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The Adventures of Frank, Gordon, and Some Other People Too

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The Adventures of Frank, Gordon, and Some Other People Too

by

Garrett McMahon

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

May 26, 2010
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When I was a freshman in film school at RIT, I had a professor who told my class that, as film students, we should watch as many movies as we can, and read as few books. I followed this advice for the next three years, as I spent the majority of my studies in film school (unlike the rest of my classmates) focusing on the creative aspects of filmmaking, screenwriting and directing, as opposed to learning any skills regarding film equipment. It was when I was trying to write a mythical, fantastical script that I took a Mythology class and read my first substantial book in three years, *The Golden Ass*. It pleasantly surprised me how, for an old, stodgy classical Latin text (my opinion before I actually read it), it was just as funny and raunchy as some films that were being released at the time. This made me want to catch up on most of the classics I had missed out on; from Homer and Virgil all the way up to *Ulysses*, I tried the best I could to take in everything I should have been reading for the past three years. Ever since then I have had a profound interest in both screenwriting and fiction writing, and I have ruefully regretted my professor's advice.

I am primarily interested in absurdism, surrealism, and satire. When I first entered film school, my main influence was David Lynch. I found surrealism to be a liberating genre; I liked how in films such as *Mulholland Drive* (perhaps my favorite film), events did not necessarily have to make logical sense, that with the use of captivating imagery and bizarre, mind-boggling events that twist rationality, a film can be as emotionally resonant and powerful as a film that relies on realism and convention. This attitude has also influenced my fiction writing; I find it difficult to be yet another reader who values realism, because I think reality is boring and depressing. My own life up to then was
largely uninteresting (I did not have many friends growing up and I mostly sat around,
got fat and played video games), so I rely on my imagination to distinguish myself from
other writers; I strive to come up with images so odd and events so crazy that I am not
satisfied with my work unless I am positive that no one else could have possibly come up
with them.

Many people who read my work say that I am influenced by Monty Python
(which could be true, to an extent) and Douglas Adams (which is not at all true, as I have
only read one sentence written by him, and I refuse to read any more simply so I can still
assert my lack of influence by him), but if I could point to one thing that informs my
sense of humor, it is an obscure late-nineties sketch comedy show called *The Upright
Citizens Brigade*. Like Monty Python, the show relied on absurd antics and general
silliness. What was different, however, was that each sketch would be part of a unifying
theme throughout a given episode, and each sketch would unify in one gigantic sketch of
wonderful chaos. In fact, the show's loose premise was that of chaos; the Upright Citizens
Brigade themselves were an underground organization dedicated to the proliferation of
chaos in society, and their efforts turned into the ridiculous events featured in the
sketches. The only thing more absurd about the sketches in this show (and even now, I
cannot help but remember the Bucket of Truth, Ass Pennies, and Japa-noi-tretching with
a smile) were the over-the-top sums of their parts that concluded each episode. This show
was completely original and unforgettable; as a film student, I realize that most people
get their popular entertainment in film and other media, and I know that if I want to
achieve similar success in fiction writing, my work has to be just as original and
unforgettable.

