was a troublemaker,” she continued. “And you, Shea, were like a gift from the gods. That’s why you were hired. That is your job. And that is why that when The Necromancer hears that you managed to shut down your boss’ golf games with his superior, she’ll be very pleased.

“From now on, and into the foreseeable future, you must gouge away at

Central IT as much as you can. And always keep this in mind: they can't fire you. You're untouchable. Because you don't work for them.”

I stared for a long moment at the computer on the desk in front of me, quelling a mad impulse kick it through the plate glass window and into the courtyard below.

“Octavia. I am not somebody’s dog. And I cannot imagine a greater incentive to be a model employee for Central IT than the words I just heard from your mouth.”

Her smile was as understanding as it was ethereal. “You could do that, but ask yourself this – is it really wise to annoy The Necromancer?”

Dumbstruck, I watched her disappear into the stacks.

For a long time, I was unable to move. A curious thing began to happen in my mind. The longer I stared into the whirling clockwork of Harvard bureaucracy, the more I began to doubt the outside world.

Is this microcosm a signifier of universal absurdity?

I stared at the computer in front of me, trying to destroy it with my mind. Eventually, I gave up, scrawled ‘out of order’ on a piece of paper and taped it to the screen. I wandered away, wondering if I should tape a similar message to my forehead.

The library foyer was hushed and still. Kurt was glaring into space maniacally, which indicated that he was probably thinking about explosives. I walked past him and kicked open the door to the corner office.

“All I want is to do is fix computers,” I told Wendell. “Is that so wrong?”

“And all I want to do is to be able to wear hats. I can’t make them work, though. Hats always make me look ridiculous. I’m just not a hat guy.”

I frowned at the floor and grumbled, “Today I learned that being a difficult person was my actual job.”

“I thought your job was to fix our computers?”

“Me too! We were so naive.”

I related the conversation I’d just had with Octavia, and then worked my way back through my recent discussions with Hector. I described his displeasure at my role in bringing an end to his golf games with Biff Clutterbuck. And, finally, I explained that Octavia would be reporting the incident to The Necromancer who had, apparently, hired me purposely to be a thorn in the side of Central IT in the first place.

“It’s a game to her. And if I don’t play, she can have Central IT remove me from the board.”

“And then you’ll be at the mercy of Hector and his, what do you call them, the commissars? Yes, I can imagine the discomfort of your situation. More troubling, from my perspective, at least,” he said, “is the extent to which The Necromancer is at odds with Gordon Hall. I wasn’t aware of that. It was indiscreet of Octavia to share that with you. I’d caution you to be circumspect –”

I shrugged lazily. “I’ve just been told that I’m a difficult person.”

“Oh, you’re not so difficult really,” soothed Wendell, coming around the desk and patting me awkwardly on the shoulder. “Well, not in an overly unpleasant way. Besides, it sounds like you’re just doing what you’re supposed to be doing – making Harvard managers happy.”

I had to hand it to him; Wendell really knew how to kick a man when he was down.

“But why? That’s my question. What does The Necromancer get out of any of this? What is the point of annoying Central IT? It’s all so stupid and petty.”

He stared at me and made no reply.

“Listen,” I declared, pointing at him. “My annoying Hector is not the same. It’s very different. And besides, I have Pathological Problems With Authority; it’s a disorder, and I can’t stop myself. But The Necromancer? She’s acting

stupid and petty..."

"She is not acting stupid and petty, stop saying that," he whispered with superstitious dread. "The Necromancer has one job to do, which is to fight for the library. And that's a tough fight because the library doesn't generate any money for the school, remember? I'm sure I've explained this to you before..."

I nodded irritably. "Yes, yes I know..."

"You know why we call her The Necromancer, right? Because she's frightening. It's her job to be frightening, just so other people – and other departments – think twice about messing with the library. Otherwise, Central IT would walk all over us. Or ignore us whenever anything goes wrong over here.

"Because we don't have the clout of, well, anyone else here at the Medical School. And why is that?"

"You're not making Harvard any money. I know!"

"So The Necromancer is a busy woman. She can't always be roaming about the campus being difficult and notorious. Sometimes she needs someone to be difficult and notorious on her behalf. So she has emissaries. Octavia is one. You're another."

"But I don't report to her!"

Wendell shook his head. "That's the beauty of it. You are a symbolic reminder that there are powers greater and more troublesome than budgets, Shea. You are Mischief for Hire! An Irreplaceable Problem Employee. A Workplace Obstacle. A Sentinel. A Warning to Others. A Mechanism of Deterrence!"

"You," he concluded with an accusing finger pointed at my chest, "are a Professional Problem for the Authorities. Where are you going?"

"I'm going to check in with Kurt, and see if he knows where a man can get my hands on a few tonnes of gasoline and fertilizer."

"Alright then. Enjoy."

I was disappointed in Wendell, of course. Here I was, neck-deep in my proverbial Hour of Need, and all he had to offer was some empty-headed prattle about the ineffable wisdom of his Great and Benevolent Leader.

Unfortunately, Kurt was preoccupied.

“My job description,” he was icily informing a furious-looking doctor, “does not require that I go upstairs to fetch books for faculty members who don’t happen to feel like doing it themselves. I know, I know – it’s an outrage, isn’t it? What is Harvard coming to? Then again, when I consider that I’m dealing with a personage of *your* magnitude, why, I bet I won’t even have a job on Monday!

“But wait! I’m in the union, aren’t I? Well, I guess it looks like you have to trudge up the stairs and fetch the book for yourself. The stairs are over there. And remember, I’ll be here, waiting for you. With this smile on my face. Do you see it? *This smile...*”

“Excuse me, Kurt,” I said, leaning heavily against the Circulation Desk. “But would you happen to know where a disenfranchised individual could lay their hands on a few tonnes of gasoline and fertilizer?”

He studied me shrewdly and shook his head. I was not to take it personally, but Kurt kept a mental list of people he did not trust with more than a gram of explosives. And I was on that list, apparently.

“You’re just a little too wild-eyed, in my opinion. You should be like me. Calm and collected – hey, did I tell you my girlfriend has me doing yoga classes? I think it’s been doing me some good. You should totally try it, dude. Where are you going? Shea? Shea!”

Half an hour later I was ruminating alone in the middle of the Quad when an idea struck me like a cricket ball to the temple. Like all great ideas, it seemed so obvious in retrospect.

Thirty seconds later I was standing in Hector’s office, panting and out of breath.

“Shea! I was actually just writing you an email.”

“We need to talk,” I said, pulling the door closed. Then I laid out my plan. Hector listened attentively, and when I was finished, he gazed at me dispassionately, nodded twice and then smiled as if he agreed with everything. And then he said: “no.”

“What do you mean, no?” I demanded. “This is the best plan that has ever been planned, in the history of all plans! Aren’t you the one who is always trying to make yourself useful to me? Well, here you go. Here’s a way to be useful.”

“I will not write bi-monthly screeds to the library’s director about how miserable you are making me, Shea. Because it simply is not true. I will not be pretending to anyone that you are a ‘problem employee.’

“Because I don’t have problem employees,” he added meaningfully. I have clever, well-adjusted folk who occasionally find it helpful and therapeutic to talk to a professional about their problems.”

Bewildered, I sank into one of his armchairs. “What? Which problems?”

Hector fetched a business card from his desk and flicked it to me. I caught it between my fingertips and stared.

“What’s this?” I muttered in a daze. “Why are … I don’t need this.”

“There’s no shame in talking to a vocational therapist, Shea.”

“Except that I don’t need to talk to this Dr. Typhon character. What I need is...”

I broke off.

Oh no! This was because of the incident last week! He was exacting revenge on me for inadvertently putting an end to his golf games with the CIO.

“Thank you, Hector, it is a kind thought. But I’m afraid I must decline.”

My boss beamed at me. “Thank you, Shea, but I am afraid I must insist. You have a recurring appointment each Tuesday, starting tomorrow at 10.30am. And

before you say ‘but you can’t do this, Hector,’ let me save you some time by assuring you that I absolutely can.

“You see, Shea,” he added, holding open his office door for me, “being your boss does have its upside from time to time.”

## psychiatry doesn't work on me

Poor Hector. He was completely out of his depth. Strangely, some part of me wanted to help him. After all, the man was positively flailing about.

I even wondered if I should sit him down and explain the situation in a kind and patient tone. Then I remembered that he was my nemesis. The first rule of having a nemesis is that one must never explain anything to them. The second rule is to make them believe they're winning – at least until you reach the Step Seven, which is when you unleash the bees.

Hector's plan to send me to a psychiatrist had irritated me, of course. On the other hand, I had to admit to myself that he couldn't possibly know that he was being culturally insensitive. Psychiatry? Useful for some, no doubt, but what about the Inuit of Greenland? What use would it be to the San Bushman of the Kalahari? Or, for that matter, to the blokes of Thargomindah, Western Queensland?

When it comes to administering to our emotional ills, my people have certain culturally-specific practices. When a man from Western Queensland goes off his feed, for instance, he will seek out the nearest pub, become extremely drunk (or 'maggoted,' as we call it), and then he'll say something inappropriately complimentary to the girlfriend of the largest man there.

This tried-and-true method has been the practice of my people for generations, and it has many advantages. First, one can generally get the measure of a man's emotional frequency by how battered he looks. A few bruises about the face is a reliable indicator that a bloke is dealing with some of the world's harsher realities at present, and does not wish to be disturbed.

Another positive aspect to this process is that nothing inspires a man to get his internal strife back in check quite like the knowledge that, if he doesn't, he'll soon have two black eyes and a busted lip.

Sadly, though, these days not all Australians are like us rural folk. Imogen's people descend from the urban variety, which in some respects is a different species altogether. Imogen's family are the sort of people who put a cloth down on the table before they eat. Incidentally, they also place multiple forks at each setting, and some cloth serviettes, too, that are folded like origami. They even have a cabinet filled with fancy plates in their dining room, for guests to admire while they're eating.

Curiously, Imogen's people also believe in psychiatry, and so they assumed, like Hector, that everyone else has to believe in psychiatry as well. When I told them that psychiatry wouldn't work on me, they smiled tolerantly and told me I was an idiot. Then, after conferring among themselves, they decided that Imogen should take me to a psychiatrist – and, further, that this would be good for me. On the strength of their faith in the subject, I decided to give it a chance. Who knows, I thought; I might even get my *Pathological Problems With Authority* cleared up for good.

A week later, Imogen drove me to a place on Petrie Terrace. It was pretty swish, actually; the waiting room had a tropical aquarium along one wall. I amused myself trying to catch a beautiful rainbow trout with my bare hands while Imogen nursed a headache in the corner. Eventually, I was led to an office where a middle-aged woman showed me some pieces of cardboard daubed in lewd smudges and demanded to know how I felt about them.

I am nobody's fool. I told her flatly that I was in a relationship and not at all interested in her dirty picture collection. This did not discourage her, unfortunately. She adopted a bewildered, innocent tone and started probing for salacious details about my relationship with Imogen.

I reminded her hotly that if she had been a real doctor, she would be up in

front of an ethics board for trying to pull a stunt like this. She argued that she was a real doctor. So I laughed at her then, and asked her, rhetorically, how many real doctors lock innocent people in offices with windows made from bullet-proof glass. She argued that the windows weren't made of bulletproof glass. I knew she was lying. To prove it, I picked up a chair and hurled it at the window.

The whole wall of glass came down in a glittering cascade of color and sound. I had forgotten, in the heat of the moment, that bullets are much lighter than office furniture. She jabbed at a button beneath her desk and yelled the word 'security.' Acting purely on instinct, I clambered over the broken glass, through the window, and dropped onto the roof of a Mercedes parked below. Then I hoofed it down Petrie Terrace as fast as my legs could take me.

My second visit to a psychiatrist happened some months later. I met with a large, balding man who had a suspicious mustache and a curious predilection for talking about pain. He kept asking me about the nature of pain, and what I thought it felt like. Eventually, it occurred to me to take a pencil from his desk and stab him in the knee. But this did not seem to help his understanding much at all, unfortunately. He howled and stomped and ranted, and made such a fuss about everything that I ended up breaking a window and escaping down an alley in sheer fright.

Now that I think about it, he was a chiropractor. But I believe my point stands, while also illustrating that one should always be careful around men with mustaches. Worst of all, it reveals that I am yet to receive a medical diagnosis that has not been compromised by emotion.

Still, what would be the point of discussing all this with Hector? I knew he was only trying to provoke me. He's a petty man, that Hector. I could make a fuss about it, but why give him the satisfaction? *Not* arguing about it would only annoy him that much more. Besides, wouldn't it be savagely ironic if my talking with this Harvard psychiatrist actually did me some good? Hector would lose his

mind.

I felt optimistic, even whimsical until I found myself sitting in Dr. Typhon's office the following day. This was not a good idea, I suddenly realized – this was not a good idea at all! How had I let Hector trick me into coming? This Dr. Typhon character wasn't going to be any use. Look over there – he has three graduation certificates hanging in frames on the wall!

What kind of poor student do you have to be to feel compelled to frame your graduation certificates? He must have really goofed around in school.

What's the big deal about passing some exams, anyway? They always tell you everything you need to know before you show up. They're evaluating your ability to follow instructions. And anyone can follow instructions; what have *instructions* got to do with real life?

Real life is like walking into an examination room after a semester studying Algebra, only to discover that the test is on Calculus, and written in Hungarian. And worse, instead of issuing pencils they've handed you a six-inch length of string. Not that you can even concentrate because, for no logical reason at all, someone in the corner is playing the sitar. That's how real life is; it's about coping with all that, while in the meantime someone locks the door and sets the building on fire.

Still, I told myself, what business is it of mine if Dr. Typhon is proud of his ability to follow instructions? Some people, I supposed, find it soothing to do ordinary, commonplace things. What a magical day it must have been for the man when he passed his driving test.

Dr. Typhon gazed at me as if waiting patiently for me to speak. His skin seemed thin and scaled, his eyes were lidless and unblinking. The silence continued. It could continue the rest of the session for all I cared.

*Problems With Authority* my foot, I thought to myself. It's the people who *don't* have problems with authority who are the real problem.

“Do you know why I wanted to become a Doctor?” he asked abruptly, his voice curious and brittle.

“Because you liked to torture small animals when you were a boy?”

“Because I wanted to help people.”

Clammy, finger-like prongs reached across the desk and absently fiddled with a pen. I watched his movements with fascination, then I told myself not to stare.

And then, all at once, I recalled that the government had conferred upon this individual the power to decide who was normal and who was not; he could lock me up if he felt so inclined.

I sat up rigidly in my chair and began to pay more attention.

“So you wanted to help people,” I said, playing along. The important thing, here, was to strike up a rapport. Show empathy and non-judgment. Above all, I must try to appear neither vulnerable nor a threat.

Stretching casually, I nonchalantly glanced behind me to check that the door was still ajar, in case I needed to leave in a hurry.

*Someone had closed it!*

The doctor must have had a switch under his desk, allowing him to close and lock doors at whim. Never mind, I thought, willing myself to remain calm. I was sealed in here with this creature. Very well, then. So be it.

“I’m here to help you, Shea.”

“And I’m here to help you too, Doctor,” I replied thoughtlessly.

An almost alien sentience emanated from him. I could feel it probing at me from across the room. Naturally, I wanted to look away, but an intuition warned me against it.

When he wasn’t moving there was an eerie stillness about Dr. Typhon. Thick, blue veins snaked along the pink folds of his neck. His lips gaped and hung strangely beneath a curious sort of beak.

“What did you mean a few moments ago, when you mentioned the torture of animals?”

“Well, that’s how it starts, doesn’t it?” I said, improvising rapidly. “Not that I judge my fellow man, of course.”

“Have you ever felt such inclinations?”

“No,” I said, firmly. *Don’t let him pull you into his world.* “I am sorry, Doctor, but I am very fond of animals.”

It was only when those words left my mouth that I realized he was testing me. He was gauging my hostility towards the animal kingdom to verify that my views were sufficiently orthodox.

*Think, Shea.* What do people in today’s world think about animals?

“Naturally,” I went on, “most animals should be exterminated – humanely, of course, except where this might be uneconomical. The flesh of the animal must be scraped from the carcass, wrapped in sterilized plastic, chilled and freighted to the waiting mouths of our young.

“As you can see, Doctor – my views on the subject fall strictly within conventional views on the matter. All of whom we call animals are an inferior species.”

Perfect. That is precisely the sort of conventional thinking he’d find normal. The best strategy for getting around the likes of Dr. Typhon, I knew, was to confirm his worldview.

“We must not shirk from feeding the flesh of our inferiors to our smallest children – they must acquire a taste for blood early, lest they grow too squeamish and effete.”

“Mind you,” I added hastily. “if the animal is ornamental in appearance – like a giraffe or flamingo – it should be locked in a cage and put on display, for the edification and entertainment of all children.”

I then offered the doctor a reassuring laugh and lapsed into silence. He leaned forward a little and studied me intently.

This is the moment where he decides, I somehow knew. He would either determine me sufficiently normal to be free – or else I would be arrested and re-educated, via some sort of chemically augmented therapy.

Dr. Typhon's eyes were lifeless, his face inscrutable. Then his tongue rattled a little, and he made a sound like a cough.

“Alright,” he said, “let us put all that aside for a moment. Why don’t you take a seat and tell me why you feel so nervous?”

*Wait a moment – why am I standing?*

“I’m not nervous,” I said, returning to my chair and blinking innocently.

“Would you like a glass of water?”

My mouth was suddenly dry, and I *did* want a glass of water! How did he know? It was some kind of mind trick, apparently. Naturally, I shook my head. I can’t be drinking water in a place like this.

A long, thin finger stretched across the desk and depressed a button on an old-fashioned intercom. “Nancy, would you please bring in some water?”

It took considerable effort to maintain my composure; I had to press my teeth together firmly to stop my jaw wobbling.

With detached disbelief, I watched a nurse place a pitcher of water, and a frosted glass, on the corner of Dr. Typhon’s desk. I did not indicate that I knew the water was laced with drugs to make me pliant and vulnerable to suggestion.

“And so,” Dr. Typhon mused. “You were saying about animals...”

“I like animals,” I said with a smile. “No more and no less than anyone else. In short, I like them about as much as is generally considered normal.”

“And how do you see people?”

“I just look around, and there they are! Ha Ha!”

I don't know why, but sometimes in dangerous situations I can't seem to stop myself from making jokes.

"So you're saying there are a lot of people," he observed. "Do you think, sometimes, that there are too many people? In the world?"

"Not at all, Doctor. People can be quite nice if you give them a chance. It may be difficult, but you should try to cultivate a feeling of empathy and then, maybe..."

I must have been gesticulating emphatically because somehow my wrist struck the edge of the pitcher and knocked it on its side.

A liter of chemical-laced water turned Dr. Typhon's desk into a sea. He let out a sigh of despair as the stack of written notes began to dissolve before his eyes. His laptop made a faint popping noise in its death-throes, and the screen faded into blackness behind a rising mist of smoke.

I ripped all the tissues from the box and dropped them on top of the water to act as a sort of sponge. Sadly, it only seemed to make the mess worse.

The doctor sprawled in his chair, mouth wide and flapping, his carefully-practiced tranquility gone entirely. Suddenly I noticed his phone drifting across the lake, blinking and miraculously alive. Dr. Typhon saw it too; he lurched forward, fingers stretched and grasping.

I snatch the phone away, just in time. His talons flailed between us as he tried to take his phone from me. I squeezed the phone so hard it shot out of my wet fingers like a cake of soap, rocketing past Dr. Typhon's nose and straight into the wall between two of his framed graduation certificates.

The ominous plastic crunch of the phone as it struck the floor made the poor doctor wince. He staggered, eyes flitting from me, to his desk and to his broken phone, and I observed in a detached sort of way that his face was now bright red. His lips moved, but no words came.

So you *do* have emotions, Doctor, I noted, pleased to discover a sliver of

humanity in the man at last.

“We might yet be brothers,” I said, punching him roughly on the shoulder affectionately. He stumbled sideways and leaned on the table, overcome. He was being overwhelmed by a sudden onset of feeling, I could tell. If the tissues on his desk were not soaked in water, I’d have passed him one.

“You have to build on these emotions,” I advised. “Launch out from them, sail onwards from this craggy shore – sail out to those gentler waters beyond the breakers.”

The poor creature gaped at me, unable to speak. I smiled reassuringly.

“It will be a journey to a rich inner life,” I promised, “and if you stay true to your bearings, you may feel the birth of a new receptivity to joy inside you. And then onwards – what’s that off starboard bow? Compassion! A receptivity to music! Land-ho!”

That poison-dispensing nurse had unwittingly left the door unlocked. Out I sauntered, leaving the doctor to his voyage of personal discovery.

I didn’t even break a window this time. Perhaps I really was making progress.

“I liked Dr. Typhon,” I told Hector when I arrived at his office a few minutes later. “I can see potential in him.”

He seemed troubled and distracted. “I just got off the phone from him...”

I looked at him askance. “I hope he didn’t disclose anything that might break patient-doctor confidentiality. The Hippocratic Oath is sacred and inviolable, remember. Stuff was shared, after all...”

My supervisor stared at me for a while. “Dr. Typhon says there is no need for you to meet with him again.”

“That’s curious. He was standoffish at first, but I thought we were establishing a rapport there by the end. I mean, I obviously don’t have a lot of time on my hands for additional responsibilities, but you should let him know that if he

wants to reach out and have a chat now and then, I'd be okay with it.”

Hector sighed. “So you can help him, right?”

“Well, I doubt I could help him all that much. The man's a psychiatrist. They eat people, you know. Don't look at me like that, everybody knows that psychiatrists have been known to occasionally eat people. There was that famous case... Honestly, Hector, would it hurt you to pick up a book occasionally?”

We lapsed into another of our comfortable silences.

I am not really one of those misanthropic types who wander about frowning in disappointment at their fellow man. If I'm honest about it, I have a tendency to like people. Not people like Hector, of course, but *real* people.