My literary influences are primarily Irish; I mentioned *Ulysses* as an example. While *The Golden Ass* made me interested in reading, it was *Ulysses* that inspired my interest in writing. This book, on one hand, is a series of literary experiments full of complex literary allusions and internal narration. Underneath the complicated layers of this novel, however, is a simple, powerful, and often hilarious story of simple Dublin people and their need for friendship and love. When I was in film school, I had an idea for a television show called *Frank and Gordon*, where two friends (Frank is usually hostile and sarcastic, Gordon gentle and simpleminded) go through absurd adventures with each other; while I usually avoid watching television, it was *Ulysses* that gave me the idea that I could write several episodes of *Frank and Gordon* in prose, and perform a literary experiment with each one. I also have a prevalent interest in friendship, and the dynamic among friends of different kinds, with all my written work, be it scripts or prose; as I said before, I had few deep friendships growing up, and even now I find the idea of friendship puzzling, often capricious, and always fascinating. It is this aspect of *Ulysses* that I responded to the most, at an important time in my life when my interest and skills in writing were just starting to manifest themselves. I have included two *Frank and Gordon* pieces to illustrate these two ideas: “The Thing That Should Not Be Mentored” is a story that showcases Frank and Gordon's odd relationship by way of an absurd situation, while “Coupla Guys (Annotated by Illiternotes, Inc.)” is less about the two friends than a specific literary experiment (though they, and the theme of friendship, nonetheless have a strong presence in the piece).
The latter piece, "Coupla Guys," is my attempt at having fun with the form of writing, as well as with things like literary scholarship and autobiography. In this piece, I attempt to write a bad Frank and Gordon story by way of its Cliffnotes-style commentary, inflated to ridiculous levels of hyperbole. I would say that my primary base of influence for this piece was Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which is itself a silly (yet nonetheless complex) yarn about a boy who tries to write a book about a bad author who, while trying to write a book about an unsavory villain, is attacked by other characters from his book who have been set free by the first author. Just when the story is about to reach some kind of conclusion, the boy narrator finishes his school exams and stops writing his book, which causes O'Brien's book to end. There never really is a point to anything that happens, other than the satisfaction of seeing the bad author, Trellis, punished by his characters for his literary "crimes." In addition to the humor and zaniness, the novel is an experiment writing in terms of form, a funny commentary on authorship and literary "accountability." Perhaps I had the long-suffering Trellis in mind when I was writing the character of Dr. Thomas Q. Roche, the unfortunate scholar forced to write about a bad story to an audience of utter philistines.

Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is another influence on this piece. Sterne's novel, on one level, is a satire of autobiography, in which the narrator spends several hundreds of pages poking fun at the rest of his family while telling very little about his own life. In "Coupla Guys," I draw from real-life facts of my own life and wildly exaggerate other aspects of it in an attempt to write my own silly biography. For example, my dad's real name is Robert Rockhill McMahon III, but, for better or worse, the
tradition ended with me (sometimes I still jokingly accuse my father of thinking that I was not “good enough” for the name). My parents did name me after an Underground Railroad figure, Gerrit Smith, whom we are still not sure if our family is related to or not. However, since he almost never shows up in any of the school history books, I was never quite able to brag about it, true or not. There is also a dig at my undergrad alma mater, RIT, and my dissatisfaction at their methods in teaching writing.

My other piece, “Workplace,” is influenced in part by my other favorite Irish authors, Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett (more on the latter author later). Like my piece, O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman* is a funny take on a vision of a hellish afterlife. While Joyce may have the ideal balance between erudition and emotion, and Beckett may have more beautiful prose, it is my honest opinion that when it comes to complete insanity, no one can top O'Brien. This novel did not have much meaningful character development or other traditional qualities of “literary value,” but damn, was it nuts. In addition to the unforgettable hijinx the narrator goes through (such as a policeman with his own bizarre molecule “theory,” who steals bicycles from others so that their molecules do not mix with the bicycle molecules and irrevocably cause them to become anywhere up to 75% bicycle and 25% human), I found the idea of a comical hell, of a character whose punishment is to be subjected to an eternally repeating series of practical jokes, intriguing. O'Brien even uses formal, *Tristram Shandy*-style silliness to “torment” the narrator, hoping to write a scholarly book on a fictional eccentric scientist, DeSelby (whose theories include, for example, that darkness is black air that is dissipated when light comes into contact with it), the narrator kills a man to gain money to fund the
book. Thus, in the “hell” the narrator suffers through, each chapter begins with a bizarre commentary on DeSelby with absurdly long footnotes, some of which are actually longer than certain chapters. As I said before, the world can be a horrible place, and sometimes one has to laugh at horror in order to make the world bearable once again. It may have been this novel that inspired me to write a story about a good person who, through a bureaucratic mistake, gets sent to hell and allows himself to turn into a monster in order to deal with the maddening, transient nature of his existence within his “workplace.”

As thankful as I am when a reader reads a work of mine, I enjoy poking fun at my immediate audience. Writers such as Beckett and Laurence Sterne are a big influence on me in this aspect. While I think that Beckett's humor, for example, is not much different from Joyce's or O'Brien's (dry, intellectual humor to cope with an oppressive, banal environment), I also find his prose style pleasing. One of my favorite tricks, when I first started writing prose, was to use a deliberately wordy, over-detailed and intellectual style of narration, and sometimes even spend two or three pages describing a very simple object or action, as a playful prank that the reader has to endure to continue with my story. Imagine my surprise when Beckett did exactly this, but with far more accomplished prose, anywhere up to forty pages when describing a character’s “few parting words” in Watt, or perhaps Molloy's detailed method of sucking-stone distribution in Molloy. In these cases, the logorrheic passages reveal insight into the psychological state of the characters; the longer Molloy takes to describe which stones go into which pockets, the more importance he places on such an action, the clearer it is to a reader that the character is slowly losing his mind. The same can be said of Watt's elaborate deliberations as to
how he can feed his master's dog, which take about thirty ages to complete, and reveal how the pressures of working for the master take a toll on Watt's sanity. I attempted a similar approach when writing the long monologues of certain eccentric characters in “Workplace” and “The Evil That Men Do.”

Also, Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* was one of the first authors to do this sort of “pranking” with his audience; i.e. the narrator Tristram always digressing from his main points to talk about various members of his family and his opinions (a reader gets hundreds of the narrator's opinions and almost no details of his life in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*), taking well over two books for him to even discuss his birth. I believe that, like when a viewer of a film feels compelled to watch it all the way through, a reader sometimes feels a similar compulsion to finish a piece of prose. In these instances of prolix narration and long digressions, it is my way of playing an Andy Warhol-like joke on the audience (as much as I hate to reference such a worthlessly clever filmmaker, and hoping my attempts are a bit more successful), knowing full well that a reader is aware of the mechanics involved in motherhood and nonetheless taking a paragraph to explain such mechanics (i.e. "Coupla Guys") with the expectation that the reader will read through it and laugh at how unnecessary it is.

I am also a writer who likes challenges, be it a technical challenge, or a challenge to subvert a rule, convention or institution. For example, “Workplace” was an attempt to write a successful second-person narrative. I was inspired by the Lars Von Trier film *Europa*, which (in addition to being a fantastic neo-noir film) uses second-person voice-over narration as a means of expressing the protagonist's anxiety and uncertainty when
entering the strange land of post-WWII Germany. I believed that if the protagonist of “Workplace,” a blank slate with no memories, had entered a similarly chaotic and uncertain environment, second-person narration could be effective here as well.

Finally, sometimes I enjoy being just as wild and silly as I possibly can when I write a story. A professor recommended I read some short stories by Donald Barthelme, and this helped my writing a great deal. I found that, as opposed to telling traditional stories that deal in characterization and plot, Barthelme tends to write stories that explore the versatility of the short story in terms of form. While I would not reduce his entire body of work to absurd for absurdity's sake, the stories of his I enjoyed the most seemed to employ a silly premise and run with it as much as they could, such as “Porcupines at the University,” where a porcupine “cowboy” tries to rustle his herd of porcupines through a university, and “The Joker's Greatest Triumph,” perhaps summarized the best on the back of the copy I read as “a hypothetical episode of Batman hilariously slowed down to soap-opera speed.” The last selection, “The Evil That Men Do,” is my humble attempt at a Barthelme emulation/rip-off.
Works Cited


Frank's jaw dangled open, barely letting out a garbled cry of shock intermingled with repulsion, as he stood frozen in his tracks. Before him stood a family of three whose son Frank had been assigned to at the local Big Brother program: Sheila, who, due to the fact that she was the only one present with a wide, beaming smile, must have been the mother; Harold, the father, standing off to the side with a frown, arms folded; and their son. True, the boy did resemble a boy, it being technically a male member of the *Homo sapiens* species of a younger generation, equipped with the usual allotment of limbs, torso and head. Nonetheless Frank was so stricken by the boy, such a boy as he had never seen before in his life, that he momentarily forgot not only the customary social behaviors for introductions but most of his motor and verbal skills in general.

— So, you must be Frank, said Sheila. I bet you can't wait to meet our son.