And yes, I tend to assume that anyone in a position of power is a bit of a threat to civilization as we know it, and it's true that this impels me to rigorously undermine them. But that's just an innocent habit, isn't it?

What if there really *was* something wrong with me, though? Could this be, I wondered, some sort of involuntary compulsion? Am I subject to prejudice?

I felt disquieted. Am I one of those people who take an irrational dislike to certain people, just because they are different?

I glanced at Hector uncomfortably, suddenly unable to recall the source of my animosity for him.

What had he done to me? Had he wronged me in some way? Ever since I'd arrived at Harvard, he had been trying to help me. And all that had made me feel was mildly offended.

Is it me? Is there something wrong with me? After all, Brandon and Henry often said that Hector was a good person; I'd always ignored them.

Perhaps I had acted ungraciously, it seemed to me now. I am better than this, I reminded myself. *I must be better than this.*

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Hector asked me suspiciously.

“No reason, man. It just occurred to me that we never hang out. Do you want to grab lunch?”

He almost gave a start. “What? Seriously?”

There was a knock at the door; it was Henry. He peered about, nodded gruffly in my direction and said to Hector: “You coming?”

“Let’s have lunch another time,” Hector said to me, still unsettled. “I have to head to a meeting.”

“He can come along if he likes,” suggested Henry, giving me a funny look.

“I can? Hmm. Will there be doughnuts at this meeting?”

“Two boxes of doughnut holes.”

“Doughnut holes? That’s a thing?” I followed them through the maze of cubicles. “I’ve been in your country for months, and you only get around to mentioning the existence of doughnut holes *now*?”

Henry brought us to a conference room, where we sat down together. Hector sat a little further away and started to stare at his phone. People were trickling in slowly. I was bored in seconds, of course. Why was I here? Why had Henry invited me?

I slouched in my chair, inhaled deeply and then attempted to exhale all the boredom from my body. It didn’t work. I frowned resentfully at Henry and munched a doughnut hole.

“How is it?” asked Henry.

“Disconcertingly similar to doughnuts,” I replied, munching my third. “I’m actually embarrassed that I expected it to be otherwise.”

Brandon appeared, nodded gravely and sat beside me. A few other techies from Central IT took chairs around the table, opened their laptops and became stoic. Hector, the only middle manager present, played a game on his phone.

I felt self-conscious and wanted to leave. Fortunately, I stayed. I could never

have suspected that this meeting would be, for me, the catalyst which would lead me to steal the skull of Phineas Gage.

Suddenly six commissars filed into the conference room. In contrast to the rest of us, who wore t-shirts, hoodies, and baseball caps, they wore collared shirts, jeans, and sports jackets. I watched them take chairs at the far end of the table.

While we waited, Henry and Brandon discussed some project I didn't know anything about while I sat between them with my arms folded, tuned out completely. The wait became unendurable. I was about to give up and excuse myself when a tall, thin man leaped into the room and yelled 'hey!'

I sat up with a start and stared. Everyone around me assumed an attentive look.

The stranger offered us all a wise, benevolent smile and waved his hand.

"Hi, guys! My name is Biff Clutterbuck! And I make things happen!"

## biff clutterbuck

The six commissars applauded with unrestrained enthusiasm. I looked at Henry, who was clapping his palms together slowly and giving me a significant look; dutifully, I did the same.

Clutterbuck looked to be about forty-five but had a youthful, energetic air. He wore a black turtleneck that was tucked into blue jeans that he wore without a belt. His white running shoes appeared to be clean and new.

“It’s so great to be here, folks! I just got back from a summit in Aspen where we were talking about the future! We were talking about devices and wearables! We were talking about connectivity!”

The commissars nodded and smiled at each other.

“Big data!” he continued. “Mobile devices! Connectivity! I believe that connectivity is the future.”

I leaned in close to Henry and tapped him on the shoulder, but he shrugged me away.

“My keynote out in Aspen addressed this question: Is Software Ready for the Server – and my answer to that question was this: ‘Is the Desktop Dead?’”

Henry and Brandon were very still. All the other techies in the room were expressionless. I decided to follow their example.

“I’m talking about social media, people!” Clutterbuck exclaimed. “Mobile analytics. That’s right. I said it. You heard me.”

The commissars nodded in eager agreement.

“You’re probably wondering why I called this meeting. Well, the answer is, of

course, interoperability! Usability!"

A few of the commissars wrote the words down. All the technologically-capable staff turned their heads and watched them do it.

And then Clutterbuck's excitement faded for a moment, and his voice became somber.

"You know, a few days ago I was drinking Japanese sake with former President Bill Clinton, and he turned to me and said, 'Biff – you're a visionary CIO and maverick healthcare technologist – what is your secret? What has allowed you to innovate as a clinician, engineer and a domain expert?'

"And I said to him, 'Bill, I have two words for you. Innovation. Innovation. Innovation! We must innovate!'"

The commissars applauded. Clutterbuck paused to take a sip from a bottle of water.

I leaned against Henry's shoulder and whispered very softly, "I don't understand what's happening."

He didn't seem to hear me.

"Speaking as a vegan," continued Biff, "who cares deeply about the sustainability of our planet, I often find myself wondering what else I can do to bring about positive change.

"Recently I was leading an executive yoga retreat in the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro, and I found myself puzzling about what I could do to improve health care in Tanzania. I realized that expertise isn't enough. Through my work at Harvard, Stanford, MIT, and Yale, my decade as a CIO and Key Opinion Leader, I've realized I have to narrow down my expertise. In the past twelve months, I have become a security expert, a mobile expert, an interoperability expert.

"But what I am, first and foremost, however, is a father."

The CIO of Central IT bowed his head solemnly for a moment.

“Henry!” I hissed under my breath. It was no use, my friend was ignoring me.

Biff raised his chin and looked across the room, as if to a distant horizon.

“On the plane back from Aspen, I had a revelation.”

Now, on either side of me, I could sense Brandon and Henry tense their shoulders.

“Scaling infrastructure! Server farms! Email!” the CIO chanted. Then he paused, grinned at us and waited.

The room was silent.

“Outmoded. Dead,” he announced with a shrug. “Think about it! Evolve! Innovate! Disrupt and revolutionize!”

The techies stared woodenly at the conference table. The commissars, at the other end of the room, seemed inspired.

“The wiki,” said our CIO softly with a modest grin.

There were murmurs of approval from the far end of the table. The fingers of five commissars danced on the phones, searching the web for definitions of the word ‘wiki.’ Only one commissar knew what Biff Clutterbuck was talking about, which is why he looked as if he was pulling himself together after a near-death experience.

A wiki is a simple content management system. The most famous wiki, of course, is the world’s most popular encyclopedia, Wikipedia. And – unless I misunderstood – the Chief Information Officer of Harvard Medical School’s Central IT department had just announced his intention to replace the entirety of his department’s infrastructure with a wiki.

Clutterbuck crossed his arms and sat down on the conference table, looking pleased with himself. None of the techies could nerve themselves to look at each other. The commissars, on the other hand, were gravely impressed. Each, in turn,

spent a minute confirming it was a solid idea. And timely, of course. This was, they said, precisely what the school needed.

Good to have fresh ideas, summarized one. New approaches. It would be tough to push it through, of course, but twelve months was all it would take.

“Twelve months?” piped up Clutterbuck. “Why don’t we just do it today?”

Oh well. Some legacy systems need to be migrated. Nothing too complicated, of course. Just time-consuming.

Most of the challenge, said another Commissar sagely, is getting a few hundred folk around campus to sit down and go over it with us. We have to answer their questions and concerns: you know how it can be, with all these other departments. There are so many labs, principal investigators, stakeholders of various kinds, most of which are fundamentally resistant to change.

“Some will get it immediately,” observed a commissar, “though an inevitable few will think we’re invading their turf.”

“Like the library,” another chuckled knowingly.

“Now, now,” scolded Clutterbuck jovially. “I know they have a particular *reputation*, as they say, but we should feel optimistic about the library. Keep this to yourselves, but Gordon Hall is about to appoint a new director. Sadly, the current one isn’t working out.”

I had been distractedly gazing at my boot; I looked up sharply.

“The new director they’re bringing on board is a buddy of mine,” he continued. “He’s a lot like me. He gets things done. He’ll have things ship-shape over there in no time, you’ll see.”

One commissar nodded solemnly and recalled that the library had recently become Central IT’s latest client.

“Has it? Good, good. Well, their new director has a mandate to really, you know, turn things around over there. He’s going to close down that museum in

the library, first of all, and get rid of dead wood. All that sort of thing.

“My buddy Devon plans to reinvent the library as a concept. He’s going to really, you know, bring libraries into the 21st Century. Shouldn’t be too hard. He can still run his department over at MIT if he likes. I’m sure he’ll enjoy the slower pace of life at the library.”

“Wait. Is he not a librarian?” I asked.

The eyes of six commissars swiveled towards me in an unfriendly sort of way.

“Endocrinologist, actually,” said Clutterbuck wistfully.

“Well these are certainly exciting developments,” said a commissar.

“Very exciting,” agreed Clutterbuck. “But remember, now, this is all hush-hush. Let’s keep it to ourselves until they make the announcement. For now, the fact my buddy is taking over the library signifies strengthened ties between our departments.”

I felt myself sinking into despair. Reaching across the table, I flicked open the box of doughnut holes, then remembered they were ridiculous. I pushed them away, feeling defeated.

A commissar cleared his throat. I’m not sure which, to be honest; they all looked the same. “Our next step will be the creation of a strategic plan for the Wiki Project. There will need to be sections on implementation and an adoption timetable as we roll it out across the campus. Training coordinators will be prepped and –”

“Training? Do they need training? Wikis are easy to use, aren’t they? I mean, that’s the whole point of them,” Clutterbuck said, laughing.

The commissars laughed with him, but the rest of us remained silent; the task of laughing dutifully with the likes of our CIO fell to those with both the aptitude and the higher salary.

“Oh wikis are wonderfully easy,” said a commissar, “but much of campus has

a lot of content and data they'll need to move about for themselves. They shouldn't expect us to do everything for them. After all, this is about enabling our clients, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," said the CIO. "There's the whole social-network aspect to it, of course. Enabling them, putting data back into the hands of users, and that fun stuff."

"There will be a momentary interruption to their workflow," said a commissar bluntly. "Migrating email to a more compelling platform is a subtle business."

His colleagues looked at him sternly. Clutterbuck merely gazed into space.

"Yes, email," he murmured. "Hmm."

"We can put together a team to oversee the transition and make sure it goes smoothly. A year is all it takes."

"Eighteen months maximum," said another. "I know it seems like a long time, but I'm afraid the rest of the campus isn't as agile as we'd like them to be. We can roll out the changes in phases..."

Heads bobbed around the end of the table.

"Phases, good idea," Clutterbuck mused absently.

"... an invite system to the departments with a proven track record as early adopters..."

"Right!" said Clutterbuck. "And I imagine there will be some media interest, of course."

"Very true. Nice positive coverage for the School."

"For the Department," corrected Clutterbuck.

They laughed at his drollness.

"You know," Clutterbuck said, "I'll be in New York next Tuesday for a photo shoot with Annie Leibowitz. We're doing a cover shoot for a magazine article about me. Why don't I announce it then?"

A painful, protracted silence followed. For the first time in the meeting, I found myself smiling.

“I’m a fan of that idea,” said a commissar, swallowing and wiping his brow, “The timing couldn’t be better. Provided, of course, that nobody … hmm.”

“Nobody what?”

“Well, Stanford’s Medical School is smaller than us. They might decide to roll out their own wiki project ahead of us. Steal our thunder with an earlier launch.”

“Oh, that’s true! Well, let’s all keep this quiet for now. Good meeting. I’ll look forward to the strategic plan, then! Awesome.”

As he exited, the CIO turned about in the doorway and raised his fist. “I’m Biff Clutterbuck,” he reminded us, boldly. “And I make things happen!”

Then he was gone. The commissars marched out as if all was right with the universe. Hector ducked out behind them, looking lost and furtive. My two friends turned to me.

“So,” said Henry, after giving me a searching look. “How do you like our CIO?”

I chewed my lip for a moment, watching the room empty itself around us.

“I need to make things right with Hector,” I told them. “If I can get him to agree to offer me a good character reference, I’ll put in my two-weeks notice today. I heard MIT is hiring desktop support staff –”

I was trying to stand up, but Henry pressed me back into my chair.

“Don’t be like that!” exclaimed Brandon, looking at me fondly. “Everybody wants to resign when they meet Biff Clutterbuck. It’s perfectly natural.”

“And you don’t want to work at MIT,” Henry muttered. “They’re an even worse disaster than we are. Now listen, you don’t drive to work, do you? Good. Take the rest of the day off. Don’t drive a car. Don’t go anywhere near a river or a bridge.”

Brandon was patting my shoulder. “Take our advice, go home and go straight to bed. Sleep is what you need right now. When you wake up, you’ll feel a little better.”

“You don’t get it, guys.”

“Oh, we get it,” said Henry with a knowing look. “Trust us.”

But they didn’t understand. They knew this was my first exposure to Biff Clutterbuck, and they knew it was a paradigm-shifting moment for me. It’s true, some of my most basic assumptions about how the world really worked had been confirmed – and shattered – in one meeting.

“Don’t worry about anything that Clutterbuck just said,” said Henry. “He’s in good hands. The commissars are excellent at preventing him from doing anything. It’s the only thing they have to do, anyway.”

I shook my head and murmured insensibly. The Necromancer was about to be banished. My untouchable status was about to be revoked. What would Hector do with me when she was gone?

Damn it, I liked this job, I thought to myself. How am I going to get out ahead of this?

“Here, Shea, let he help you put on your hoodie,” said Brandon’s voice from far away.

I was shivering. It was June, but already I could feel the first chill of winter.

## the forging of history

Outside in the fresh air, I felt myself revive. Promising them I would go straight home, I shook my friends' hands, turned about and walked briskly back to the library. My timing could not have been better; George Ripley was leaving the building as I arrived, so we sat down together on the low concrete bench in front of the library. I told George everything I had just learned, about Gordon Hall's plan to supplant The Necromancer, my discovery and swift disappointment in doughnut holes, and the new director's plan to shut down his museum.

Without a museum, of course, what need would they have for a curator? George took the news well; he had worked at Harvard for too long to be surprised by shenanigans like these. After a short discussion, we agreed to keep the news to ourselves for the time being. Smiling grimly, we shook hands and went off in separate directions.

I re-entered the Countway, mind racing with absurd plots and impractical plans to save George's job. Abruptly, I remembered that my own job security was looking fairly nebulous as well; without the Necromancer's patronage, I would be entirely at Hector's mercy. What was I going to do?

If I tried very hard over the next few months, I could probably give him no reason to fire me. It was all a matter of staying focused. Middle managers can be pretty thin-skinned, unfortunately. I would have to grit my teeth and treat Hector like an ordinary human being for a while.

This meant I would have to stop hanging up the phone on him whenever he said anything boring. Furthermore, I would have to stop subscribing his personal email address to terrorist mailing lists. But, above all else, I needed to stop

reacting so negatively to his emails. There was something unpleasant about the way he used words; he had this perverse habit of implying that I was supposed to follow his instructions or something. It was as presumptuous as it was delusional.

To prevent any conflict between us, I decided to do the grown-up thing and block his emails altogether. I was in the midst of setting up a filter on my phone when a message arrived.

It was Agatha, a querulous archivist from the deep sanctums of the library, and she needed my urgent assistance with something. I typed out an assurance that I was intensely busy at the moment but would come to her as soon as humanly possible. And then, out of the blue, I remembered a particularly good joke about a penguin that I needed to tell Kurt right away.

After spending half an hour at the Circulation Desk, exchanging jokes and lewd facts about dolphins, I remembered Agatha and decided to push off down to her office to find out what was what.

The Rare Books Department is staffed with the sort of people who have made it their life's work to wage war upon the ruin of time and neglect, and they wage this war in deep, dimly lit places that are warm and dry and quiet as crypts. They are, after all, the Custodians of History, and their enemies are not merely dust and mold and time, but short-sighted bureaucracies, governments, funding-shortages, patrons, fools and idiots.

There are some strange things down there in those archives. For one thing, they have lots of surgical tools from bygone eras, when all that a physician needed to put matters right with a patient was two strong arms and hacksaw.

To get there, you first have to go down a few floors below ground level, around a corner and through a corridor or two, and then right through a pair of glass doors. You take a left past the reception desk and through that pair of wooden doors in front of you. And there you are, in the dark sanctums of the

illustrious Rare Books department in the Countway Medical Library.

Take a quick look around because your moment will not last long; an outraged librarian with arched eyebrows and thick mascara will screech and howl, and then Security will fall upon you in a great writhing pile of body-fat and overcompensated masculinity. A little while later, your pepper-sprayed body will be dragged up to ground level and thrown through the doors like a sack of unwanted potatoes.

But nobody paid any attention to me, of course. An IT guy goes wherever he pleases. Rare Books was empty and still, as always. The archivists were probably off nibbling cheese in their corners. The air was rich with history, and the cloying, musty fragrance of mildew that somehow reminded me of New York cheesecake. I shouldn't mention the smell, of course; the archivists have told me a dozen times that there is absolutely no mildew here whatsoever, and they already have enough to worry about, without me making up nonsense about mildew. I am a very good listener.

So there I was in Rare Books, as I've already told you. Agatha's door was closed, and from the inside I could hear sobbing.

Oh dear, I thought to myself. What has she done to her computer now?

I listened carefully, and from within I could hear the voice of Octavia, doing her stalwart best to console her.

“It’s just in the planning stage at the moment,” I heard her say.

“They’re idiots!” rang Agatha’s shrill voice.

“Of course they are,” soothed Octavia reasonably. “Everybody knows that...”

“But we’re the Custodians of History! Why would they put a Starbucks down here?”

“They’re only talking about at this stage...”

“They must be mad!”

I thought about knocking politely, but the sobs continued on and on, so I put my hands into my pockets and spun around four or five times until I grew bored with that direction. Then I turned around and spun the other way to see how it felt.

For a while, I leaned against the door and rattled my keys rhythmically. Sad muffled sobs came waffling through the wood, interspersed with a few soothing sounds, the occasional “there, there,” as well as some earnest speculation about staff discounts on pumpkin spice lattes.

A long hallway ran off to my right with office doors on one side, and small recessed antechambers on the other. These antechambers had desks and chairs, computers and old Hewlett-Packard printers. Boxes of paper-filled manila folders were stacked atop desks in no semblance of order. Everything was quiet and still.

Through the door, Octavia sounded suddenly reproving.

“Nobody is asking us to serve coffee to anyone. They’ll bring in specially qualified personnel for that...”

Then I noticed the maroon door across from me. I’d never been through there, it was always kept locked. Today, for some reason, the door was slightly ajar.

This was the door to the fabled Collection, where the archivists store all the priceless artifacts that aren’t on display in the museum upstairs. All sorts of things might be in there – magical items, devices, alchemical tools, parchments from another age...

As I entered, I glanced from right to left as if looking for someone; if anyone were here, I would tell them that I was looking for the cheesecake. Then we could have a friendly argument about that again, they could get all huffy about it, and I could slouch off as if nursing my disappointment that they’d gobbled it all before I’d gotten there. But there was nobody here. I pulled the door closed behind me.

I was in a vault composed of shelves and ... so many things! All around me were old tomes of medical lore. There were trays containing teeth, jaws, bones, medical saws and tongs, each tagged and identified for the morbidly curious. Here and there were rolled up paintings, dignified alabaster statues, and some tools that seemed to have been designed to expedite interrogations. Manuscripts, papers, a set of antlers. Tables stacked with hundreds of boxes, each filled with junk that a discriminating connoisseur would probably ignore at a church sale.

It was quiet, but not deathly still; ghosts were prowling about on the edges of my vision, muttering discontentedly at my intrusion. They liked sulking in places like these. I pretended I couldn't hear them.

Then I spied a familiar silhouette; an alabaster bust of John Harvard, luminous amid the disarray. I recognized his noble brow from that famous bronzed statue in Harvard Yard. I was looking at a smaller replica, a handsome, serious face. It is not a sculpture of the *real* John Harvard – there is no record of what he looked like, and even if there had been it wouldn't have mattered; this is the official John Harvard of the university's carefully-groomed narrative.

I moved away, deeper into the collection, my sneakers squeaking on the floor. Passing an old mirror with a tarnished frame, I caught a vision of myself and paused.

I had never met my father. I found myself looking for his resemblance in my reflection, as I occasionally do. Nana had often said that my Dad was that actor, Cary Grant. Or Neil Armstrong – she could get a bit inconsistent – so all I really knew for sure was that Mum must have been a pretty interesting woman.

Dad being Carey Grant made a lot of sense to me because I am naturally very suave. But if he were Neil Armstrong, then that would explain my tendency to push everyone out of the way while exiting during a fire drill.

The man in the mirror was wearing a white t-shirt and a dark hoodie, with a Harvard ID hanging from a nylon lanyard around his neck. He looks like Cary

Grant, I decided, there was no mistaking it – especially if the latter wore a woolen beanie and didn’t shave too often. He looked as out of place here as he did most places, which made me feel slightly melancholy. The reflection paused, tilted his head a little to one side. Then he tugged a lock of hair out from under his beanie, snickered at me, and went wandering out of frame.

On I tiptoed, listening carefully for the forlorn scuffs of archivists. The very air trembled with poignancy. My intuition warned me that something pivotal was about to happen, and I am never wrong about these things, especially not when I’m telling a story in retrospect.

I did notice half a dozen or so canvases in gilt frames leaning up against one wall, draped in some kind of cloth, and I paused to take a look. One old portrait featured a dignified, well-groomed gentleman – an early amateur dabbler in surgery, I assumed – looking bold and wise, despite the enormous number of people he had probably killed in the name of medicine.

Turning away, I crept down a different row and, unexpectedly, found a skull. It sat alone in an old cardboard box, an unrepentant grin beneath a nasty hole in the upper forehead. Of course, it was Phineas Gage, or what was left of him. With a surreptitious glance in both directions, I lifted the skull from its box. I was trembling nervously. I half-expected a trap to spring, and a voice to suddenly shriek: “Aha!”

But nothing happened.

Isn’t it strange how all the best memoirists always manage to find the time, in the heat of the moment, to be such philosophers? Face to face with the most famous and medically-significant skull in the world, they pause to impress us with their pious solemnity.

What trembling hopes this skull once housed! What lost desires, what great sorrows! What mad dreams once burned within this sad bone casket!

And, having gleaned a few spiritual truths from history, they urge us to reflect

upon the vicissitudes of fortune and the brevity of life, while they bow their heads reverently from the comfort of posterity.

To hell with them.

Phineas Gage's eye sockets shook with empty shadows. I saw nothing, not a totem of medical speculation, nor a piece of human remains that Harvard had arrogantly claimed as an heirloom. There was nothing here in my hands, not even the faintest gleaming shimmer of the restless dead.

What was this? I turned it over and studied it carefully. A faint seam traversed its surface. This was no skull, this was a replica. A forgery.

What is wrong with these people, I thought irritably, returning the thing to its velvet-lined box. I turned away; it was time to leave. I passed the little statue of John Harvard without a glance. This crypt of illusions no longer interested me; a curious thought was swirling like a vapor in my mind. What a funny thing, I observed to myself, as I wandered up the stairs. My appointment with Agatha, the distraught Rare Books archivist, was all but forgotten.

Sometimes they call people like me 'persons with Pathological Problems With Authority'. Who do they think they are, anyway? As if they have any right...

I sighed. This was going to be like that whole, sorry incident with the missing forklift, all over again. Only this time, a whole lot worse.

I was succumbing to a mystical awareness that my life was about to change forever, and there was nothing that I, nor anybody else, could do about it. After all, I had just decided to steal the skull of Phineas Gage.

## ghosts and promises

“Ah ha,” murmured André from Paris in the darkness.

Midnight had come and gone. Gertrude was snoring quietly at my feet. My friend’s silhouette was leaning back against the couch, gazing upwards.

“Have you ever,” he wondered, at last, patting the armrest lightly, “talked to any of the ghosts in the library?”

“It is rarely a good idea to let ghosts know you can see them, André. When I am shaving in front of my bathroom mirror at seven in the morning, I do not want to see a spirit with an ax sticking out of his head, peering from behind the shower curtain, and wanting to have a chat about something that happened back in the 18th Century. Such conversations are invariably boring and predictable.”

“And involve misplaced axes, correct?”

I nodded emphatically. “It gets wearisome.”

“Surely some have some interesting things to say, now and then?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted, “and listen, I know it’s wrong to make broad, sweeping generalizations. Some ghosts can be quite lovely when you get to know them. But anyone who has spent time with the dead knows that they are prone to petulance. They’re a touch obsessive. And they never have any sense of time, obviously.”

“I mean, who wants to be woken up at two in the morning by an ethereal, raven-haired beauty in a nightdress, wailing shrilly at the window about some bloke who lost interest?”

“Who wants to get dragged into yet another conversation with a spirit about a misplaced locket? I like to say hello, occasionally, just to be polite. What I want

to avoid, however, is getting caught up in any of their drama.”

I was probably wasting my time attempting to explain any of this to André. The irritating truth about spirits is that they’re a lot like teenagers. They will only ask your advice to give themselves the pretext to explain why they’re not going to listen to it.

And you can say: ‘But you really need to get over this business of being murdered by your cousin who wanted to marry your wife’ a few hundred times, and they will look at you in that smug, complacent, ‘otherworldly’ way because you don’t get it.

Of course, you don’t get it! But then again, they don’t get it either. That’s why they’re ghosts! I think what annoys me is that no matter what they say, they’re not really trying to move on to a different plane of existence. They’re just looking to vent at someone.

“I believe you, of course,” said André. “But I’ll admit it, your ability baffles me.”

“There’s nothing special about seeing ghosts,” I said, for probably the hundredth time. “Some people see them all the time, without even knowing they’re ghosts. And all small children see them. Kids are just gradually taught not to see them by well-meaning adults.”

“Have you told anybody in the library?”

“That the building is seething with malcontented spirits? I don’t lie about it, obviously – nana raised me to always be truthful, as you know. But she was the first to point out the futility of letting folks know about the spirit world.

“Many people these days, André, are devout materialists. They have a complex and deeply cherished belief in the nonexistence of the unseen. It brings them great comfort, and secretly I envy them that. I admire their ceremonial skepticism, their faith in a rational universe. It must be comforting.”

“Nana, however, raised me in the animist tradition. My religious education

was strictly orthodox; I learned all the traditional songs and dances and stories. It's not difficult to see spirits when you grow up in a household where nobody tells you that ghosts don't exist. It also doesn't hurt if there's a witch doctor around; all sorts of phantoms and wraiths will be stopping at teatime for a chat."

Of course, it was wise to be discreet. Even otherwise religiously tolerant sophisticates can quickly become unnerved when you try to include their recently-deceased loved ones in the conversation.

"Are you concerned the librarians won't believe you? That they're too skeptical?"

I shook my head. The truth is, it is often worse when people *do* believe you. The non-stop pestering begins, usually about some dead aunt. Would you mind asking her where she put that broach? You know, the turquoise one that Grandma said they could have when they were holidaying at cousin Claire's house that summer. They've looked high-and-low for it, and it's nowhere to be found...

'Don't you tell a soul,' my nana used to tell me, 'or your phone will be ringing off the hook, night and day. You'll be a supernatural message service for every loon and crank from here to Cunnamulla.'

And this, from a witch doctor who frequently held-forth on the topic of alien lizards seizing control of all the world's government, constituted a warning not to be ignored.

"So you never feel tempted to follow in your nana's footsteps?"

I shook my head with frustration. "As a witch doctor? I don't want to be a witch doctor, André!" I declared emphatically. "Nor do I want to be a medicine man or a shaman or even a warlock! What I want to do is become the world's most successful jewel thief! I want to move to Monaco and make my fortune depriving rich old ladies of their gems and jewelry, and whatever Picasso or Dali that comes my way.

“That is my calling, André. My vocation. It’s what I want to do with my life.”

“Alright, alright. It is only that a man with your skills could make himself very useful, learning secrets and gathering intelligence. Alright!” he added, bitterly. “I won’t ask you again!”

I exhaled patiently. “Thank you. Now this business with the skull...”

“I will help you. This is agreed.”

“Thank you, André.”

“But you will owe me a favor, of course.”

“Of course.”

Then we went out into the frosty air to share one last clove cigarette. Gertie watched the darkness warily, standing between us for warmth. André and I were both yawning and blinking. We had nothing left to say. It was time to turn in.

Tomorrow I would call in sick, and then together we would start planning my very first heist.

It was almost dawn when I finally fell asleep. I was walking alone by dark waters beneath the moon. The night air was still, and flooded with milky light. On a distant hill, a broken stone column marked an ancient tomb. Some intuition led me to the water’s edge, something familiar shimmered and shook beneath the surface. I stared down and saw curling horns over a darkened brow, and a face of animal mischief. A braying laugh rang out across the mead, startling sparrows into the stars.

I awoke with a start. Gertie sat nearby, head tilted, staring at me meaningfully.

“I haven’t forgotten George Ripley,” I told my dog. “If I didn’t explain the situation thoroughly, it is only because André is from a different world than you and me, and he wouldn’t understand. Now let’s go to sleep, Gertrude.”

Then I rolled over and followed my own advice.

## the onset of winter

“When I took Gertie outside the next day I noticed that many of the trees were bare of leaves,” I said, feeling wistful. “Autumn was fading away.”

I roused myself and looked around. The IT lounge seemed cramped – the librarians had filled the room.

“How did that happen?” I mused softly. “All at once it was cold outside. I found a nice gray woolen jumper in the Lost Property box, which has been keeping me warm under my pea coat. And ...”

I broke off, fatigued. I’d been telling my story all afternoon, racing on through some parts and slowing down to explain whatever seemed necessary, but nearing the end I felt a mounting apprehension.

Christmas was a few days away, and tomorrow the library would be closed until after the New Year. In an hour or so, I knew, things would start to happen very fast. All I could do was hope that I had the presence of mind not to make a mistake.

Everyone looked at me expectantly. None suspected what I had done, fortunately. Ned, sitting over there on the table and leaning against the wall, was giving me amused conspiratorial winks now and then, but he always did things like that. Ned is a little strange, by the way.

“So you were forming a plan with this André person,” summarized Octavia. “And somehow, you think it’s going to help George, am I correct?”

I nodded.

“And then everything went sideways,” she concluded.

I shrugged cagily. “Maybe. And maybe things are not always as they seem.”

She turned to Wendell. “He’s not prepared to admit his plan was misguided.”

“It might be better to wait and see, Octavia,” I replied testily.

These people really expect a lot of me, I thought with annoyance. In their world apparently, everyone can become a criminal mastermind on their first attempt.

Wendell cleared his throat. “I just don’t see how there is anything to be gained in stealing the skull of Phineas Gage.”

“Exactly,” I said, nodding fiercely. “That is exactly what I told those two lawyers from HISG! In fact, I remember saying –”

“You met with HISG?” Ned interrupted, seemingly amazed. “You need to tell us about that!”

“Alright,” I said, settling back in my chair.

“Now, I don’t want to say a bad word against the capabilities of Harvard’s Internal Security Group, who worked tirelessly and heroically to keep the whole thing out of the press, but, when they summoned me to a nice informal chat in their plush offices over in Gordon Hall, they didn’t even have the decency to put out a box of doughnuts...”

“No no no!” shouted Octavia, leaping to her feet. “We’ve already been through this –”

Ned stood up and shook his fist. “No, he hasn’t! I’d have remembered!”

“He has! He went over it at lunch! He met with HISG this morning and, at the end of the meeting, he stormed out with one of their staplers.”

“Thanks for that!” cried Ned angrily. “Thanks for spoiling the ending!”

I promised Ned that I would tell him the entire story later. Seemingly mollified, he threw a peevish look in Octavia’s direction and sat down, grumbling under his breath.

Octavia glowered. Wendell fidgeted in his chair. Even Astrid seemed pale and

worried. I recalled that many of the librarians were troubled by my story. Many unpleasant changes had occurred inside the Countway in recent months; the loss of the Necromancer, in particular, had been a terrible blow to many.

I had survived in my job through the rest of the year, obviously; Hector hadn't found a reason to fire me yet, but our relationship was as strained as ever. July had rolled into August, and most of the staff disappeared on vacation. Old George and I had kept silent about the Countway's impending change of leadership. The months slowly passed, and I began to wonder if Clutterbuck had simply hallucinated a fantasy about the library's new director. Perhaps he had confused the library with some other department? From what little I knew of the man, it seemed reasonably likely. Each day I wondered when the news would come.

I spent Thanksgiving with Kurt and his family and had a wonderful time. I even tasted my first pumpkin pie, and it was even better than I'd expected. Thanksgiving was a happy few days for many of us. And then...

“Disaster struck the Countway on November 30,” I said. Many of the librarians nodded. I didn't want to tell them the next part, but it really was unavoidable.

## regime change

The walls had been smashed, the gates flung open and the Great Library of Alexandria had been conquered. The soldiers of Caliph Omar of Damascus lounged in the market square, drinking wine and singing songs of their glory. Vast caravans were assembled to carry scrolls and books bound in vellum to the bathhouses across the city, to fuel the saunas of the conquering army, while the occupiers amused themselves by defacing the statues of the pagan Pharaoh Ptolemy II beneath the palms.

“That’s how it was then,” George Ripley told several of the librarians who had descended agitatedly into the Countway’s foyer. “And that’s how it is now.”

“Were you really there when they sacked the Library of Alexandria, George?” I asked in wonder.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Shea!” he exclaimed. “I recall from the annals of history! Just how old do you think I am, anyway?”

The librarians looked at me with disgust and admonishment. I threw my hands up with frustration and stomped over to the Circulation Desk where a smaller crowd was gathered.

“A new library director?” someone grumbled. “That’s all we need.”

“What happened to The Necromancer?” someone demanded.

“I heard she was embezzling funds,” whispered an archivist with raised brows.

I pushed open the gate and went around behind the desk to where Wendell and Kurt sat listening with expressions of mute resentment.

“I didn’t know she was embezzling money,” said one of the shelveurs, “but I

did hear she was cooking the books.”

“She was secretly planning to open a Starbucks franchise, right here in the foyer! It sealed her fate, I’m afraid.”

“I heard that she opposed the Starbucks plan and it made her powerful enemies.”

Wendell leaned in close to me.

“There was never any Starbucks plan,” he confided. “I simply made a joke one day. The whole thing got way out of hand.”

“I can’t listen to any more of this,” I told him.

“How do you think we feel?” Kurt growled. “This has been going on for an hour now, and my job literally requires me to sit here and not leave for the next four hours and thirteen minutes.

“You know what else? If I burned this place to the ground, they would actually send me to jail. There’s no justice, dude.”

Wendell looked across the atrium absently.

“The funny thing is that I saw him come in a little while ago. The new director, I mean. I’d looked him up online when they made the announcement and recognized him from his photo. He walked right past everyone, right over there. He’s wearing a white shirt with a club collar and a lemon cashmere sweater, v-neck. Tan chinos and casual denim-colored shoes. Vans, I think they were.”

Kurt looked fixedly into the distance. “Don’t do that, man,” he muttered.

“Do what?”

“Demonstrate such sartorial awareness. It’s unseemly.”

“It is,” I agreed.

Wendell pouted.

What neither Kurt nor Wendell knew, of course, was that I’d known the new

director was coming for months. I'd been feeling apprehensive, too.

My mind turned to George Ripley. For the thousandth time, I found myself hoping he would stick to our plan. George was the only Countwegian I had told about the upcoming leadership reshuffle, and I was worried that he might let the news slip. He wouldn't do it on purpose, of course, but there was something about his tendency to think he was in the 17th Century that shook my confidence.

Still, I was sure I could prevent George from losing his job if he could remember to play along when the time came.

In the meantime, I had other concerns. How long would it take Hector to find a reason to fire me, now that I no longer lived under the protection of The Necromancer?

What I really need to do, I reminded myself, is to steal the skull.

And to do that, I needed André's help, but unfortunately, he had gone off on a trip somewhere. For now, I had no choice but to listen to the librarians yap a lot of alarmist nonsense about their new director and wait for my friend to reappear.

Librarians are a funny sort, I thought on my way back to my office. They are driven by a pathological need for quiet and orderliness, despite knowing that the very engine of the universe was powered by chaos and entropy.

They are good people, though, and devoted to the public good. They don't deserve to have their peaceful lives disrupted by penny-pinching bureaucrats. But still, it seemed to me that they were over-reacting, at least a little. How bad could the new director be, anyway?

I tried to imagine how the librarians would cope if they'd had Biff Clutterbuck thrust upon them from on high, and burst into a fit of snickering. I'll admit it, a small part of me wished they weren't so inclined to over-react. Why couldn't they be nonchalant? It would make my job a lot easier.

When I came through the doors of the IT wing, I found eight or nine vibrantly

attractive young women chattering enthusiastically, right outside my office.

I halted, lowered my head and stared at them for a little while, feeling somewhat disinclined to stay but also eerily unable to leave. I decided to meander about nearby, in case any of the ladies needed me to bring them a cold drink, some helpful directions or a foot massage.

Then I noticed my office door had been pushed open. Was I seeing things? Were a few of them milling around inside?

“Hey, wait a moment!” I cried, pushing through the crowd. “I need to get past...”

The ladies glowered at my temerity and exchanged disbelieving looks.

“Look here,” I said, becoming authoritative and professional. “I’m Shea, this is my office. Is there something I can help you all with?”

“Oh hi,” announced a blonde woman who, for some reason, was sitting on my desk. “We’re the Dream Team. We’ve been authorized to take over this space.”

I gazed senselessly past her ear, turning her words over in my mind.

“No,” I admittedly eventually. “None of what you just said makes sense. What space? And who authorized what? And what in hell’s name is a Dream Team?”

“That’s what they call us,” supplied a brunette, breezily. “Devon’s Dream Team.”

“We’re members of his lab,” offered another voice. “Didn’t they tell you we were coming?”

*Who is they?* This is Harvard; there are no mysterious Truth Pixies wandering the halls, passing out useful information. Knowing that your office is about to be permanently appropriated by a batch of chattering cheerleaders would require almost semi-mythical heights of institutional knowledge. Theoretically, it was possible to attain that kind of exalted situational awareness, I suppose, but it would drive anyone insane.

“You know what?” I finally admitted. “I’m feeling perplexed. Can we all, perhaps, start again? My name is Shea. I work here. And I’m perplexed. Who are you again?”

The blonde flashed a wide-eyed look over my head, to indicate how patient she was being, then told me that it was all very straightforward.

When Devon was confirmed as the new director of the Countway, he had seen it as an opportunity to merge his clinical research with the library’s broader mission.

“Sure,” I replied, shaking my head.

“So he decided to move us – his lab – into the library,” she continued.

“Apparently there’s a lot of room for office space here in this building,” added one of the Dream Team, brightly.

“Hmm!” I agreed cautiously, seized with a powerful urge to run off and repeat her words to the nearest librarian.

“We just came from a meeting with Devon, actually,” said another. “And he said we could have this area...”

“He said what now?” I spluttered, tilting my head. I tried to focus, but the meaning of their words wasn’t lodging itself in my mind.

“So if you could maybe, like, vacate,” suggested the blonde, smiling warmly, “then that would be totally awesome!”

There were radiant smiles and nods of agreement about how thrilled they were by this plan.

“I think,” I said, making ready to leave, “I need to go talk to this Devon guy. Right now.”

This was met with some murmurs of regret.

“Unfortunately, he left for the day.”

“He’s gone?” I cried. “But it’s not even eleven...”

The Dream Team lapsed into silence. Their faces became severe, and I was struck by a sinister feeling for some reason.

“He is on his way to the airport,” someone announced crisply. “He has to go to Los Angeles.”

“He’s attending an important Extreme Sports Event,” said another, also sounding displeased with me.

“He’s competing,” said the blonde, reluctantly, because I was clearly unworthy of such important divulgences, “in the annual Death Mountain Summit Challenge in Hawaii. He’s parachuting from a helicopter on a motorcycle onto the side of a mountain. Then he races down to a surf event at the beach below.”

I gazed at them for a little while, trying to think of something to say. Eventually, in that unfortunate way that is my nature, I went with the first thought to waft through my mind.

“Why?”

“He’s ranked 13th in the world!” declared the blonde on my desk, and there was something about the look she gave me which suggested she wouldn’t be leaving crayons around the office, in case I came by and ate them.

“Have you even *met* Devon?” someone asked. “He’s kind of a big deal.”

“So you’re all scientists?” I asked.

One or two nodded. One of the Dream Team, however, spoke up to clarify that she had been an economics major who just happened to meet Devon in a café.

“It was felicitous – we just totally clicked. I was so taken with his passion for science. And I said, like, I feel like maybe working for him would be a great idea. So he offered me a job on the spot. Now I’m a project manager.”

I stared at her distractedly and tried to think up some sort of response.

“I technically haven’t finished my diploma in interpretive dance,” admitted a

thin brunette, “but Devon really appreciated my passion for communication the moment we met. I’m a clinical research coordinator for the lab.”

“Devon is all about giving people opportunities in science,” explained a girl with reddish hair.

“So as you can see,” concluded the blonde, getting up from my desk and settling comfortably in my office chair, “we kinda need these offices ready as soon as possible.”

“When?” I wheezed softly, defeated.

“Could you have it done maybe by this afternoon?”

“This afternoon?”

“What’s behind that door,” the brunette wanted to know.

“That’s a server room,” I murmured, feeling dead inside. “It’s filled with equipment...”

“Would you like us to help you carry some of it out?”

I shook my head, and then kept doing that for a while as I tried to collect my wits. As my confusion grew, so did the severity of my head-shaking until eventually I started laughing and grabbed the door frame of my office to brace myself.

Devon’s Dream Team took a step away from me.

“You need to get out of here,” I whispered at the carpeted floor. “Before I say something so honest, heartfelt and fair that I’ll be forced to explain myself to Human Resources later.”

“Do we need to get Devon to call you? From the airport?” the blonde threatened.

I shrugged. There was room in my calendar for at least one meaningless argument with a Harvard professor today. It’s not as if Hector wasn’t going to fire me any day now.

“You can shrug, but Devon had authorized us to take over any office space on third-floor that we deem suitable, and he will not be happy if –”

I began to laugh.

“Why are you laughing?” she demanded.

“Third floor. This is not the third floor!” I cried, waving my arm around like a madman, “This is the second floor! There are some student workspaces on the third floor, you could probably convert those into staff offices if you were so inclined.”

“Oh,” said the blonde, rising from my chair. The others filed out of the IT wing as if this sort of thing happened to them all the time.

The blonde, who had stayed behind, crinkled her nose in a gesture of regret. “Would you mind letting me have that office chair?” she asked. “It’s just that I always have trouble finding a comfortable –”

I pointed at a pencil on my desk. “If I stab myself in the arm with this – over and over again, until this entire limb is a bloodied mess of torn tissue and veins – would it make you leave my office sooner? Because I’ll do it at a moment’s notice, just say the word.”

Horrified, the last member of Devon’s Dream Team disappeared.

I felt curiously relieved, as though I had been playing out on a highway for too long and had almost been run over. My hands were trembling as I locked my office. I descended the stairs to the Circulation Desk on shaky legs.

The librarians had scuttled back to their respective corners of the building, and the atrium was empty once more.

“Hark! He returns!” cried Wendell to Kurt. “Behold his deathly pallor, his monstrous visage, for he hath supped full of direness and horrors –”

“We are having a Shakespeare Awareness Hour,” explained Kurt excitedly.