Frank reached for the boy's hand, assuming that whatever limb was there near the latter's shoulder was in fact an arm, offering to shake his hand, but the boy flinched his left flipper away. Frank left his open hand in the air.

— Go ahead, Sheila told Frank, you can shake his hand.

— You mean, the one coming out of his head there?

— Sure, that one. Go ahead.

Frank hesitated before grasping the hand protruding from the left socket of the boy's face and shook it before snapping his own hand away.

— We're so glad you're doing this for our son. Even if it is court-ordered.

— Oh, this isn't court-ordered, Frank replied with a stammer. My therapist told me
this would help with some anxiety issues I have...

- All the same, Sheila interrupted, he doesn't have too many friends, so it's always
top nice when someone shows an interest in him.

- He gets picked on in school, Harold said. You know, on account of his looks.

- Oh, there's nothing wrong with his looks! He's my handsome little boy, said
Sheila, tousling the spot of fur growing on top of the boy's head. He's so handsome he's
going to be a supermodel! Isn't that right, son?

- Well, that's a fine goal to aspire to, Frank added, trying not to imagine a set of
webbed, duck-like feet plopping down a catwalk. And I can see he's already on his way.
He has his father's... uh, nevermind.

- Oh no, please, go on, the boy's father interjected. He has my what? My beak?!

- Harold!

- I'm sorry, Sheila, I can't just stand here and pretend that everything is normal,
that my son doesn't have birth defects!

- Oh, here we go again! Birth defects! It's all my fault, isn't it?! It's not that our
son is just different and beautiful in his own way, it's me and my no-good uterus, isn't it?!

- For Christ's sake, Sheila, we've been over this! I told you right from the start,
you can't put twelve fertilized eggs in at once! I told you, you only have so much space to
take care of so many babies. Some of them are going to come up lacking!

- You know Father MacAllister told me not to get rid of any of them! A life starts
at conception, that's what he said!

- Father MacAllister doesn't have to take care of a half-bird, half-fish, half...
whatever!

― Well, I'm sorry you're ashamed of our children, because I love my boy just as much as our other thirty-seven children!

― WAAAAAAAAAK. WAAAAAAAAAK.

― Oh, wonderful! Now you've got him squawking!

― I got him squawking?! You were the one who—

― Well, it was very nice to meet you, interrupted Frank, mistakenly reaching for a flipper before catching himself and grasping the boy's head protrusion. I think we're just going to go ahead and play some baseball or something.

― All right, I'm going to count to three and throw the ball. When you see it come to you, swing your arm, or your head, I guess, and hit the ball with the bat. Okay? One, two, three.

Frank threw the ball as gently as he could. The ball missed the intended area and hit the boy square in the other socket, in the middle of his enlarged single eye.

― WAAAAAAAAAAK!

The eye, being able to protrude and retract at will, like a telescope, had receded into the boy's head, perhaps to lessen the damage from the impending collision between eye and ball. The ball, upon striking the head, became lodged within the empty socket of the boy's head. Frank tried to look on the bright side, that probably would have counted as a strike. He did not have much time to gain any solace from this thought, soon realizing that a boy with a baseball stuck in his only eye, running around, squawking in
pain and flailing an aluminum bat in a baseball diamond full of other small children made for an unsavory combination indeed.

- AAAAAAH! GET HIM AWAY FROM ME!
- WAAAAAAAAAK!
- HELP! HE'S HURTING ME!
- WAAAAAAAAAAK!

Frank stayed with the boy as the resident nurse removed the errant ball from his eye. While she treated the boy Frank noticed several motivational posters strewn across her wall. One had a photograph of several baby ducklings gathered around a single baby swan. A caption beneath it read APPRECIATE THE INNER BEAUTY OF ALL THINGS. Frank tried to apply this lesson to his own predicament. The boy was certainly not a beautiful boy. On the other hand, Frank noted that he was not a particularly beautiful duckling, or fish thing or whatever, either. He gave up this endeavor, apologized to the other injured children and took his leave of the nurse's office with the boy. He decided to avoid strenuous physical activities for the time being. As Frank and the boy spent the rest of the day in the activity room, the former tried to engage in friendly conversation while his charge did a bit of coloring.