I informed the pair that unless the Swan of Avon had devoted reams of

parchment to the subject of restless foreigners wandering about in a cold, dark void, I wouldn't be able to enter fully into the spirit of the occasion.

Kurt squinted at me. "Can I offer you some unsolicited advice, Shea?"

"Sure. You know I always value your opinion."

"Well, never mind then," he muttered grumpily, moving away.

I looked interrogatively at Wendell, and he told me that Kurt sometimes had a tendency to become upset whenever people showed signs of not understanding the word unsolicited.

"Kurt can be very fussy about precise language, some days," he said. "I once told him that a patron blew up at me over a ten dollar fine, and he locked me in my office until I promised not to use any more 'disconcerting idioms.'

"Are you alright, by the way? I wasn't joking about your 'deathly pallor.'"

I was probably still in shock. Rubbing my hands over my face, I described my encounter with Devon's lab members.

"They were buzzing about like oblivious bees," I added at the conclusion of my story. "I was in a cloud of perfume and smiles, and all of them were chipping away at my sense of reality with dainty little pickaxes."

"Ah ha!" said Octavia, appearing out of nowhere. "It sounds like someone has encountered Devon's Dream Team."

I nodded weakly.

"And did you notice anything about them?" she asked, eyes burning.

I nervously drummed a tattoo on the Circulation Desk but could not yet marshal my thoughts.

"They were all, uh..."

"Yes," murmured Octavia, as if beside herself. "You picked up that little detail, did you?"

"What little detail?" Wendell demanded, alarmed. "Will somebody please tell

me what is going on?”

“They’re all women,” I whispered.

Wendell’s eyes widened.

“Yes,” hissed Octavia with a demonic smile. “I thought it curious also. Couldn’t prevent myself from remarking on it, in fact. And they were delighted to tell me the reason. You see, it turns out that Devon is all about getting women into science.”

Wendell cringed.

“Or, as one of them cheerfully put it,” she spat with an unnatural calm, “the new director of the Countway is, like, a total feminist...”

# the afternoon of the long knives

The IT lounge had become stuffy. The librarians were sullen. While I'd been chattering, their faces had slowly adopted the mutinous expressions of the dog whose fun adventure in the car has turned unexpectedly into a visit to the veterinarian.

The new director couldn't have made a worse impression on them if he had turned up to the annual pool party with a bad case of dysentery.

On his first day, he sat alone in his office for an hour and sent an email to the Countway mailing list letting everyone know that his door was always open to them. Then he left and didn't return for the rest of the week.

After a while, rumors began to swirl. There were plans to convert the fourth floor from shelves to office space, some said. Wendell was wringing his hands. Octavia promptly attempted to contact the director but met with no success; only when she accidentally stumbled across his blog did she learn that he had taken his family skiing at Lake Tahoe.

Devon returned for two days, then went away to a conference. December went wafting by. When he finally came back, however, Devon kindly invited Octavia and Rufus to a meeting in which he assured them that he had absolutely no plan to make any structural alteration to the library. Everybody felt much better, including myself, because I like the librarians and I'd hated seeing them so worried.

The following day, a small group of architects arrived to inspect the fourth floor and take measurements. That, incidentally, had been precisely one week ago. None of the librarians now knew what to believe. They had been wandering

about looking wide-eyed and twitchy ever since.

On Friday, Octavia sent out an email to all staff announcing that due to budgeting restrictions the library was canceling this year's annual staff holiday party. Wendell and I pestered her for reasons, but she glowered fiercely and remained silent.

On Monday morning, Octavia informed everybody that the museum would be closing permanently in three months, its exhibits to be divided among other Harvard museums. That afternoon, which was supposed to be the holiday party, most of the librarians left work early, more out of spite than for any other reason.

That's when I went upstairs and stole the skull of Phineas Gage.

When they discovered it was missing, the librarians took the news remarkably well. The few who did not assume that I was responsible promptly blamed the Countway's new director. One of the archivists even speculated that Devon had secretly auctioned the skull among competing gangs of Chinese criminals to buy himself a new motorcycle.

The librarians who did suspect me, however, evidenced some sort of collective feeling of relief.

“You’re keeping it safe, aren’t you?” asked one, covertly, as I passed by her desk yesterday afternoon.

“What?” I asked, somewhat flummoxed.

“Of course he is!” whispered another. “That’s why he stole it!”

So that explained why nobody was terribly cross about me strolling off with the skull; everybody – every one of them, including Wendell and Octavia, but most especially Astrid – had unconsciously assumed that I had taken the skull to keep it safe from some mysterious threat.

As I have described, Wendell and Octavia were not at all pleased about my activities, but they naturally felt I was acting with the library’s best interest at heart, however naively.

And now that I had pledged to return the skull in exchange for telling my story, they were not worried at all. Still, the fact that I had known – six months in advance – that the museum was to be closed had shaken them greatly. It was inconceivable that I should be so well-informed. After all, hadn't I been yammering about alien lizards most of the year? If George hadn't confirmed my story I don't think they would have allowed themselves to believe it.

It was inevitable, I supposed, that most of the library's staff would end up here in the IT wing. Today was, of course, the final work day of the year. And besides, the director should have let everybody go home early; all the other departments had been allowed to go home!

Besides, as word of George Ripley's untimely departure spread through the building, everybody wanted to know *why*. And the only person who seemed to know anything about the matter was me.

Was George really leaving? And was it true that the skull of Phineas Gage had been seized by FBI agents? And how did any of this tie-in with the latest rumor, that the new director had been authorized to turn the Countway into a six-story parking garage, for the exclusive use of Harvard faculty?

And who, above all else, was this Second Thief that George had mentioned? Mercifully, I'd managed to distract them for the past hour or so, and that particular detail had been, for now, lost among all the others.

Nonetheless, for the staff who had come to the IT wing to listen to my tale, the day had been filled with revelation. Their entire month had been plagued by sinister occurrence, and my account of life inside the realm of Central IT reminded them that, beyond the Countway's walls, trouble and strife stalked the lands like a great, gangrenous giraffe.

And now, of course, sweet old George Ripley was leaving them. This wasn't merely a dark portent, but a dark portent too many. The mood of the librarians was bleak. I had tried my best to cheer them up today, but no amount of

distraction could avert their eyes from the eerie comet that loomed ominously overhead, in a cold and moonless sky.

They were all now lost in thought, and for several minutes nobody said a word. Even Ned was standing by the tall glass window, peering upwards as if he was expecting a few billion locusts to come wafting out from the clouds in search of a bite to eat.

It was all so gloomy, that was the problem. This isn't what I wanted at all. Then, all at once, I had an idea.

"I know everyone is bummed that they canceled the holiday party," I began, swallowing nervously "so ... would anybody be interested in coming over to my place tomorrow afternoon? It's just that I'm thinking about throwing a Christmas party. I don't have to, I just thought ..."

To my endless relief, there was a stir of sudden interest and enthusiasm. Almost everyone was nodding and looking around with rueful grins. I looked at Astrid. "What about you? You're not busy tomorrow afternoon, are you?"

Astrid was free, and also amused by the idea. Nobody had ever thought to invite her to a Christmas party before. "Being Jewish, and all," she added.

I told her that, having been raised by my nana, I'd never been to a Christmas party before, either. We were pretty traditional animists, I explained sheepishly.

"It would be good to have a monotheist at the party to explain some of the mythology, and let me know if I am getting anything wrong," I explained. "I just understand the essential ideas. Everybody has to give me presents, and there has to be a Christmas tree. To be honest, the topic of Christmas is unsteady ground for me. I mean, how does one go about acquiring a Christmas tree, anyway? Does the church give them out?"

"Perhaps you could make it a non-denominational holiday party," suggested Wendell. "You know, in the spirit of inclusiveness."

"Oh, let me have my Christmas tree, Wendell!" I said, a little testily. "I've

never done this before. I want snowmen and egg-nog and Santa hats, and my dog wearing reindeer-antlers, just like they do in American movies!"

"Well, don't look at me," he remarked, glibly. "My parents joined the Nation of Islam in 1970."

"Well, that wasn't very helpful of them!" I said accusingly. "Now what am I going to do? All I want is a traditional American Christmas, and none of the Americans I know seem to know anything about Christmas anymore! You know, this is why your conservatives get all upset and want to bomb foreign countries..."

"Paging Shea," said Kurt's voice in a low rumble over the library's overhead PA system. "Shea, please come to the Circulation Desk. Someone is waiting for you. Shea."

Well, that's odd. Who would have paged me? It was well past five in the afternoon, and most days I would be on my way home by now. Could it be those goons from HISG, here to take me into custody? I shook my head absently. They wouldn't page me, they'd just walk right in...

I looked about suddenly. Britney was gone. She – or he, rather – must have slipped out, in that mysterious way of his. He'd gone off to reconnoiter, no doubt. He knew my plan, and I could easily understand him sneaking off to make sure nothing was going wrong out there in the library.

Everything did seem to be going to plan. Except for this matter of being paged to the Circulation Desk, of course. Then again ...

I paused at the door. Nobody would have any reason to know I was still in the building. The more I thought about it, the more perplexing the matter seemed. Perhaps it was because I had just been thinking of André that I found myself remembering that first night when I'd come home to find him in my living room with Gertie. He had located me in the world, via the internet. It had been deeply unsettling because it had meant that *anybody* in the world could find me.

I gave a start.

“Oh no! It’s happening! It’s happening right now!”

“What’s wrong?” exclaimed Octavia. “What’s going on now?”

“Who is it!?” demanded Wendell.

Astrid picked up the stapler and brandished it above her head, as if prepared for any emergency, then promptly hiccuped.

“Wendell,” I said, thinking quickly, “we might need to call security. I have every reason to believe that the person waiting for me downstairs is here to do me harm.”

“If you say so,” he said, taking out his phone. “We call security and … where are you going?”

“Stay here, everybody. I need to be certain.”

And then, after instructing them to draw the deadlock behind me, I exited the IT lounge through the rear door. I ducked around the corner, entered the stairwell, and then went bounding up the stairs two at a time. Reaching the third floor, I turned and ran east as fast as I could, skidded to a halt, ducked down and carefully pulled open the door of a little cubicle and crept inside. Here I raised my head and peered over the desk.

Damn it. I could only see half of the Circulation Desk form here.

“What are you doing?” asked Piper, who had drifted up behind me through the stacks.

“Shh, not now!”

Kurt was on the other side of the Circulation Desk, leaning on one elbow and smiling amiably at someone who was just out of sight.

Fortunately, the Countway has the best acoustics of any library in the world.

“Well, I can’t believe he’s been keeping you a secret,” he said charmingly.

“No, Kurt,” I hissed. “This is not the time to make friends. Call security, you

war-addled maniac!"

I started to jog back to the western side of the building. I would call Kurt, I decided, and instruct him to inform the visitor that I had already gone home for the evening.

I reached for my phone. *Where's my phone?* Damn – it was in the right pocket of my pea coat, which was hanging over the back of my chair in the IT lounge. *I'll stop in there first, grab my phone, tell the librarians not to panic and to calmly disperse through the building. Then I'll run up to the sixth floor to Harvard Health Publications and hide in the publishing director's office. He's a very reasonable man, he'll understand...*

Down the stairs I went. Something felt a little wrong, I'll admit. Why come into the library and wait by the Circulation Desk? Why let me know he was here? What he should have done was follow me home and catch me on some darkened street, away from campus security. He wasn't normally that stupid.

I wasn't thinking straight, I decided. As I left the stairway, I jogged back to the locked rear-door of the former IT department and stopped. A horrible thought passed through me.

It was all a diversion.

"I'm behind you," said a familiar voice.

I spun and dropped to the floor, hoping to roll clear of him, but he was already on top of me, fighting like an animal. Somehow I managed to pivot with his momentum and caught both his forearms as we went tumbling together, rolling and snarling.

I let go of one arm and, swinging with all my strength, slammed my fist into the side of his skull. There was a knocking feeling in my hand, and a moment later it exploded in agony. I heard a metal clatter and glimpsed a knife sliding away across the floor.

Numbly I reached for it, but his elbow came down on my throat and then I

couldn't breathe. He was reaching for the knife, his fingers touching the dull, black hilt...

I could hear a door swinging open and then there was shouting all around us. A multitude of voices, faces, arms reaching out for me.

And then my assailant screamed with triumph, a shattering bellow that made all other sounds disappear for a long moment. The knife flashed past my eyes. I felt something cold wiping along my shoulder.

“No!” I yelled with despair, collapsing in defeat.

The knife went spinning away. Fabian rolled onto the floor beside me, panting.

“No, no, no, no!” I moaned with despair. He was laughing insanely.

“Tag,” he muttered, exhaustedly. Then, taking a deep breath, spat out two words: “You’re ‘It.’”

Above us, Octavia and Astrid, and perhaps all the librarians in the Countway, were standing in a circle, gaping with horror. Wendell retrieved the knife, then retreated a few steps.

“Give it to him,” Fabian panted at Wendell, glancing at me. “He can have it.”

“I don’t want it. I’m playing with a machete next year,” I said hotly.

“I direct you,” whispered Fabian, smiling in that malignant way of his, “to rule number four, which states –”

“Shea!” Octavia demanded, “do you know this individual?”

“It’s just a game,” I panted. It’s odd how exhausted you become after ten seconds of fighting for your life. “Just a game we play.”

“A game?” Wendell gasped, incredulous.

Fabian grabbed my shoulder and pulled down my sweater. Beneath the livid, bleeding cut, Wendell saw five other, older scars. I too looked at the new cut, and muttered, “Ow.”

“Look, he’s got me before,” said Fabian, rolling up his sleeve and showing them. “This year it was my turn.”

“I do not understand,” said Octavia, beside herself. The others were looking at us as if we were crazed.

“It’s really nothing,” I explained, climbing to my feet and pulling up my friend. “This is Fabian. Fabian, everybody.”

“Hi, everybody.”

Wendell was looking between his phone and me and Fabian, as if the world had stopped making any sense to him. “So am I calling security and telling them not to come?”

“Of course! It’s a little bit too late now, don’t you think? He’s already cut me!”

“Ignore him, everybody,” said Fabian. “He always gets sore when he loses knife tag.”

It’s true. Having my shoulder slashed with a knife does make me peevish. A character defect, Fabian had once called it.

“Knife tag,” repeated Octavia in a daze.

“Knife tag?” asked Wendell, looking at us incredulously. “You’re out of your minds.”

“Rubbish,” I said, hotly. “You play video games all the time. I’ve seen you. Fabian and I only play knife tag about once a year.”

“It’s not the same!” yelled Wendell.

Fabian blinked in surprise, then asked, *sotto voce*, “Why are they being all weird about knife tag?”

“You need to get that cut seen to,” said Astrid, frowning with concern. “Does it hurt much?”

“Not really,” I replied heroically. “But I’ll tell you what, I could use a cup of

tea right now.”

Apparently, the idea of tea was amenable to all, and everyone began to shuffle around to the elevators. Wendell, however, darted downstairs to fetch a first-aid kit from his office.

As the librarians walked away, Fabian casually introduced himself to Astrid.

“So you’re a friend of Shea’s,” she said.

Fabian smiled, a little too rakishly to my liking. “Yeah, we’re friends. Except for one day a year.”

“When you play knife tag?”

He shrugged and gave her a lopsided smile. “So tell me about you.”

Feeling awkward, I fell behind and decided to take the stair alone.

I stopped by the bathroom on the fourth floor and remembered Piper. A minute later I found her among the carrels.

“Sorry about earlier. I was trying to duck an old friend of mine. Hey, take a look at my shoulder – it’s pretty deep, don’t you think? Do you think I need stitches?”

“Shhh,” she said, without looking up from her textbook. “I’m trying to understand something.”

I exhaled. “I know, I know.”

A long minute passed in silence.

“I know you’re under a lot of stress,” I whispered, “but have you looked out the window lately?”

She didn’t reply.

“You’re working too hard, Piper. In fact, what you’re doing to yourself is just plain wrong.”

She finally looked up from her textbook.

“Can you believe I once thought coming to Harvard was the best thing that ever happened to me?”

“I’ll stop by before going home,” I told her, but she had already forgotten about me.

Upstairs, the staffroom was crowded and lively. Half of the Countwegians had stayed on to have an impromptu after-work celebration. Even a few people from The New England Journal of Medicine had joined the throng.

I skirted the crowd and settled at an empty table in the far corner by the windows. The world out there was all darkness and shadows. The green line tram passed slowly along Huntington Avenue amid a stream of headlights and hunched briskly-trotting pedestrians. It looked cold outside, and I was grateful to be in here, surrounded by the warmth of friends.

A large plastic case bearing a red cross emblem dropped heavily onto the table, and Wendell began fussing with it.

“So,” he prompted. “Knife Tag.”

“Such a relief that this year’s match is over. It’s rough on the nerves, that game.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, cutting some gauze.

“Knowing that a good friend might appear out of nowhere with a sharp knife in his hand is not conducive to a restful state of mind.”

He nodded. “You ever consider not playing?”

“And let Fabian win?” I laughed bitterly. “Not on your life. Sneaking up on me in the Countway Library of Medicine. I tell you, he will rue the day...”

Wendell, unable to see the logic, only shook his head. “So what are the rules of this game?”

“I will never tell anybody the rules,” I said, feeling cross. “And that is all there is to it.

“But I should explain that the first rule of knife tag is that both players must first agree to play. Otherwise, it’s not knife tag, but assault with a deadly weapon. Which is less interesting, and also heavily regulated by law enforcement.”

Each knife tag match lasts the entire calendar year. Your opponent must cut your shoulder with a sharp knife before the year has ended. He or she may not cut you with a knife if you have spoken to each other in the past seven days.

If your opponent hasn’t tracked you down by midnight on December 31st, the game is over, forever. You then count up the number of scars on your respective shoulders, and whoever had the fewest is the victor.

“If I win, Fabian has to buy me chocolate milk – whenever it pleases me – for the rest of my life. He would also have to address me as *Sir* in a respectful and non-ironic tone. Forever. The rules are precise and specific.”

There were dozens of other rewards that neither of us probably remembered, perhaps because neither of us sincerely expected to ever lose. We both played Knife Tag in deadly earnest. A lifetime of free chocolate milk is not to be sniffed at, after all.

“What a ridiculous game,” remarked Wendell, suppressing a yawn.

“It’s better than baseball,” said Fabian defiantly, appearing out of the crowd.

“Are all Australians criminally insane?” Astrid asked him, interestedly.

I didn’t hear Fabian’s reply. Wendell had unscrewed the lid from a bottle of liquid and, without warning, poured it all over my shoulder. It was a challenge not to scream. How I managed it, I’ll never know. As my watering eyes stared into Wendell’s, I had the distinct impression that he was silently paying me back for some trivial offense or other.

“You seem deep in thought,” I heard him say over the roaring in my ears.

“Just enjoying a moment of calm reflection,” I whispered tautly.

Dimly, I watched him drench some cotton with the same liquid, then press it firmly against my shoulder. The room began to fade into shadow.

After a while, I noticed Fabian and Astrid, now across the room and talking privately. My friend had evidently turned on that wry, psychotic charm that some women seem to find irresistible.

“That’s unfortunate,” observed Octavia, tapping my forearm lightly in a supportive sort of way. I hadn’t noticed her arrival.

For a moment I thought I had something witty to say, but whatever it was flew away, like the butterflies in my stomach. I shrugged, a little painfully.

Wendell, still taping up my arm, told me not to move.

I looked at Octavia. What was I supposed to say? All at once I had an inspiration.

“Looks like there’ll be snow on Christmas day.”

She looked at me as if I was an idiot, then went off to make herself some tea.

“Thank you for looking after my shoulder,” I said to Wendell.

He thanked me for thanking him. “It’s nice to be appreciated. And a little unfamiliar, I’ll admit. Between you and me, there’s not much to do in my job most days. And, unfortunately, I make it look far too easy. People don’t really appreciate me as much as they might. But, rules are rules, I suppose.”

I looked at him askance.

“Which rules?”

“The unspoken ones,” he said breezily.

“No-one ever told me about those,” I remarked irritably. “It’s like nobody ever tells me anything around here.”

“Well, you barely have time to listen to unspoken rules. You’re far too busy going around the library and, you know, doing things.” He paused and looked at me carefully. “Yes, you are always doing things. That has always been your

greatest mistake.”

“So, you admit you don’t do anything around here,” I said, feeling empty. I looked around to see if anybody had heard him, but the staffroom was buzzing with conversation and no one was paying attention.

“A middle manager should never do things, Shea. Otherwise, what would be the point in having us?”

“So your job is – to do nothing?”

“Not at all. My job is to seem like I am doing everything, which is exhausting, by the way. You try spending your day ducking actual work. Believe me, doing things is far less demanding than the rigors of doing nothing at all.”

“So, your role is ornamental?”

“Ornamental?” he exclaimed indignantly. “I have the most important job on my floor!”

“But you just said—”

“Listen here, have you ever heard of anything ever going wrong around the library?”

“Yes. All the time.”

“Well,” he said. “There you are.”

I regarded him levelly. “You see, I feel like you’re leaving yourself so wide open right now that if I said *anything* it would be too easy –”

“You’re being obtuse!” he diagnosed with annoyance. “Remember – what happens when something goes wrong at Harvard?”

“Someone gets instantly blamed. And, by the way, lately that person has been me.”

“Exactly. So whenever something goes wrong in our library, my job is to make sure –”

“That the Circulation Desk doesn’t get blamed, I understand. But you’re

saying that's all you do?"

Wendell gaped.

"All you do?" he parroted. "This is Harvard University! The biggest ma-and-pa operation in the history of the world! You know how many things get bungled here every day! And, with all this bickering and passing the buck around, preventing my department from being blamed for every small thing is, in practice, a full-time responsibility!"

I remembered, then, the accusing looks I'd received when the skull of Phineas Gage disappeared from its cabinet and felt a sinking in my stomach. You know that feeling you sometimes get, whenever a hapless nitwit dressed in a sweater vest makes a good point? The experience was unnerving.

It was not unlike finding yourself on a bogged forklift in the middle of a swamp, and suddenly remembering the words of your high-school Principal – and a ridiculous person, altogether – casually observing that you should never be trusted around an unattended forklift.

In short, I hate it when people like that are right about something.

Meanwhile, Wendell had lapsed into one of his monologues. In the interest of keeping the narrative lively, I have trimmed down his speeches, somewhat. Much of it sounded like 'blah blah blah,' anyway.

"So if I don't keep my wits about me," he concluded, a little while later, "the entire Circulation Desk could be sold to a corporation overnight!"

He had made a good point there, I knew, but it was probably only accidental. He's bound to say something true, sooner or later. It's a matter of statistics; an infinite number of monkeys tapping on typewriters and that sort of thing.

"My job is about ducking, covering and nothing else," he chattered. "And it is a job I must undertake as if it's effortless because, obviously, the Circulation Desk must never be thought of as capable of making a mistake! So, for that reason alone, I have to do this job as if I'm busy, but not too busy, or else..."

“Or else?”

“Or else they’ll think I don’t do anything at all, and take away my job!” he declared with agitation.

“And who would that inconvenience, again?”

“Who would that?” he spluttered. “Without me here keeping everything balanced and in check, our entire Circulation Desk would disappear under a weight of bureaucratic mismanagement in under two weeks.

“Because, as ridiculous as it is to remove a Circulation Desk from a library,” he said, his voice sinking to a tense whisper, “it is completely feasible in the current political climate. And it would also knock the entire library on its side. The Countway would never recover! We’re the world’s most important medical library, and we are this close to toppling over. If our library topples, Shea, many others might too! And a world without libraries is a very dark place.”

“Well, all right,” I said, looking out the window. Maybe Wendell had a point, I don’t know. The world does need libraries, now more than ever. Looking at him, glowering darkly about the end of civilization, I was reminded that librarians are very complicated creatures. They might seem like mild-mannered folk, but all librarians harbor a secret, which is that every single one is a simmering firebrand, waging a covert war against the darkness of human ignorance and stupidity.

Which makes them the most underestimated people on earth.

But I like this side of Wendell, though. The secret crusader, the sentinel on the watch tower of civilization. It was a pity he is so horribly ambitious. Set aside the fact that he cares so much about libraries, there is just something about the man that suggests that all he really wants from the world is to become your boss. And that sort of temperament can be taxing, especially if you have Pathological Problems With Authority.

But why shouldn’t I be this way?

I realize that to survive humans have always needed to cooperate with one another. The problem has always been a matter of how it scales.

As the population of any given human collaboration rises, gradually the sum of the group's collective common sense declines to zero, when it will inevitably assume the general absurdity of Harvard University.

In other words, you can stuff a few buildings with the brightest minds on the planet, and inevitably some idiot will put Biff Clutterbuck in charge.

What I found perplexing, however, was Wendell himself. How does a bright, amiable person decide to make Soviet-era levels of bureaucratic incompetence their vocation? I can't understand it! What makes Wendell incessantly attend every single meeting on campus that he hears about? Why was he so fascinated with procedure, policy, and planning?

Here is a man who has wiled away many an evening memorizing the rule books for board games. Here is a man, furthermore, who wears neckties. Here is an advocate of the status quo, a passionate defender of common sense, a true believer that the system works.

I don't know. Perhaps our world really does require an upbeat nitwit to put on a fluorescent vest and organize fire drills. But why would anybody *want* to do that?

Speaking as someone whose nana was a witchdoctor who sometimes got drunk and brought home poltergeists, Wendell is the greatest mystery I have ever looked upon. Say what you like about ghosts, but they invariably have a good reason to exist, which is not something I could say about him.

“Where are you going?” I asked him. I knew the answer, but some mischief in me urged me on.

“Nowhere,” he said, raising his eyebrows innocently. “Just taking the first aid kit back downstairs.”

“Stay here for a little while. Let's talk.”

He blinked and gesticulated at the door and the first aid kit in his hand.

“Don’t be silly,” I persisted. “Let us sit and talk, as seasoned adventurers and men of the world.”

It was like he was being pulled toward the door against his own volition.

“Wendell, you are one of my best friends,” I said unsteadily. “You don’t have to go anywhere. Stay here.”

It was no use, of course. Bemused and unsettled, he drifted away, muttering blandly about returning reasonably soon.

Well, I thought miserably, nobody can say I hadn’t tried.

## dark and festering treachery

I waited three or four minutes, lurking around near the staffroom door. I slipped out when nobody was looking. In the stairwell, I descended to the fifth floor and sat down on a step to snatch a moment of solitude.

I was nervous and unsure of myself. Anyone who has been raised by a witch doctor becomes accustomed to people treating them with a small degree of condescension. Being a genuine article of provincialism does have its usefulness, however. It's helpful to be underestimated, sometimes, especially when you are up to no good.

I was about to take the most dangerous step in my life. It was time to show my hand.

All day I had concealed myself behind a seemingly endless pattern of digressions and switch-backs, but my story was coming to an end. And I still had no idea what would become of me. Harvard spills-over with an abundance of confidence; it made me feel uneasy. Many who come here fall under its bewitching spell of complacency. They snuggle up with the hype, luxuriate in the brand, succumb to the subtle, numbing narcotic of pride.

Today I needed my adversaries to be clinging to that pride for dear life. I needed them to feel smart. More to the point, I needed them to keep their eyes squarely on what was going on in front of their eyes, in the mad, desperate hope that none of them would notice what I was really up to.

Well, I thought. Here goes everything.

I left the stairwell, took a left and a right, and passed through a red door labeled with a single word: *Administration*. Taking the corridor to my left, I

passed by the mail room and, a moment later, was among about a dozen people milling awkwardly outside the new director's office.

Everyone seemed a little solemn and annoyed. After all, who the hell would call an urgent meeting at 6pm on the final work-day of the year? And then, apparently, keep everybody waiting?

Still, there was no getting around this meeting, it was far too urgent to postpone until after the holidays. After all, the email request had mentioned a serious security breach, a theft, and 'a security matter involving Central IT.'

Two of the commissars were here with three middle managers. Oh, look – the two stooges from HISG were here! I waved, but they pretended not to see me.

Over there was the Assistant Dean, whom I recognized from one of the decadent parties in the Gordon Hall atrium that Kurt and I had crashed. She was a pleasant, blond woman in her early forties, dressed very formally and looking deliberately patient.

"Why are we all waiting out here? Is Devon not here?" someone asked.

"He's taking an important call," announced Rufus, who noticed me now and winked.

Everyone, particularly the Assistant Dean, looked a mixture of amused and annoyed.

"There you are," I said, walking towards Wendell, who was understandably uncomfortable. "I have a feeling you weren't expecting to see me."

"But your secret meeting is not so secret, Wendell. I know you're going to try to hang me out to dry to the university administration. It wasn't hard to piece together. Besides, and I'm saying this as your IT guy, 'Library01' is an insecure password. You need to change it."

"You've been reading my email?" he gasped, affronted.

"Well, obviously. You were spying on me. Your whole ridiculous Recovery

Committee has been trying to keep me occupied all day, while your people ransacked my offices and probably my house, for all I know. It's a priceless artifact, after all. But, I suppose you're just doing your best."

"But you were reading my email!"

"Why did you think I wouldn't be reading your email?"

I turned on my heel and walked away over to the window. Someone touched my arm.

"Hector," I said, smiling grimly.

"What are you doing here, Shea? You should be half-way to the Canadian border right now."

"Well, I thought I'd stick around and see how it all pans out."

"Unwise. Very unwise," he whispered seriously, leaning in close. "Look around. This is the meeting where they decide what to do with you. Go home, get your dog, and flee."

"Thanks but no thanks. I'll take my chances with a judge."

"Judge? You won't see a judge. You have a green card. Are you listening? As one green card holder to another, let me remind you that we are not American citizens. I'm a Mexican – you think I don't know how this works? We have no legal rights here, *mang*. The gringos can detain you without a charge – indefinitely – without telling a soul, not even your government. You've heard of the Patriot Act, right?"

I felt the blood drain from my face.

"There is no due process for green card holders," he went on. "There will not be a trial. Understand this – Harvard lawyers are networked all the way to the White House. The alumni are practically running the entire military-industrial complex."

"I see," I said, looking at the door. "Perhaps I have been intemperate."

“Harvard’s business model derives from their reputation. Are you getting it now? You stole something from their museum. I’m speaking to you as your friend. If you don’t want to disappear into a hole forever, I will urge you to hand over the skull right now and then run for your life.”

My face felt strangely numb.

I’d managed to bluster through the day, but somehow I’d forgotten the broader picture. I had a plan, I reminded myself. It required some improvisation, of course, but it was, technically speaking, a plan, wasn’t it?

And yet... the double doors were right over there. I could be through them, and down five flights of stairs, in no time at all. I could probably be out of the building in under forty seconds. This whole mess would be behind me.

And then Devon opened the door to his office.

## in over my head

“Sorry everyone,” he said with a grin. “I was taking a call from Fox News. They’re interviewing me for a piece they’re doing on ‘mavericks in science.’ Come in! Are there enough chairs? Let me see...”

Devon’s office was spacious but sparsely furnished. There were some armchairs and a small meeting table with four or five office chairs. More interestingly, hanging on the southern wall was an immense portrait of a black-feathered bird perched on a rock; sea foam splashed about its outstretched wings, mouth open in an eternal, silent cry.

Beneath the painting crouched a single incongruous glass cabinet filled with trophies and ribboned medallions. Behind these were arranged an abundance of pictures of our library director riding motorcycles, or else lifting champagne bottles to the camera in post-race victory toasts. There were no other photographs to be found, no spouse or children, nor any decorations in the office at all. There was an odd, untenanted feeling to the room as if even the Countway’s ghosts felt that there were far better places to be.

Hector and Wendell pulled some of the chairs away from the little table and moved them over near the wall. Grabbing a chair, I followed them and sat between them.

“Isn’t this cozy?” I said, smiling at Wendell, who ignored me. Rufus settled on the other side of him, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the room; his scholarly attention was directed at the canvas hanging on the wall.

There was a great deal of commotion as the Central IT folk dragged some extra chairs in from the conference room next door. Soon, everyone was seated

in a rough sort of arc around Devon's desk. The Dean's Assistant, seated in one of the armchairs, crossed her stocking legs and leaned towards Devon with deliberate expectation.

There was no chatter for a long moment, just a strained silence broken by creaking of swivel chairs, and the occasional cough.

Devon, who had seated himself casually on his desk, was staring at his phone. Fit and evenly tanned, his hair looked it had been carefully mussed by a highly-paid specialist.

I'd grown up in Queensland, I knew what sunbleached hair looked like. I don't know how much Devon had paid to have his hair dyed to resemble that effect but, regardless of the price, the man should have demanded a refund.

"First off," began Devon, "I'd like to thank everyone for coming, especially our Assistant to the Dean, as well as our guests from Central IT. I understand that one of your staff is permanently stationed in this library, correct?"

I held up my hand. "Hello."

"Hello back, sir!" said Devon, beaming at me. "We've heard excellent things about you, for the most part. Now, I know we haven't met but –"

"Yes, we have," I contradicted, squinting at him. "On a couple of occasions."

Devon raised an eyebrow ironically. "I really don't think so, but let's move on."

"Not so fast," said I. "I'm the IT guy for the entire building. We've met, you keep calling me Phil, for some reason."

There were some amused stirrings from the direction from Central IT.

I can tell you that Phil was the name of the IT guy who covered his lab over at MIT; let nobody say I hadn't done my homework. Devon frowned.

"I don't think so," he said, simply. "Of course, I've heard of you. We have all heard of the Australian working in our midst. And until today we have only

heard excellent things about you.”

Then he stood, sauntered over towards the window and looked outside, speaking as if he had become suddenly despondent.

“As a few of you know, a few days ago there was a theft from the library’s museum. The Phineas Gage skull was taken. Naturally, we’ve been moving heaven and earth to recover the item. From the very start you see, we suspected this was an inside job. Or, *almost* an inside job...

“This is why I’ve gathered everybody together. It pains me to reveal that we have gathered a lot of information that seems to implicate the involvement of this gentleman here.”

Devon nodded at me.

I blinked, of course.

“Naturally, once I had all the facts I called this meeting immediately. It’s a sensitive issue, a grave concern touching on campus security with corresponding implications for our inter-departmental relationship with Central IT. Now —”

“Where are you going with this?” I interrupted.

Devon laughed theatrically. A room of faces turned toward me.

“So, do you know anything about the missing skull?” asked the Assistant Dean.

I looked into her eyes and nodded slowly.

“Of course I do. I’m the one who took it.”

The room was very still.

Devon folded his arms and leaned back, evidently satisfied. He seemed, however, to be the only individual in the room who felt pleased. The representatives from Central IT were frowning at me. Only Hector was looking away, arms crossed and sulky.

Two narrow lines appeared between the Assistant Dean’s eyes as she studied

me. It struck me that she was a very handsome woman. I wondered whether she found me attractive, and if she was in a relationship, in which case, how committed was she to that relationship and what were the chances that she might abandon that other guy for me. After all, he was probably a jerk – it's almost always the way – and I like to think I have that whole rugged ‘real man’ Australian vibe going for me. A lot of women have said that I can be quite charming when I’m not talking. Of course, there were enormous cultural barriers for us to overcome, but if we could both work past them, and put our expectations and differences aside...

Hector’s hand on my shoulder shook me from my reverie.

“I think everybody here wants to know – where is the skull? And why did you take it?”

I looked at him incredulously.

“I can tell you why I took it.” I pointed at Devon. “I took it because he told me to.”

Part of me felt terrible. I know, I was acting like a barbarian; it is never proper etiquette to point a finger at another person – in fact, it’s downright rude, and my nana would have been really cross at me if she’d seen me do it. But sometimes in life, when you’re squaring off against someone and your liberty – and maybe even your life – is on the line, I would argue that small breaches of etiquette ought to be permitted, if only for the sake of emphasis.

The room was utterly silent again, and all faces swiveled back to the director of the library.

“No,” Devon’s words hissed through the air like a rapier. “I did not.”

“Yes, you did,” said I.

“No,” he parried deftly, “I did not!”

“Yes, you did,” I deflected, advancing a step. “You totally did!”

Devon was about to strike once more, but the Assistant Dean held up a card. “If I might interrupt this battle of wits, I’d like to hear more from your IT guy.”

She turned her chair around to face me better. “Now, you claim that you took the skull of Phineas Gage on Devon’s orders.”

I nodded.

“So where is the skull now?”

“I don’t know. I left it there on his desk.”

“And when was this?”

“Night before last.”

“Monday.”

“Yeah,” I said with a shrug.

Devon was glaring at me. “You lie.”

The Assistant Dean shot him a warning look.

“I know how it sounds,” I said, looking around at everyone. “I feel like I fell into a trap here. I mean, if I really did want to steal that skull, I would not have told anybody about it.”

“What do you mean?” the Assistant Dean asked, shrewdly, and I was struck with the thought that she knew more about this case than she was pretending.

Wendell decided it was his turn to say speak.

“Shea has been talking about stealing the skull all day. All over the library. He’s made no secret of it.”

I climbed to my feet and looked about, muddled and feeling a bit sheepish.

“Alright, so look here,” I began, not knowing where to start. “It was sort of funny at first, but things got way out of hand. Why don’t I start at the beginning?”

The Assistant Dean nodded. “Please do.”

I began to describe how months ago I had noticed just how lax the security of the museum was, especially after hours. My comments on the topic with members of staff fell on deaf ears.

“That’s sort of true,” said Wendell. “He used to say –”

“Don’t interrupt him.”

“Sorry.”

Devon, leaning against his desk, arms folded across his chest, was looking powerfully annoyed. Wendell was also watching attentively. All day he’d heard me chatting glibly about a heist, teasing and hinting that I knew more than I was letting on. He’d heard me back-track evasively and loop around certain topics, but I had taken great pains, of course, to avoid telling him what had really happened.

“I’m the library’s IT guy, right? We’re generally pretty security-conscious people. The problem is that most people really *aren’t*. Ever since I arrived here, I’ve been telling my clients that it’s only a matter of time before something goes missing. And what could be more attractive to a thief than the famous skull of Phineas Gage? Unfortunately, at one time I made a stupid joke about it. I was frustrated. I said something like: if nobody fixes the security in the museum, then I’m going to take that skull, just to show how easy it would be.

“You know, I really wish I hadn’t said that. Because, now I think about it, it’s gotten me into a bit of trouble.”

I had only been trying to be pro-active, I added ruefully. I was new in my job, and I had taken on a massive amount of responsibility. I wanted to impress people. And maybe I was showing off a bit, too.

“My job is about fixing things, you see? It’s about putting out fires. It can get frustrating from time to time. You see problems coming down the road, and you think: if people would only listen. If only they would let me write the fire safety code...”

On Monday afternoon I was crossing the fifth-floor landing when I noticed a few people lurking around the museum cabinets. It was merely an instinct of mine, some sort of intuition. Or maybe it was the way they looked at me as I passed by. They were too attentive, too innocent.

“It was late in the day, and I was just about to go home, so I came through the doors out there, looking to tell someone here in the Administration to keep an eye on the museum cabinets. It was about five-thirty, though, and nobody was here other than the library director.”

Then I told the Dean’s assistant everything, the part of the story that I had withheld from the librarians, no matter how much they had pestered me.

I explained how I had relayed my concerns to Devon, right here in this office. He had been on a conference call; he covered the handset, reached into his drawer, removed a small key, and handed it to me. ‘Go get the skull,’ he said. He’d lock it in his drawer until the morning. Tomorrow, he would have a word with the curator about beefing up security.

Now I glanced at Wendell, who was looking at me with horror, mingled with exasperation. Devon, on the other hand, was staring at me balefully. I couldn’t blame him.

“I did that, and then forgot all about it. The next day, around lunchtime, I learned from a librarian that the skull had gone missing from its cabinet. That seemed odd to me, and then I remembered the previous evening. I went upstairs to check in with Devon and learned he was working from home. I figured he’d be back the next day to straighten everything out, so I went back downstairs. And then I began to notice something.

“Everybody was looking at me suspiciously. By the afternoon, I was so annoyed at everyone giving me funny looks that I thought to myself: you know what? They can figure it out by themselves.

“And then, today, when I turned up to work I discovered that I really was a

suspect in the skull's disappearance."

I nodded in the direction of the two HISG lawyers, who were staring daggers at me from across the room. "And this, I will admit, *really* annoyed me. Imagine being raked over the coals by those super sleuths. Look at them over there. Have you ever seen such a waste of space in your life? Those clowns treated me like a thief, so I clammed right up. Obviously, I knew that Devon was bound to show up, sooner or later, and set the record straight. All I had to do was wait it out.

"I never expected he'd forget about it though," I said, finally sitting back down in my chair.

Devon shifted and looked uncomfortable. Everybody turned to look at him.

"Devon?" prompted the Assistant Dean.

Looking at him, I could sense his suppressed rage. His eyes spoke volumes. Didn't I know who he was? How dare I come in here and embarrass him like this in front of the Assistant Dean of Harvard Medical School. This stunt had gone on long enough. He would crush me, of course, because that's what people like him do: crush little people like me. His eyes were glittering as he opened his mouth to finally speak.

"Wait a moment," said Wendell, standing. "This is all beginning to make a lot of sense.

"First of all, my name is Wendell, everybody. I'm the Manager of Library Services here in the Countway, and co-chair of the Recovery Committee. I've been liaising with Devon about this matter."

*Why are you talking, Wendell?*

I wanted nothing more than to stand up and tell him to be quiet. Shush, I tried to telepathically message him. Let the director speak! Let the fool dig himself into a deeper hole.

"And let me say that I can vouch for our IT guy's concerns about the administrative wing being empty after five-thirty. Staff hours being what they

are, the museum is fairly exposed after hours. This has been a concern of mine, and the museum's curator, for some time now."

Nonsense, I thought.

"It is, of course, both understandable and reasonable for Devon to lock the skull in his office at night."

*Are you actually throwing Devon a lifeline?*

The Assistant Dean shook her head. "Yes, yes. On Tuesday morning you noticed an empty display case and naturally assumed it was stolen. What I'm wondering is, why did you not think to contact the director?"

"Unfortunately, as I understand it, he was very ill on Tuesday so –"

"And yet..." she replied sharply.

Wendell looked lost for a moment. And then Rufus finally spoke.

"In Wendell's defense, Devon is very busy," he said, with a trace of irony. "Besides, we don't usually like to bother him with day to day library affairs."

*Wow, Rufus.* If I was not mistaken, it was Rufus's turn to throw Wendell a lifeline. I looked between them and suppressed a smile. I was unprepared for this meeting, I suddenly realized. I should have brought along some popcorn.

"It's a regrettable fact," said Wendell, rallying, "that the library's leadership is stretched thin on all fronts. It is no cakewalk, being the director of the Countway Library of Medicine."

The Assistant Dean shook her head a little with disbelief. "And by the way, where were the security guards on Monday evening?" she muttered. "Oh, that's right. Not patrolling due to 'nebulous feelings of preternatural dread...'"

"Mistakes were made," said Wendell. "The important thing is to look forward and establish better policies and lines of communication, to, uh, prevent things from falling through the cracks."

"Things like skulls?"

Rufus laughed out loud. “‘Misplaced’ seems to be the *bon mot*. We are used to things like this in libraries. Books get put on the wrong shelves. Ours is a delicate art, managing order amid chaos. A misplaced item is especially the norm in such a short-staffed institution as ours. Of course, we do our very best considering the meager resources we have at our disposal,” he said, nodding in Devon’s direction.

The director turned sharply at the last remark, but once again, Wendell spoke up before he could say a word.

“The situation here, essentially, is that our director has been a victim of the same circumstance that afflicts everyone in the library. As Rufus has reminded us, our library is short staffed. Our attention is stretched.

“We are all embracing diverse roles as a stop-gap measure. This was supposed to be a temporary solution, but time is rolling on, as they say. We all remain as deeply committed to our mission as ever, but faced with such insurmountable challenges, and being as short-handed as we are, people will eventually make small mistakes.

“And although I have no doubt that Devon is undoubtedly the busiest person in the library,” he added, shamelessly, “the rest of us are also working hard to keep the ship running smoothly. We might all be busy, but we should never forget how much is on the director’s plate.”

The director, listening to Wendell’s words, bowed his head with noble solemnity.

“Devon,” said Wendell unctuously, “this library owes you its gratitude. You persist tirelessly in a thankless role, balancing your duties here with your obligations elsewhere, to the research community, to your patients, and to your various labs here and off-campus. This skull was – and is – a tiny issue, which landed on your plate in the later hours of one hectic day among many.

“Now, our IT guy here has presented this scenario as a major moment,

because it was for him, a tremendously uncomfortable situation to find himself accused of doing something he had not done. But for you, Devon, this episode was a brief interruption, a minute of distraction, while doing several momentous things at once."

The director looked around as if reluctantly acknowledging the melancholy truth of Wendell's words. It was easy to picture him in the midst of juggling his many responsibilities, being interrupted by an alarmist, perhaps even paranoid, IT guy who was chattering incessantly about 'shifty people lurking around the museum.' The director puts the skull into a drawer and then has his attention dragged back to weightier, more insistent concerns. An endless stream of obligations and demands.

"And I can't help but think," continued Wendell sententiously, "that our IT guy is not entirely blameless in this affair. He might have spoken up sooner and told us where the skull was. But, no, he was irked about being a suspect, even though it seemed reasonable to everybody else. So, rather than sorting it out quickly, he decided to pull everyone's leg and waste our time.

"Why, he spent most of the day telling half the library a long shaggy dog story."

"I barely mentioned my dog!"

The Assistant Dean shot me a look. "It does make one wonder how an individual, possessed of such knowledge, did not come forward sooner."

There were a few nods of agreement among the commissars, and the atmosphere seemed to be quite frosty.

I stood up to speak, and Wendell, feeling a little awkward standing so close to me in a room of seated people, sat down, though looking as if he still had much more to say. The Assistant Dean regarded me disdainfully, and I couldn't help noticing how unattractive and repellent she was.

"So let me summarize Wendell here. He's saying it's not the director's fault

that he absentmindedly forgot where he put the skull, because he has too many other part-time jobs. And really all this is my fault, because – not only did I not steal the skull – but I was a terribly behaved suspect!

“You’re right, Wendell. It was very uncooperative of me to refuse to let Devon here throw me – and the entire Central IT department – under a bus!”

From across the room, I heard an audible snort. Even Hector was biting his lip.

“Now look here,” began Wendell, flushed.

“Or why don’t we just mention the elephant in the room. That’s right. I’m Australian. There, I said it!”

“Here we go,” murmured Hector and Wendell at the same time on either side of me.

“And you folks can’t see an Australian without thinking ‘criminal,’ can you? I can’t believe you let me into a room with such expensive stapler in it … let go of me, Hector… Wendell, put that stapler down, it’s mine!”

Everyone was talking at once. While I was arguing with Hector and Wendell, Devon had taken it upon himself to start looking through the drawers of his desk.

“Is that it?” I heard the Assistant Dean say.

Devon nodded and handed it to her. The cracked skull of Phineas Gage was grinning in her hands. The two lawyers from HISG, as well as all the folks from Central IT, gathered around to make a closer inspection. Hector let go of my arm and was looking between me and the skull with wary astonishment on his face. I could tell he could barely believe I hadn’t taken it.

There was a light knock on the door. Rufus went to open it.

“Hullo,” said an elderly gentleman, looking very prim and serious. “My name is George Ripley. I have come to punch the library director in the snout. It will be my last official act as curator of the Harvard Medical School Museum.”

The Dean's Assistant stared at him, agog. "What is happening now?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry, you wouldn't know this," explained Rufus, putting his arm around the old bloke and leading him gently into the room, "but old George here is being laid off. He only found out today and is understandably upset."

"Oh dear," said the Assistant Dean, looking at Devon suddenly. "That doesn't sound right."

"Excuse me," I cried. "Everybody! Can I have your attention, please?" I took a deep breath. "I would like to make an announcement. Today is my last day. I am leaving Harvard. And not because of this nonsense with the skull. This has been my plan for a while. You see, I've known for months that the library was getting a new director. And that he planned to close the museum and sack George Ripley. I had hoped it was not true, but the confirmation came today.

"I don't want to work at a place that would sack a nice old bloke like George right before Christmas. So, Hector, I'm giving you my two weeks notice."

Hector looked dazed.

"This is a noble gesture you are offering," began the Assistant Dean, "however..."

"It is not my noble gesture," I improvised. "Wendell's giving his two weeks notice as well, aren't you, Wendell?"

If nobody but I saw that Wendell had a 'deer caught in the headlights' look about him, it was probably because they thought he was looking noble or something.

"Of course," he whispered, like a lost child in the dark.

"Is this true, boys?" asked George. "I had no idea..."

"I'm also resigning in protest," said Rufus, squeezing George's shoulder. "I only just heard about it this afternoon, and I was very upset. This whole business

is a disgrace.”

The old man was visibly moved. “Gentlemen, I am overcome.”

The Assistant Dean, however, had had enough.

“Everybody, I think there’s been a mistake. It is Christmas. Nobody is getting laid off, or believe me I would know about it. This is all just gossip-mongering and rumors, isn’t it?” she asked the director.

He nodded seriously. “We’ve been talking about restructuring, but there have been no plans to lay off any staff... The museum is an important part of our rich heritage. There is no truth to these rumors at all.”

George’s eyes flashed, and he seemed to be about to angrily contradict him.

Rufus, however, swung him around. “Come along George, let’s put Phineas back in his cabinet.”

“What a madhouse,” said the Assistant Dean under her breath, watching them leave with the skull. “Is there anything else? Would somebody like to propose matrimony to anybody? No? Good. I am so relieved.”

Without another word, she spun about and disappeared through the door, followed by the two harried-looking lawyers from HISG.

I looked about the room. The two commissars were giving me a funny look. One of them nodded at me, and then they too marched out with curious smiles on their faces. Hector and I followed.

Glancing over my shoulder, I could see Wendell, with a warm smile on his face, standing beside the director of the Countway discussing something.

And people wonder why I have Pathological Problems With Authority.

## all my christmases

I was on my way down the stairs when I remembered my promise to Piper to stop by before leaving. The fourth floor was deserted, of course, except for my friend, who was lost in her textbook as usual. I sat on the adjacent desk and cleared my throat.

“I don’t want to do this anymore, Piper.”

“Then don’t,” she retorted, without so much as a glance in my direction.

“Do you have any idea what I’ve gone through today? I don’t think I’ve ever felt so alone in my life. And that says a lot, coming from me.”

She turned a page distractedly. I decided to press on, on the chance she was listening.

“I don’t have a family, Piper. I always spend the holidays alone. I have a little tradition. I watch my favorite Christmas movies, *Die Hard* and *Die Hard 2*. I eat a packet of biscuits. And hmmmm ... what else? That’s it, really. I never said it was a rich tradition. But still, this year, I’ll be with my dog, so that’s going to be nice.”

Piper nodded vaguely into her book.

“Nana didn’t really celebrate Christmas, see, but she did like to get drunk on methylated spirits and space-out. I tell everyone she was a witch doctor. That’s what she called herself. I hope she was a witch doctor, but I only really had her word for that. When you’re a little kid you don’t know up from down, do you? You just listen to what the big people say and go along with it.

“Still, I knew that Christmas was a big deal for everybody else, so I used to go down to the shops, all by myself, and pick up a packaged fruitcake. They were

about two-dollars eighty-five or something. I'd bring it home, cut off a slice and heat it up in the microwave. I'd have it with custard that I'd make from an old carton of Bird's custard powder. It's like egg custard, it goes pretty well with fruitcake.

"Sometimes, if I could get away with it, I'd shoplift a pack of Iced VoVo biscuits as a Christmas present for myself. They're a sort of cookie, you see, and if nana was feeling lucid I'd share them with her... It was this thing we would do together."

I looked at Piper, staring intently into the pages under her nose.

"Nana's no longer with us, unfortunately. And everything is different now. You know what I don't like about Christmas? It's that they keep saying Christmas is a time to be with your family. They keep shoving it in your face, regardless of your situation. I mean, what if you don't have a family? What then? What if all you've got is a few friends and a couple of people at work?

"They make you feel like you've failed at something. Every year it's the same. I have to hear all these people telling me about what a great time they had, and what presents they got, and where they went, and which relative was getting on their nerves. They take it all for granted.

"And they bloody-well *should* take it all for granted. They deserve to, I'm not saying otherwise. I'm happy for them, I really am. It's just that I'd like to take something for granted too, you know? When I was little, I always thought that one day, all my Christmases would be wonderful as well. But you know what I've learned, Piper? I've learned that wonderful Christmases don't fall from the sky.

"You have to be brave! You have to go out into the world, and make friends, and bring people together around you. I'm having a bunch of friends over at my house tomorrow, actually, Piper, and I'd love it if you could stop by ..."

"But I have to do this," she said, thumping her textbook, nervously.

“I know that. I know. I’m just saying...”

“But it’s not making any sense. Ugh!”

We fell into a long silence.

“If I had a real family, I’d be with them at Christmas,” I confided. “If I had a mother she could cook me my favorite meal and ask me questions. She’d want to know all sorts of things about me. If I was hungry, if my clothes were washed, or if there was a girl I liked.”

“I’m going to be stuck here until I can figure this out,” Piper mumbled.

“So maybe there are people out there who care about you. Maybe they’re waiting for you, you know?”

“This just isn’t making any sense,” she murmured.

“You ever think about being with them?”

“I’m under so much pressure.”

“I know you are, Piper. Makes me feel sad.”

“Ugh,” she exclaimed, shaking that eternal textbook with frustration. “I’m going to have to re-read this whole chapter ...”

They had found Piper slumped over one of the desks on the fourth-floor back in the early ’90s. She had overdosed on some sleep medicine. I had read all the kind things her friends had said about her in the Harvard Crimson and learned how shocked they had all felt that terrible day. The staff had held a candlelight vigil for her down in the foyer.

“Try to remember the people you love,” I reminded her. “You don’t have to prove anything to them. They don’t care about this Harvard stuff. People already love you for who you are. Do you hear me?”

Piper nodded. “Alright,” she whispered, staring at her book.

I waited with her a long while, then crept away. Upstairs, the museum was empty. I walked among the cabinets, inspecting them without much interest until

I reached Phineas.

“And that goes for you too!” I told him.

People don’t believe in magic anymore, but I don’t really mind. Their lack of belief can be useful some days. As my nana used to say ‘nobody will try to stop you doing something if they think that thing is impossible.’

I had told my colleagues that my people were storytellers, but they hadn’t heard the caution. They’d forgotten that storytellers were magicians, not craftsmen of idle entertainment.

I had undertaken a spell of great mischief, and they would never know. They were above such nonsense, and far too sophisticated to be taken in by a tale told by a wandering storyteller.

Old George would have known, had his powers not faded in his dotage. In his youth, George would have seen my tricks as plainly as cloven hoof prints in fresh snow. But now he lingered here in befuddlement, trapped between two worlds and haunted by recollections he could no longer fully understand. He’d have warned me not to interfere with the order of things in the library, and I’d have ignored him; that’s just the way we are, I suppose. Sometimes our knowledge makes decisions for us.

Nana always said that knowledge is a lens, like a shard of clouded glass through which we peer at the world. In that way, it is a subtle and inexplicable sensory awareness, much like sight or smell or touch.

Some things, once known and understood, can compel us to involuntary movement. Our knowledge of heat pushes our hand away from a fire. A memory of music might compel fingers to tap in rhythm.

Magical knowledge feels involuntary too, like instinct; but in the way of so many things that feel involuntary, it conceals itself from the human mind. It’s the knowledge itself that decides. In a way, I am blameless in all this mischief.

Down on the second floor, the IT wing was deserted. I shrugged on my pea

coat and filled my pockets with various things, and powered down all the computers. Then I looked about one final time, turned out the light and locked the door.

Wendell was leaning against the railing on the landing, waiting for me. He seemed tense and self-conscious, and also a little fatigued, perhaps. It had been a long day for us both.

“Hello, traitor,” I said, joining him at the railing. We both looked down at the broad sweeping stair that dropped down into the foyer.

“Don’t be like that. You know I had no choice.”

“You’re a fool, Wendell. I had your stupid library director on the ropes, but you couldn’t resist coming to his rescue, could you? You just *had* to score some political points. I have a very low estimate of your character, and even I can’t believe you threw me under the bus just to ingratiate yourself with that pathological liar upstairs.”

I was annoyed at him. If he had only kept his mouth shut in the meeting, we might have seen Devon evicted from his office by Gordon Hall. I had felt as if I had swum out into treacherous waters to save Wendell and his friends, only to receive a smack in the mouth for my troubles. The injustice rankled me.

“You’re right, of course,” he mused. “But you were putting the director in a tight spot. Something had to be done.”

I studied his face. He seemed calm for a man who was entirely out of his mind.

“Devon came too close to being ousted,” he continued, “and we don’t need a new director, Shea. This one is bad enough. Who knows what sort of nitwit Gordon Hall will send our way next time? No thank you. I like this one fine.”

I shuddered. “Tell me why...”

“It’s his hair,” Wendell explained. “That’s a lot of hair product, did you notice? It’s all so carefully tousled, it almost breaks my heart. How long does he

spend in front of a mirror, do you think? And how many times a day?"

I studied him closely. "You like his hair, do you? Very interesting..."

What was I going to do? Wendell had clearly lost his mind. Should I call Octavia? Was there a number in the Harvard directory to call when middle managers become unglued? There had to be. On the strength of everything I had seen this year, the phone on the other end of that line was probably ringing off the hook.

"Fortunately," he continued, while I watched him warily, expecting him to froth about the mouth at any moment, "our director seems to have a vanity problem. It's practically oozing from the pores. I can work with that. Men like Devon are easy to control when you know how."

I might have had a disgusted look on my face, I don't know, but Wendell noticed something about my expression and paused.

"Of course he's an absolute swine, but I've got to work with him. And if not him, some other absolute swine. My job doesn't require me to be friendly with only the nice faculty members of Harvard Medical School. They're too hard to find, for one thing. Don't look at me like that. You're new here. And you only have to fix computers. I have to keep the library from toppling over, remember?"

"It's clever of you to pretend as if you were only acting for the good of the library, but we both know how ambitious you are. You were acting out of self-interest, which is what you do. It's all you ever do. You only ever think about the advancement of your career."

For a long time, Wendell stared across the foyer below. "You see, Shea," he admitted finally, "I see no distinction between the future good of this library and my career. They are one and the same."

"Ugh."

I could have talked to him about integrity, of course, but it would have felt like a lecture. I could have explained that most Australian blokes believe in

sticking up for their mates, and expect the same from each other, but I was too tired. It had been a long day, and suddenly I wanted nothing more than to go home and see Gertie.

“Shea?” said Wendell. “I think someone wants to have a word with you.”

It was Astrid. She was standing alone near the railing across from us, looking down into the foyer with a wistful expression.

“You know, I might go downstairs, and have a chat with Kurt,” he murmured to himself after a moment. When he was gone, I edged guiltily over to Astrid.

We stood together for a while in silence. I did my best to think up something witty and intelligent to say, but all I could do was feel sheepish.

“You lied to me,” she said eventually.

“I did not lie.”

“And what about the Second Thief?” she demanded.

“George was talking figuratively, about himself. He knew what was what.”

She turned and pressed her finger into my shoulder. “You told everyone here that you took it. You even made me believe that the skull had been stolen from your office. I’ve been worried sick about it all day.

“I’ve been worrying about you! And all this time … it was right there in the director’s office?”

“I *let* you think. I didn’t lie, I simply didn’t correct you.”

“That was a lie by omission, Shea.”

She had me there. “Astrid, everybody lies by omission, every minute of the day. We all have things we don’t need to share with the world. And we’re entitled to those secrets.”

“This was all just a prank to you, wasn’t it?”

I rounded on her. “You know very well that everyone unanimously decided that I was a thief and a liar. Do you know what that is like? Well, now – after

hearing my story – perhaps you can.”

“So this entire day was just your way of getting back at everybody, I suppose.”

I shook my head with frustration. “I wanted you all to realize that we only see what we want to see. So I told a story, Astrid. Nobody would have listened, otherwise.”

“What about the facts?”

“People can be strange around facts, haven’t you noticed that? Particularly when they don’t match their worldview. Besides, if I’d presented only the facts today, would anyone have learned anything?”

“Everyone would have gone back to their lives and forgotten about it by lunchtime. So I didn’t give them facts. I gave them the truth, instead.”

“And Astrid, are you honestly telling me you couldn’t sense the truth in everything I was saying? You know this place.” I gestured around us. “You believed me – and you were right to do – because I was telling the truth from top to bottom.”

Astrid didn’t say anything; she just walked away. I watched her descend the long curving staircase and out through the glass doors into the cold night air, without so much as a backward glance.

Kurt and Wendell waiting for me by the Circulation Desk, both looking at me with intense expressions.

“Shea,” said Kurt.

“Just a moment,” I said. “Listen, Wendell, one other thing: if you turn up to my place tomorrow wearing a necktie, I’m sending you home.”

“What if it has little reindeer on it?”

Before I could respond, I noted that Fabian, who was also standing nearby, seemed to be smirking at some secret joke or other. I glanced between Kurt and

Fabian.

Then I wondered if someone was standing behind me?

There was. A raven-haired beauty was gazing at me, eyes shimmering with fierce heat. All was lost, I knew, feeling the ship founder beneath my feet. Five thousand years ago, women less wondrous had driven gods mad with desire. All was lost.

My ship was tearing herself apart, and I could do nothing but stare wildly at the siren off the bow. I deserve better than this, I thought bitterly. Her skin, after all, was perfect, her eyelashes cruel, her lips practically unfair. Then I felt it, my will breaking like a mast, and that strong, independent me that I had so carefully nurtured all year was swept away into a cold, unflinching sea.

As if from far away I could hear Fabian speaking, his mischievous cadence rising above a howling wind. “So I thought to myself, why not bring Imogen along? Merry Christmas, by the way.”

## the last of the rum

That night as I lay dreaming, I could hear the mad cries of curlews calling me home to that sylvan glade. I walked through long, restless grasses under stars, listening to branches creak and stir.

I heard the droning nocturne of crickets and saw the spark of fireflies igniting among the rushes. I caught the far-off fragrances of jonquils and jasmine, swirling in the hot air.

Then came the sound of hoofs smacking the mud by water's edge. I turned, looking out across the water to a far shore, and from the darkness came to my mind a haunted recollection, like a fragment of lyrics that accompany a half-remembered song.

My head felt heavy, like a weight pushing down on my brow, and my heartbeat boomed in my chest. It was like I was aware of a sudden, powerful yearning to complete an unfinished task, though I could not recall its nature. It merely felt like an awakening of some ancient, long dormant necessity to wreak mischief.

It was the sound of the wind that woke me. A low, warning whistle rose and fell, and small handfuls of ice were flung against the window glass like a petulant child yearning for attention.

I was on my back, shivering in a cold blue light, on the floor of my room. Nearby, on my bed, Imogen was rolled up in my quilt like a crepe.

Gertie was resting on her haunches alongside me on the floor, sphinx-like and implacable.

“I know,” I whispered to her, pulling on my boots and shrugging my woolen

sweater over my shoulders. Together we crept quietly out to the landing at the top of the stair. A hooded figure was there, gazing up at a glowing, snow-encrusted skylight.

“Can’t sleep?” I asked.

“Jetlag,” Fabian murmured.

In the kitchen, I put the kettle on the stove and was about to turn on the gas when Fabian shook his head and produced a bottle of spirits from the inside pocket of his hoodie. “Just a few mouthfuls, what you say?”

It was a bottle of Bundaberg Rum. I fetched two clean coffee mugs from a cupboard and then, sitting warily across from one another at the table, we toasted an uneasy truce.

“You know something?” my friend said. “We need to stop playing Knife-Tag.”

I agreed and made a point of gazing pointedly upwards, where Imogen slept one floor above.

“We can stop playing when I win,” I told him. Then I topped up our mugs a little, and we drank deeply again.

“You know, about Imogen...” he said uncomfortably after a while.

“You don’t have to say anything.”

Silence prevailed again, and each of us stared purposefully into a different corner of the kitchen. I was annoyed with Fabian. He had acted lowly. But I also knew that to say a single word about the issue was just bad sportsmanship.

Besides, there were better ways to settle our differences. There was our annual game of Knife-Tag, for example.

“Admittedly,” he said, breaking the silence at last, “it was sort of funny seeing your face when –”

“One more word, I dare you, and next year I’m playing Knife-Tag with an

ax.”

“Let’s have another mouthful or two,” he suggested, refilling our mugs. “But not too many. We don’t want to lose our way.”

I nodded solemnly. “Prudence in all things.”

“And a measure of restraint!”

Our mugs chinked together, and we both drank. Fabian, flushed and cheerful now, asked me about my year. “What have you been up to?” he asked. “Anything interesting or noteworthy?”

“I fled Australia. I got myself a dog – finally! Then I landed a job at Harvard. Wait a moment, have you seen my coat?”

“Isn’t it hanging over the back of your chair?”

“Thank you. Just a moment.” I felt about inside the satin-lining where I’d expanded the inner pocket. “By the way, André has me hooked on clove cigarettes. I can’t get this out of the pocket, though. Wait, what was I saying again?”

“Have you seen my coat?”

I shook my head to clear it. The pack of clove cigarettes was caught on something.

“I fled Australia. I got myself a dog. At last! Then I landed a job at Harvard. Wait, what was the question again?”

“No idea,” said Fabian, pouring some rum into our mugs. “Probably wasn’t important. Anyway, what have you been up to? Anything interesting or noteworthy?”

“Oh, I remember now,” I said, freeing the contents of the inner pocket of my coat. “I was about to explain how I used an ancient technique of magic to steal the world’s most famous skull.”

And then, very carefully, I put it down on the table between us.

“What’s that?” he exclaimed with alarm.

“That, my friend, is the skull of Phineas Gage.”

He looked at it for a while. “It’s got a hole in the top.”

“I know it’s got – look, don’t touch it, Fabian.”

“It’s creepy, man.”

I shook my head. “It’s a man’s skull. Have some respect.”

“Right,” he nodded, giving it a lingering suspicious glance. “So tell me about Astrid.”

I poured the contents of my mug down my neck then slammed it down hard on the table.

“I probably made it all sound easy, but it really wasn’t. Stealing that skull took some high-level planning and misdirection on my part, let me tell you.”

“Does she have a boyfriend?” he asked, topping up our mugs. “If so, I feel like it’s something I’d like to know in advance.”

“I figured that the only way to proceed was to make it impossible for them to be able to accuse me of anything.”

He nodded and drank deeply. I inhaled the fumes of rum and sighed contentedly.

“I prefer to avoid awkward confrontations with aggrieved third-parties,” he said softly. “Never been one for needless drama.”

“But how could I do it?” I asked, rapping my mug on the table for emphasis. “How could I create an airtight alibi for myself and get away with the skull? Then it occurred to me – why not just let them be suspicious of me?”

“I myself,” he confessed, nodding sympathetically, “have always been a suspicious person.”

“Was it really fair for them to suspect me?” I asked rhetorically, hiccuping for some reason.

“It’s not fair!” he lamented.

“It never is! You know what? I don’t think there’s any justice in the universe.”

“Thank goodness,” he shivered, trying to chink our mugs together, and somehow missing.

“So, it’s up to us to make it better. Make your own justice, I say.”

“To making our own justice!” cried Fabian, “and to not getting caught in the act.”

“A-ha!” I cried. “That’s where magic comes in useful.”

“Explain that, then,” Fabian dared me, balancing the bottle on the palm of his hand. It was a terrific trick, considering how the room was tilting at a strange angle. We both had to tip our heads carefully to remain properly balanced on our chairs.

“It’s very technical,” I began.

It all hinged on an understanding of an elevated metaphysical dimension which overlapped the quotidian in such a geometrically discombobulating fashion that even attempting to discuss the subject in a kitchen like this one might lead to hallucinations, nosebleeds and the temporary loss of the ability to see the color yellow.

“I like the color yellow,” said Fabian simply. “Raincoats. Ducks and what not.”

“You don’t understand magic at all!” I accused, slapping the table.

“You’re right!” he retorted. “Rabbits hiding in hats! How do they talk them into being so cooperative? Your average rabbit has no interest in such things. If you want my opinion, persuading them to hide inside the hat is the real magic!”

Invocation is tricky work and often leads to strange events. I tried to argue that the universe was inherently unpredictable. Fabian, meanwhile, argued passionately that next time I should leave out rabbits altogether.

“You don’t understand what I’m saying,” I hissed. “Let me top up these mugs. Now this drink – this is number three, right?”

“Nobody is that persuasive!” he declared hotly, still talking about rabbits.

I shook my head with exasperation. Didn’t he even realize that the price of drawing a circle of protection – even around a kindly old man like George Ripley – is to beckon ill luck in the caster’s direction?

No task of this nature can be undertaken without sacrifice or endangering somebody. Some would think it merely bad luck that Fabian would choose that very afternoon to appear with a knife in his hand, but I knew better. Under the circumstances, I was astonished he hadn’t slipped and stabbed me in the heart.

“It’s all very well for you to worry about yourself, but think of the poor bunny,” Fabian glowered. “It didn’t ask for any of this!”

“I’ve done something unusual to space-time, Fabian. And now the facts are no longer what they once seemed.”

“Facts are immutable!” he countered, fumbling with the screw-top lid of the bottle.

He was wrong, of course. Facts can sometimes change – not often, but still far more often than anyone likes to admit. And when they do change, it’s almost always because of someone like me has meddled with things.

After some initial confusion, everybody accepts the change and moves on with their lives. They soon forget things were any different, and before very long the old facts have become fictions.

“Let me give you an example,” I whispered. “But hold onto your head, things are about to get weird. When the staff of the Countway return to work after the New Year, the library is going to feel very different.”

Changed, some will say. The atmosphere will be lighter, and everyone will say that the Christmas vacation had done them some good.

The security guards on the night shift, who have been avoiding the fifth floor for years, will forget their disapprobation and wander about at ease on the upper levels of the Countway.

“That’s all very well and good,” Fabian interjected, “But have you considered —”

“It’s just the way things work!” I assured him. Soon, nobody will remember there had ever been a time when the library had felt like a cursed or luckless place.

And then, sometime well into the New Year, a skull with a hole on the top will reappear in a new, securely locked cabinet on the fifth floor of the library. Visitors will continue to come from all corners of the globe just to gawk at it. And, as always, most who peer at the skull of Phineas Gage will see only what they want to see.

A perceptive few, however, will pause, look at the skull askance and wonder how curious it is that skulls can look so subtly different from their photographs. This one has a vaguely unreal aspect, but perhaps all skulls are uncanny that way? They are such sad, mad looking things, aren’t they? To stare at them for a long time is an invitation to melancholy. The visitors will turn away eventually in relief and allow that troubled moment to pass away into forgetfulness.

“Sure. I get it. They replace the skull with a fake one – a counterfeit skull! And they put it on display by the museum to avoid scandal,” said Fabian. “But aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Enough about rabbits!” I cried. “Yes, a counterfeit skull, made from epoxy resin and airbrushed by an artist. And because it’s Harvard, it’ll be the best fake skull in the world. Like that famous statue of its founder in Harvard Yard.”

Over time, my colleagues will remember that one day when I diverted them with an entertaining story. A few might remember it had something to do with the skull of Phineas Gage, but none will recall the details. My effort has brought

forth a subtle alteration, as well as a necessary forgetfulness.

Facts change. A hole in reality is filled with a new substance, and before long, I will find myself alone with my memories of a different world. I have wandered from a path, away from the familiar. And also, sadly, the people I know.

“Isn’t this nice,” said Fabian with a dreamy smile. “Two old friends sitting down together in a cold and wintery corner of the world, reminiscing like mature, civilized adults who only attack each other with knives once in a calendar year.”

“My nana used to warn me about all this,” I said, waving my hands wildly for emphasis. “I’ve been too bold, and now the world is changing before my eyes.”

“Alright,” said Fabian. “No, no – I’ve let you talk, and now it’s my turn, understand? The thing here – the thing I want to know is – what has any of this got to do with rabbits?”

“Wait, where’s all the rum? Did we spill some of it?”

Gingerly, Fabian climbed down off his chair and clambered about on the floor for an eternity while I leaned to one side, trying to prevent the room from tipping over. Eventually, and with fantastic balance, he managed to climb back onto his chair. He seized the table to steady himself.

“Well, I can’t find any spillage down there. It occurs to me that we might have drunk most of this bottle. Does that seem like something we would do, do you think?”

It seemed implausible.

“You know me. I’m a skeptic at heart,” I said with a shrug, “so I’m inclined to go with the simplest, most reasonable explanation.”

“What, you mean – elves?”

“Elves are hallucinations, I’m sure of that now,” I whispered, struggling to think. “Wait a moment, where were we, again? I’m lost.”

“When lost, always retrace your steps.”

I was slumped across the table, resting my head on my folded arms and watching Fabian pour the last of the rum into our mugs.

“We’re nearly at the end,” he said, brow creased with concentration.

“Hallucinations,” I muttered, yearning for a clove cigarette. “You know, one time on a train in Poland...”

I was falling. Why was I falling? Let me close my eyes for a moment.

## the reckoning

I awoke on the floor. A cold draft was blowing across me from under the back door. A thin, milky light filled the kitchen, and I could hear the hard scraping of snow shovels outside. There was a fragrance of rum in the air, and the faint redolence of cloves and chocolate. Gertie was sitting primly nearby, paws together and head tilted, giving me a look.

She was not offering me her usual resignation, nor even friendly concern. This morning she was the embodiment of a shaken pragmatist. She had been a very reasonable dog so far and had, I surmised, kindly overlooked my various offenses against civility. Her discovery of me, passed out here on the floor like some common vagabond, was, however, the giddy limit.

I lay for a while, moving my tongue around with the objective of scraping the cobwebs from my teeth, trying to not moan piteously. After a while, I remembered Fabian was somewhere in the house, feeling just as terrible as me, and felt much better.

Clinging to the hope that my dog might still, one day respect me, I managed to pull myself up onto two feet and stumble around the kitchen for a while, readying the kettle for action and banging my head on a cupboard door only twice. The skull of Phineas Gage went into a cupboard over the sink, behind the breakfast cereal. He looked cheerful, actually, and better than how I felt.

Ten minutes later, I was gently sipping Pennyroyal tea when Imogen's slippers came scuffing into the kitchen. She rubbed her eyes sleepily, threw back a head full of tresses and carelessly flooded the room with beauty.

I stood, somehow, and came around the table.

“Imogen,” I murmured, reaching out my hand. She moved in close, lifted her chin and her eyes became soft and tender.

Then her right fist landed square in the middle of my face. I’d watched it coming, of course, in that surreal slow-motion that always accompanies moments like these; I was too overpowered by disbelief to think about getting out of her way.

I staggered back against the kitchen counter, tenderly touching my nose and watching her warily, preparing to ward off future blows.

“I’ve been waiting for ages to know how that would feel,” she observed, shaking her hand and studying it with concern.

I could feel a trickle of blood on my upper lip, and I wiped it away with the sleeve of my woolen sweater. She watched me with dumbfounded curiosity.

“Darling,” she said softly, “you are such a savage.”

Deciding finally it was safe to turn my back on her, I pulled down a large mixing bowl from an overhead cupboard, then fetched milk, eggs, and flour. Without speaking, I mixed up the crepe batter with a whisk and poured half a cup of the mixture into a hot frying pan.

A few minutes later, I slid a plate across the table with two wholemeal crepes topped with orange marmalade and thick Greek yogurt, which Imogen promptly devoured. Finally, she folded her knife neatly against the fork and pushed her plate away. I could tell by the tilt of her head she was trying to understand my state of mind. But there are many things Imogen didn’t know about me. For example, she didn’t know that, if growing up with my nana had taught me anything, it was that making crepes for a woman makes them much less inclined to hit you in the face a second time.

And there were other things, too. Lessons learned over the past year. I felt stronger in myself now, I noted. I had come to the far side of the world and done something unusual and interesting. And I had done it all without Imogen’s

guidance or good advice.

“Anyway, I’m sorry I hit you,” she remarked at length.

I nodded, watching her from a distance.

“It was only fair,” I replied, matching her equanimity. “After all, how dare I not want to spend my life following your orders.”

She was shocked, of course, and justifiably so. Throughout our history together I had never indicated that she was anything less than perfect. Her terrible temper was something I never mentioned to anyone. Everybody always acted like I’d be a fool to let go of a girl like Imogen, and I naturally agreed. It took me far too long, unfortunately, to see her with my own eyes. And when at last I could, I knew I had to run. I had always kept my reasons to myself. I suppose I don’t expect people to believe me.

“So what are we doing today?” she wondered.

“I’m having a Christmas party this afternoon. You can come if you like. There’ll be a girl there that I like,” I added in a calm, steady voice. “I would like you to be nice to her.”

“Of course.”

“Good.”

“And this party. It’s in a few hours, correct? And am I right in supposing you have made no preparations for it whatsoever?”

“Well, you see – the thing is – and besides that – it’s a very long story, but –”

She cut me off. “Of course, darling. Tell you what, take your dog for a walk. Disappear for a few hours, and let me take over. Fabian’s upstairs, he can run some errands for me.”

Gertie, whose eyes had been filled with vilification over my refusal to offer her a crepe, suddenly adopted the opinion that bygones really were bygones, and besides that, weren’t walks wonderful?

Dazed, I attached Gertie's lead and pulled on my pea coat.

"Where's my yellow scarf?" I growled.

Imogen gave me an inscrutable look, and a gray scarf I had never seen before and then shooed me out the door.

Outside the air bit and snapped at me, and my exuberant dog dragged me along, hunched and shivering in her wake. We went down along the river for a while, then looped our way back through Kendall. Defrosting myself in the Starbucks near MIT, I was surprised to notice André from Paris, sipping hot chocolate at a table near the window.

He looked me up and down. "Well, how do you feel?"

"Apart from cold?" I asked, rubbing my hands together. "I feel good. It's nice to be a criminal mastermind."

He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I've been thinking. I'd like to take the skull to California the day after tomorrow."

"That would be better. The sooner the skull is returned to its grave, the sooner the curse shall be lifted."

"If you say so," he said, looking a little skeptical.

I exhaled patiently. "André, I've already explained this many times. Even if there is no curse – and there is a curse, I assure you – then where is the harm in doing the right thing, anyway?"

My friend shrugged. "I'm just looking forward to putting this whole grisly business behind us."

I agreed. "And it's better to get the skull back in the ground sooner, rather than later. It's not good to keep skulls in your possession for too long. They attract bad luck."

"Well, right now it's in *your* possession. If you're worried about bad luck, you might want to stay close to home and keep an eye on things."

I smiled at him. “Imogen and Fabian are already here, staying under my roof! The universe has done its worst. I’ll be fine.”

I bid him farewell, and Gertie and I headed home at a brisk trot.

Someone had fastened something odd to my front door, while we’d been gone. It was a wreath of twigs and wild grass, threaded with berries and ribbon. I don’t think I’d ever seen such a thing before in all my life. After gaping at it, I unlocked the door and floated up into the house, where I was greeted with a wafting fragrance of gingerbread, and the discovery of dozens of paper ornaments cut from Japanese paper hanging in the foyer. Imogen had been busy.

An unfamiliar shrub with spiked leaves and red berries now nestled in a terracotta pot in the corner of my living-room. This could only be holly, though I don’t think I’d ever seen it before. I scrutinized the plant, then moved over to the coffee table. It now rested against a wall and was covered with a silver damask tablecloth, a pot of poinsettias, and a platter of *pfeffernusse*.

Very good *pfeffernusse*, I quickly ascertained, and then I had to spend two minutes describing to Gertie the terrible fate that would befall any dog who gobbled them. Golden fairy lights hung from above like a dense, thorny undergrowth.

Next, I followed my nose to the kitchen, where I found Imogen baking fruit mince pies. Behind her, burnished ceramic pots of red amaryllis had appeared on the kitchen window sill. And, on the table, scores of blood-colored candles waited to be lit.

An assortment of boxes wrapped in silver paper, festooned with gold ribbon, was stacked on the kitchen table.

I sank into a chair and gaped at her handiwork. My house had been transformed into a mystical faerie realm infused with joy and wonder, and it was not yet noon.

“This is magic,” I managed to gasp finally, shaking my head in defeat. “How

are you doing this?"

Then I noticed Fabian gesturing at me from the hallway. Excusing myself, I joined him in the entryway.

"That was bloody low of you," he whispered hoarsely. "How could you leave me here with her? She's had me running around all morning!"

"Just say no to her, why don't you?"

"Oh, don't worry. I will," he hissed.

"Is that you Fabian," Imogen called from the kitchen. "Did you get the tree?"

"Going to get it now!" he called out nervously. Then, bewildered and angry, he stormed out the front door and slammed it behind him.

"He's a moody one, that Fabian," Imogen informed me when I returned to the kitchen.

"He's criminally insane," I muttered, rubbing my shoulder where my wound was itching. "What have you got there?"

She was holding a small parcel, wrapped in brown paper and ribbon. "It's for you. An apology, by way of a Christmas present."

I took it from her hands and stared at it. "Thank you, Imogen. Do I ... open it now?"

"It would probably save you some time if you did."

Careful not to tear the paper, I peeled the tape back and slowly unwrapped the parcel. Inside was a pack of Iced VoVo biscuits.

My hands were shaking, I was looking through a mist. I was spared the misery of speaking by a knock at the front door.

## christmas party

Six librarians cheered at me, then clomped into my house, looking about approvingly and praising everything they saw all at once. Wendell brought up the rear in a blue three-piece suit and green necktie that was covered with a rash of tiny Santa faces. It had to be removed, of course, and I was in the kitchen looking for scissors when my house began to resound with even more voices. Wendell was loudly welcoming more librarians into the home, and soon my kitchen was filled with smiling faces and laughter.

“There he is!”

“The prankster himself!”

“He had me fooled!”

“Not me!

“In Devon’s office all that time!”

“Too funny!”

“I was on to him from the start!”

“Oh sure –”

“Come here and give me a hug!”

I was experiencing vertigo. The tale of yesterday’s confrontation had spread through the library, apparently. Not only had I saved George’s job, but I had turned the tables on an evil director, who had misplaced a prized artifact and had tried to blame me. I wanted to crawl away and hide.

Ned appeared beside me with a beer in his hand.

“Shea, I want to tell you something serious. If some faculty member tried to

frame me for something I hadn't done, I don't know if I could keep my cool the way you did. You showed some real class this week, my friend."

Stricken, I tried to escape, but there was nowhere to go. My kitchen was too small for this many people. Everybody was talking at once. I was crowded in! Somehow, I managed to slip away to the hallway where Wendell was patting Gertie. I grabbed his elbow.

"What did you tell everybody?" I hissed in his ear, furiously.

"Thank me later," he said, smiling innocently at Brandon and Henry as they came stomping through the front door.

"Thank you?" I whispered, feeling horrified. "For what?"

"You did me a favor yesterday. I am simply showing my gratitude," said Wendell. "Hey, Brandon! Henry!"

"No more gratitude, okay?" I pleaded.

"Congratulations on your promotion," said Brandon, a little stiffly.

I stared at him, and he stared back. Eventually, I gave up.

"What are you talking about, Brandon?"

"Your promotion. In Central IT. Why is he looking at me like that? Speak, man! Open your mouth! What's the matter with him, Wendell? Didn't he check his email today?"

There hadn't been time, of course; Fabian and I had sat up all night talking, and I'd slept in, and then breakfast, Imogen, and walking Gertie ... "What email? And what promotion? And what the hell?"

It was Wendell who was able to extricate the details. I stood to the side, gaping and lamenting my ill-fortune. I had been promoted to a departmental liaison. I'm sure Brandon attempted to explain what that meant, but he might have saved himself some time; I don't speak a word of political-speak, it's all just gibberish and nonsense.

“Allow me to translate for these gentlemen,” Wendell said at last. “Your commissars saw you in action yesterday and liked the cut of your jib. You’ve been promoted, and moved, apparently, to some department they hate even more than the library.”

“You’re still not making any sense, Wendell.”

Even Brandon and Henry seemed to agree with me. They were both powerfully annoyed, but I suspect my dazed reaction mollified them. Brandon put his arm around my shoulder and told me not to worry, and that I would be looked after. The Committee would soon identify the ring-leader of this little coup, and the culprit would quickly have their employee-status at Harvard significantly altered. They would back-date his or her resignation to November, cut their benefits and severance package, and by January all electronic records would reflect some kind of surly resignation...

Henry nodded with agreement. “And then we’ll go to work on that CIO...”

They went off to plot together in the living room, where they discovered the snack table. Wendell and I watched them set upon it like half-starved hyenas.

“So anyway,” remarked Wendell casually. “Your department is insane, you know that, right?”

“That’s what they say about the library, Wendell.”

We stood together in the hallway, two comrades in the trenches of an insane war, watching our fellow troops passing back and forth between the kitchen and living room. Everyone was filled with good cheer. Chattering voices and laughter clamored all around us, and there was much pointing and gesticulating. Raised plastic cups, filled to the brim with inexpensive wine, rose and fell like waves.

Then Agatha, the troubled archivist, appeared with Rufus on her elbow, and immediately demanded to be allowed to put on Christmas carols. We had a brief argument, which I promptly lost, and then Agatha put on Harry Connick Jr’s

*When My Heart Finds Christmas.* I pretended to fume, but secretly I did not despise it at all.

Rufus tapped me on the shoulder, looking somewhat embarrassed. “I got you a present, dude.”

It was a small parcel wrapped in black wrapping paper covered in tiny white skulls. I ripped off the paper immediately. It was a dog-eared paperback about cormorants.

Did you know cormorants can dive 30 meters beneath the water to catch fish? Thanks, Rufus.

I shook his hand gratefully and led the man into the kitchen, which was overflowing with librarians of every size and variety. They were all fixated on my large glass bowl.

“I just love this eggnog,” someone declared. “How did you make it, Shea?”

“It’s straightforward. All you have to do is flee your country to the other side of the world. If you do it right, an ex-girlfriend will appear in your kitchen and make it for you.”

“Someone is here!” I heard somebody yell. Wearily I tramped back into the hallway again.

It was Kurt, followed closely by an all-too-familiar figure.

“I brought Hector along, Dude,” Kurt said in greeting. Then, with a quick, manly hug, he whispered “be cool,” and then drifted into the kitchen to yell ‘hey!’ at everybody.

My nemesis and I warily shook hands. “So,” I said, “you and Kurt know each other, do you?”

“Kurt’s on my softball team.”

“Of course he is,” I replied, wondering why I bothered to let anything surprise me anymore.

“Anyway, congratulations on your promotion, *mang*,” said Hector after a little while.

“Thanks,” I said, embarrassed and troubled. “It makes no sense...”

“It doesn’t. I would have fired you.”

“I would have fired me.”

“I like your Christmas decorations.”

“My friend Imogen did all this. But I’m a middle manager, now, so I suppose I should get into the habit of taking credit for other people’s work.”

“Sometimes it’s about not taking credit. On a completely different topic – did you know the skull of Phineas Gage went missing again overnight?”

I clucked my tongue. “Oh dear. They really should keep a closer eye on that thing. You know what – I believe I warned certain parties that something like this might happen one day.”

“Yes, I distantly recall,” he mused. “Personally, I pity for the Countway’s director. Did you know he had to cancel a ski trip to Aspen to deal with this? The Assistant to the Dean is livid. Yes, I feel so bad for Devon. He seems like such a nice man.”

I nodded. “I hope they don’t ... but no, they wouldn’t – they’d know better than to try to blame me *again*, wouldn’t they, Hector?”

Hector was soothing. “Rest assured, even Devon wouldn’t try that. You could probably have gone back after the meeting last night, slipped the skull under your jacket and walked out with it. Nobody would dare point a finger you.”

“You’re absolutely right, Hector,” I told him. “We should all feel bad for the director. I didn’t like him at first, because – let’s face it – he tried to blame me for his own carelessness. And our entire Department as well, let’s not forget. Still, if I ever find a way to overcome my Pathological Problems With Authority, I promise you I’ll think of something nice to do for the man.”

“Ugh, why are you even talking about him?” said an arch voice behind me.

It was Octavia, of course, looking at Imogen’s Christmas decorations with imperious approval. Her husband waved at me and cheerfully demanded beer. Hector led him into the kitchen.

“What’s all this about you feeling bad for the Countway’s new director?”

Extemporaneously, I babbled something about my worrying that I might have put him in a tight spot. “He looked a bit out of his depth yesterday.”

She looked at me shrewdly. “You might be a little more complicated than many of us thought.”

I suppose it was meant as a compliment, but I took it as a sign of misunderstanding. I don’t think I’m complicated at all. I have criminal tendencies, an inclination to tell the truth, and Pathological Problems With Authority. You could probably throw a rock in Thargomindah and, well, not hit anybody, because it’s a very sparsely populated town, but if your rock *did* happen to strike someone, then that person would probably be a lot like me. Especially if his or her nana was a witch doctor.

Octavia squinted at me. “You know, Devon brought a hundred million dollars of grant money into Harvard Medical School, with the promise of much more to come in future years. You could no more impede his career than a beetle could inconvenience a freight train.”

“True, but –”

“He could spend his lunch hours sacrificing virgins to the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli – right on top of the Circulation Desk – and Harvard would be issuing excited press releases about the man’s bold new initiatives in the field of medical anthropology.”

“Octavia, when my nana used to say that the world was secretly run by lizard people, everyone thought she was crazy.”

Octavia looked upwards like a martyr.

"Well, now you've seen the man behind the crimson curtain is just a garden-variety weasel, with perhaps a little too much hair product. Devon's nothing special, is he? His sort never is.

"There will always be a certain kind of person who wants to dismantle libraries. Just as there is always somebody trying to bulldoze coastlines, or steal from charities, or profit from the sick and impoverished. And that's why we're here, Shea.

"We're here to fight them. Or in our case, we're here to protect the world's most important medical library from men like Devon. Our eternal fight for civilization."

I yawned dreamily. "Yes, Nana, I know."

Octavia looked at me blandly. "Well, then, how do you fight the good fight?"

I considered telling her that I was reuniting a skull with the rest of its bones, then decided it might make her agitated.

"The old-fashioned way, Octavia. Magic. Invocation, and, well, it's a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"I have a feeling I already have. You don't suppose you could use your magic to prevent the third and fourth floors from being converted into lab space, do you?"

I looked at her blankly. "I thought Devon promised he wasn't going to do that?"

"Oh, you sweet, innocent lamb," said Octavia, and then she went off to check on her husband.

The party had entered full swing. The ground floor was packed, and people were now upstairs, too. Agatha had turned one of the bedrooms into a coat room and had appointed herself in charge of every guest's jackets and gloves. How do people have parties without inviting at least one archivist?

Imogen was in a corner, chatting with two of the reference librarians about the best museums on the East coast of the United States.

Two of the editors from Harvard Health Publications were describing their experiments with absinthe to Ned, who seemed delirious with envy.

Rufus was telling Wendell the history of a specific picture hanging in the director's office. A lack-luster oil painting of a mournful, solitary bird perched on a rock by the sea, it was, nonetheless, one of the most valuable pictures in the building.

“If the director had the slightest knowledge of art history, that painting would have been removed and auctioned-off in the blink of an eye. It turns out the safest place for it is right there in his office, where he will never notice it.”

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was Astrid. I probably gaped witlessly at her for a good while until she eventually took pity on me.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello.” I was about to say something smart, like, ‘I like the way your dress hangs off you,’ or ‘your makeup makes your face look nice,’ or ‘did you put something in your hair because it looks shiny?’ when Kurt walked backward into me. I flailed with fright, and a swish of his beer went up in the air and down on top of me.

“Sorry, dude,” he said, dabbing at me with his t-shirt. “Don’t worry, it wasn’t good beer. Hey, what kind of beer is this, Ned? It reminds me of the swill Mom used to give me when I was little.”

“I brewed it,” exclaimed Ned, smiling like a child.

“You need to stop brewing beer,” Kurt advised. “What’s it made out of? Asparagus?”

“Where’s your friend?” Astrid asked me.

“You mean Fabian?” inquired Imogen, appearing out of nowhere. “I sent him

on an errand.”

“Oh. How nice.”

Then both of them smiled sweetly at one another in that way that women do when they’re communicating telepathically.

And at that moment, as if summoned, Fabian pushed his way through the front door, hauling a ridiculously large Christmas tree over his shoulder. “Make way, make way,” he grunted, and the crowd squeezed around him as he lugged the piece of horticulture into my living room.

“What took you so long?” Imogen asked, trawling the depths of incredulity.

“It turns out that Christmas Eve is not the easiest time to lay your hands on a tree,” he growled, propping it vertically in the corner, by the window.

It had a pleasant scent and was some sort of North American tree. A spruce or pine or elk or something – who has time to look these things up? I studied it carefully and noticed a few pieces of broken glass sprinkled among its needles. I was about to ask Fabian where he had found it, but Imogen shot me a warning look. I edged back out of the room in search of Astrid, who hadn’t followed us.

Hector and Octavia sat on the stairwell together, exchanging information.

“So I said to him ‘due process doesn’t apply to green card holders.’ And his face was like – oh my god, they’re going to lock me up and throw away the key...”

Noticing me nearby, he started to howl. “His face! You should have seen his face!” he cried, dabbing his eyes. “He’s like – the Americans are going to put me in a special prison where they put terrorists.”

“Yes, that sure was funny, Hector,” I told him solemnly.

“The hard part,” he explained to Octavia, who seemed to be having some sort of fit, “was having to say it all with a straight face. I was dying on the inside.”

I’m no psychiatrist, but even I could see that there is something wrong with

Hector. The man has issues of some sort. I'd been too busy all year with this business with the skull, but I promised myself that next year I would focus on Hector. I would help him, I decided. Even if I had to turn his world upside down...

"Let's try that again," said Astrid, at my side once more. "Hello."

We were alone, practically speaking, amid the throng. I wanted to thank her for coming, and say that I was sorry about yesterday and that I could understand how she must have felt. I also wanted to say how grateful I was that she'd come to my Christmas party because I really expected that she wouldn't, and it had made me quietly miserable this morning.

But I didn't say that; I couldn't bring myself to do anything but whisper, "Hello, Astrid."

"So, are you happy your girlfriend has arrived?"

I looked at her queasily. "Imogen isn't my girlfriend. We broke up about a year ago. I told Wendell about it yesterday, you can ask him if you like. Imogen is just looking in on me to make sure I'm doing alright, I think. You could talk to her if you want ..."

"Oh. She and I have already had a nice chat."

"Oh dear," I remarked, wincing. "How nice."

Astrid had discovered that Imogen favors Glerups slippers, which she buys once a year in Copenhagen, and collects Stutterheim raincoats from a store in Stockholm. She reads the *London Review of Books* and also *The Paris Review*, and when there is time, *The Economist*. She spends her time attending book fairs and art gallery openings. Imogen also sits in on lectures by scientists, theorists, and thinkers, eschews religion and practices yoga. She can speak French, Japanese and can express herself passably well in Italian.

"She also knows," Astrid added, woozily, "that shavings of fresh parmesan compliment a slice of pear, and the secret to a good risotto."

“Good Lord,” I exclaimed, boldly reaching my arm behind her back and supporting her weight. “Breathe in and out.”

“I’ll be fine, presently,” she said, shivering.

“She’s a bit of an assault on the senses, isn’t she?”

“I’ll say.”

“Would it surprise you to learn that she also had a fearsome right hook?”

“Ah,” she said, pressing a fingertip to my lower lip. “So that explains that. Hit you a lot, did she?”

I shook my head. “Once or twice a month.”

She looked at me with concern. To reassure her, I told her that I’d spoken with a psychiatrist a few months back.

Astrid nodded. “You mentioned that yesterday.”

“It actually went well. He didn’t seem to think we had much to talk about.”

“That wasn’t quite our takeaway from the story –”

“When you think about it,” I added, trying not to sound boastful, “a psychiatrist not wanting to ever see you again is an unspoken endorsement of your sanity.”

“Again, that’s not really ... but that’s a conversation for another day. As for Imogen ...”

“Astrid, would you mind if we didn’t talk about her?”

“Yes, I’d prefer that as well.”

We looked into one another’s eyes for a moment. Somehow, all I could see was picnics on bright green lawns, fresh linen clothes on a line, children running through the house on Saturday mornings, and me ordering them crossly to please stop running inside, all to no avail, of course...

“It was mean of your friend Fabian to surprise you with her, wasn’t it?”

Wendell rang this morning to tell me about it, and how you nearly died from fright.”

“Did he now? Anyway, there is a reason I play Knife Tag with Fabian. Nobody seems to understand that at first but —”

“Nevermind, dear, I understand completely. Consider me all caught up.”

I sighed, leaning woozily against the wall. She had called me ‘dear.’

“Anything wrong, Shea?”

She was standing very close. It was her scent, I decided. It was making my mind unravel.

She expected me to say a particular thing, I knew, but what it was I had no idea. But if I could finesse this, I somehow knew, Astrid and I would be moving in together, possibly into a lighthouse on some windswept crag, where the sky was always golden, and she would be forever smiling at me and stretching out her arms, wanting hugs. And maybe Gertie would have puppies.

On the other hand, if I messed this up, I was going to die alone and unloved in a cold, damp room, on a mildewed carpet beside a dead clown with a needle in its arm. And lots of spiders.

It was as if Astrid could sense my alarm.

“You don’t have to say anything,” she said softly. “Why kill the moment?”

If I could only think of some kind of pretext to kiss her, I thought.

Astrid glanced upwards, and whispered, “We’re standing under the mistletoe. You know what that means?”

I sighed. “I know exactly what it means.” I’d read all about mistletoe in a pamphlet in a veterinarian’s waiting room a few months ago. “Very poisonous to dogs, mistletoe. What was Imogen thinking? If this fell on the ground, Gertie could eat it!”

I reached up and carefully unfastened the leaves, then tucked them safely in

the inner pocket of my coat.

“She has a gift for eating things she shouldn’t. I mean, what kind of dog eats bees, anyway?”

Astrid sighed, no doubt touched by my devotion to my dog. Gertie came skittering into the hallway, looking excited. Agatha chased her into the hall. “Your dog is a real diva, isn’t she? And she really likes shortbread!”

Gertie looked me up and down, noted I wasn’t holding any shortbread and ran back to the kitchen.

“Excuse me a moment, Astrid,” I said in a calm, controlled voice. “My responsibilities as a dog-owner beckon. Now listen here, Agatha, will you please stop feeding my dog shortbread!”

“It’s not just me, George is at it too!”

She was right. The old man was sitting at my kitchen table looking sheepish, his knees covered in crumbs.

“George,” said I, overcome with disappointment. “You of all people know better than feeding dogs from the table!”

“She’s no dog, she’s a fam –”

“George,” I cautioned him, “look what you’ve done. You’ve made her all uppidish!”

Gertie had hopped onto a chair at the table and was looking at me disappointedly. Having been introduced to the world of shortbread, Gertie was now seized with the knowledge that I had never, in all our history together, offered her a single bite of the stuff. She gazed at me now, as if from afar, and seemed to be reappraising our relationship in the light of new evidence.

“I’m going to be dealing with the fallout from this for days,” I said, wringing my hands in despair.

George Ripley extended his hand to me. Absentmindedly, I took it, and we

shook hands. I'm not really sure why.

About a dozen of our colleagues were looking at us in expectant silence as if waiting for me to say something. It was horrible. Don't look at me like that, I wanted to tell them. I am not what you think I am. Then the buzzing in my head turned into a whir. Something was not right with the old mental machinery, I realized. A thrum, thrum, thrumming noise was rising up inside my brain, and then a heavy clunk, followed by another, and I felt myself slipping away.

When looking at other people from afar, perhaps reading an account of their lives from the comfort of a chair, it is usually easy to decide what they should do. 'Go on, disregard the old emotional state. Improvise! Make a speech! Jump through a hoop! Do a trick!'

It's true, I was the host of this party. I should do something. They were all here, and they seemed to be really glad about it, too. Something was shining in their eyes. It was like whatever they saw when they looked at me pleased them somehow.

Naturally, I should make a clever joke. Stand up and drink a toast to all the fine people that I had come to know during my time at Harvard. It would be so easy. Telling the truth has always been effortless, at least until now. I had thought that this was because of all those icky truth potions my nana used to make me drink, but now I think it's because I had never felt particularly close to anybody.

And since nana had passed, I hadn't really felt any sense of belonging anywhere. It's strange to discover you care about people. I even liked Wendell over there, grinning at me in that foolish necktie of his.

Raise a glass, I thought; say something ridiculous, anything at all, and then they'll raise theirs, and it will be over. I could saunter on out, laugh with everybody, pat my friends on their backs, and be uproarious.

The problem was, I couldn't move. It was awful. The silence stretched on

painfully. My face was frozen, my limbs stiff, my hands awkward. Perhaps it was the spell I had woven, I thought numbly. And here we were now, staring at one another from opposite banks of a wide river, unable to hear each other's voices.

I swallowed. The world was somehow different, things had all been changed.

Gertie gazed meaningfully from her chair. Dog and I looked at one another for a moment until I finally took her meaning.

“Does anybody,” I asked softly, “want to hear how I *really* stole the Skull of Phineas Gage?”

They were still laughing when Gertie and I slipped out through the back door.

## promises, promises

It was the middle of the afternoon, but it felt as if the night would be along any moment now. Yesterday around this time I had been weaving a web of misdirection, uncertain as to whether the net would hold. Already that seemed a lifetime ago.

Gertie sniffed the air a few times in all directions, then nodded to indicate we would not be disturbed by squirrels. I went to the railing and looked up into a thick overcast. My porch was dusted with frost. I hoped it would snow.

“You’ll like snow,” I told my dog. “You can jump in it, and make snowmen. Sorry, snowdogs. No, I was not being insensitive. Of course you can’t have any more shortbread.”

We stood close to one another and shivered. After a while, a gust rose up, and a faint mist blew across the frost. The wind chime stirred nervously.

Laughter and voices rose and fell inside the house. I felt uneasy and expectant. Gertie stared at me curiously; I gazed back with bewilderment.

“Where’s André,” I asked her, “and his infernal clove cigarettes when you need him?”

“Down here,” said my friend, stepping out from the porch’s shadow. “Sorry, I heard you crunching around up there but wanted to make sure it was just you and Gertie.”

“Come upstairs. You should go inside and say hello to everybody. I’ll introduce you as André, not Britney, this time. Don’t worry, I’ll say you are André from *Prague*. Nobody will suspect a thing.”

That’s when I noticed my canvas bag – the one I’d hauled with me all the way

from Australia – laying at his feet. “What have you got that for?”

“I took the liberty of packing a few of your things. You see –”

“What?”

“You need to come with me right now, I’ll explain everything later.”

“Don’t be crazy, I’ve got about thirty or so people in my house.”

“I promise you –”

“Let’s talk about this later,” I said with annoyance. *What cheek! The nerve of the man!* “And another thing, you shouldn’t be going through my things. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I should go back inside.”

“Alright, I’ll wait. But you’re making a huge mistake.”

“Thirty guests! Or more!”

“You might want to subtract Fabian,” said André from Paris, pointing south towards the center of Kendall, “because I saw him on the road, with a bag over his shoulder, walking very quickly in the direction of the station.”

Gertie and I exchanged glances. “Well, that’s a bit odd,” I commented.

*What could it mean? Why would Fabian leave without saying goodbye?*

André waited patiently for the penny to drop.

*Well, he might have some reason for not wanting to see me.*

And then a very nasty thought came tip-toeing into my mind, looked furtively in all directions, lifted up a bat and struck me hard between the eyes. I nearly fell over backward.

“Oh no, André! He’s got the skull, hasn’t he?”

My friend nodded. “He must have overheard the librarians talking about it being priceless and everything, and put two-and-two together. But how would he even know you had it, that’s what I want to know!”

I looked at him miserably.

“You didn’t show it to him, did you?” he cried out. “Tell me you didn’t show it to him! Shea! He’s a criminal!”

“Well, I’m sorry! He had a bottle of rum, and –”

“Your problem is that you’re too impressionable! Come on, we had better get moving if we’re going to catch him.”

Behind me, the noise of the party rose up loudly, and then Imogen’s Italian heels clacked across the porch. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders and shivered.

“What are you doing out here? Come inside, it’s freezing!”

I was stuck, frozen solid, near the top of the icy stairs while Imogen studied me with the manner of an expert.

“Oh, good grief!” she said at last. “Really? Now?”

“It’s complicated,” I muttered, looking down at André, who had stepped silently into the shadows beneath the porch and was pressing a finger to his lips.

“Alright,” she said, in a ‘take charge’ sort of way. “If you say so. Now, you might want to give me your keys.”

Dutifully, I handed them over. She ordered me to wait right here and promised she would be right back with something. I felt fearful, obviously, but I knew it was probably better to obey.

“By the way, Imogen?” I piped up, as she was about to disappear inside. “Thank you for the Christmas party. It’s … the best Christmas I’ve ever had.”

A smile broke across her face, then she waved and disappeared inside.

“Alright, let’s go,” said André.

“Wait,” I said. “She’s coming back with something.”

“Probably a gun,” he muttered.

My hands were numb, and my teeth were chattering. I stamped. I breathed into my fingers. I paced about. Gertie woofed at something in her imagination,

then settled on her haunches with the dignity of an ancient goddess. Beneath the porch, André lit a clove and muttered imprecations under his breath.

And then finally the door opened, and Astrid tottered out into the cold air, her face filled with concern.

“Your ex-girlfriend asked me to give you these. Is everything alright?”

I received my pea coat, gloves and a scarf with both gratitude and relief, and bundled myself up as quickly as my frozen fingers would let me. In a coat pocket, curled up in a tight hoop, was Gertie’s leash. In another, my packet of Iced VoVos.

“You’re up to something,” said Astrid.

“Well you see, actually, and this is the point I’m trying to make, it appears that circumstances have arisen, and it appears, for very solid reasons that I can’t go into right now ...”

While giving every impression of listening intently, Astrid picked a speck of lint from my coat and smiled into my eyes.

I blinked witlessly. “And I have to go on an adventure, Astrid.”

“Will you be safe?”

An excellent question. I leaned over the railing to check with André; he looked up and shook his head.

“No,” I declared boldly.

Curiously, Astrid looked over the edge of the porch.

“Ahoy there!” she said. “You look different. As a man, I mean.”

“Thank you. I do try.”

“You know, at first I thought Shea was fibbing about you. This André from Paris individual has to be some sort of imaginary friend, I thought.”

“Why,” I wondered out-loud, feeling a little cross, “does everybody treat me like I have a tenuous grasp of reality?”

“Now, now, don’t pout,” she murmured, tying the gray scarf in an elaborate knot for me. “Will you write to me from time to time?”

“Whenever the adventure allows,” I promised.

“Good enough. Can you promise to live precariously?”

I nodded.

“Do you promise to be reckless? Do you vow to take terrible risks?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Most of all, will you promise to always be interesting?”

I gave a start. “Well, that’s weird. Nana once made me promise that very same thing. It was after her funeral, and she kept showing up in the kitchen at all hours, raking the air with her fingers and howling menacingly, so one day I said to her, ‘what on earth is bothering you, Nana,’ so she wailed -”

“Consider me reassured,” said Astrid. Then she grasped the lapels of my coat and kissed me.

I will never tell anyone about that kiss. I will never say a word about it.

But I will say that I had never felt such infusion of warmth and enthusiasm and encouragement, and for the first time in my life, I forgot to feel apprehensive. I barely remember what happened after, nor what we whispered to each other. I remember her eyes, though, and the terrible ache of parting.

And then I was miles away, walking in a dream. Through hushed, deserted streets we went, snow fluttering about us like disconsolate spirits. Now and then my companions looked at me with uncertainty, but I had nothing left to say.

END

# a note from the author

Thanks for reading The Blue Bandicoot Saga.

If you enjoyed the book, it would really help me out if you were to [write a review at Amazon](#). Your review could potentially help others find my books.

Also, I recommend signing up for my newsletter at [stgabriel.io](http://stgabriel.io); that way I can let you know when I publish the next book in the series.

Anyway, once again, thanks so much for reading.

Yours with chaste affection,

Kris St.Gabriel

June 11, 2019

Cambridge, MA

# about kris st.gabriel

Kris St.Gabriel grew up in a series of small rural towns in Queensland, Australia. He graduated from Griffith University and then wandered aimlessly for several years, working in a variety of odd jobs. Eventually he was hired by Harvard Medical School, first as an IT Support Associate, and later as a Biological Software Engineer and then as a Creative Director. He left Harvard in 2013 to write books and raise his two baby daughters. Lately, he has been considering getting a dog.

You can find short stories by Kris at <https://stgabriel.io>. His newsletter alone is worth its weight in awkward metaphors; why not go subscribe to it?