- So. How's school been? Are there any girls you're interested in?
- Waaaaaak.
- Yeah, that was a stupid question, wasn't it? Anyway. Read any good books lately?
Okay. Well, I just got done reading the Republic. Have you heard of Plato?

It's a philosophical defense of justice, of how a philosopher king can rule an ideal republic.

Plato believes that there is an ideal version of the world that all humankind used to belong to. There's a Platonic, if you will, version of everything, like a table, for example. And when we are born into corporeal existence we lose the knowledge we used to have.

You see, there's this story of some people in a cave, and...

Okay, look. I'm all about looking beyond the superficiality of physical appearances and appreciating the inner beauty of people and stuff, but you really have to give me something to work with here.

Hey Frank!

Frank turned around and found his friend Gordon holding a plump boy of about seven years old by the hand, who was revealing a few missing front teeth with a bright smile.

Fancy seeing you at the same big brother program! This is my little buddy Connor.
Hi, uh, Connor. What are you doing here, Gordon?

The same thing you are, Frank! Doing my part to help out a few unfortunate, misunderstood children, who just need a sympathetic ear.

Yeah, but I *have* to do this. Why are you here?

Well, I thought I'd join you to make you feel better, but then I really just got into this whole community service thing. Oh Frank, you've gotta see my kid, he's the best!

Hey, Connor, say something precocious!

Connor batted his eyes, placed his arms behind his back, and bobbed up and down on his heels as he related to Frank the following:

My mommy says God is seventy-seven feet tall!

See what I mean? said Gordon, as he laughed and tousled Connor's blond hair.

I guess you're right, said Frank. That was fairly precocious.

Say, Connor and I are headed to the beach today. Do you want to come along and bring your little brother with you?

Sure, whatever.

Gordon noticed his drawing and peeked over his shoulder to get a better look.

Oh, that's your whole family, isn't it? Looks like you've got your father's beak.

Frank was puzzled by this statement and took a look at the drawing himself. Sure enough, it was a crude representation of the boy and his family. What was strange, however, was the boy's rendition of his father. Standing next to his mother, he indeed closely resembled the boy, beak and all. The individual Frank surmised to be Harold, however, was standing far away from the family proper, eyebrows drawn in a steep valley
and mouth wide open, probably spouting some angry ravings of some sort.

- And my daddy says Jesus can bench press fifteen elephants!

The boy once again visited the resident nurse. After removing the water in his lungs, she had her work cut out for her for the rest of the day, as she lanced the myriad boils on the boy's skin, a consequence of an apparent rare allergic reaction to external contact with water. Frank was not with the boy this time around, however. Instead, he sat outside the office of the director of the mentoring program with Gordon and waited for an impending employee/employer conference.

- Hey, Frank, I'm really sorry about this. I just thought your little brother might like to swim. You know, on account of his gills and all.

- Don't worry, it's my fault, replied Frank. I should have known they were vestigial.

When the director finally ushered them into the office, Gordon began the conference by immediately apologizing and claiming responsibility for the mishap that had occurred to the boy in Frank's care. Frank, on the other hand, took this meeting as an opportunity to make his concerns known.

- Look, he said, couldn't I just take care of a different kid? It's impossible to do anything with the one I have!

- Oh, really, he's not so bad, the director replied. Just because he looks different from other boys, and just because he doesn't enjoy the same sports that other boys do--

- He doesn't even speak! All he ever does is squawk! How am I supposed to
mentor him?

The director and Gordon exchanged shifty, telling glances, making Frank uneasy.

The director let out a sigh.

– Frank, he's deaf. Gosh, we all thought you knew.
– How could I have possibly known?
– Maybe the parents might have told you, Gordon helpfully added.
– Oh, of course! They must have neglected to tell me that while they were warning me that he gets boils when he touches water!

– Well, I guess you just have to learn sign language, said the director.

– Just learn sign language?
– What's the matter? It's easy.
– What do you mean, it's easy?! It's a whole other language!

The director nodded understandingly, then opened a drawer in the bottom of her desk and handed him a textbook that appeared be at least seven hundred pages. Frank looked through the book, titled *A is for Apple*. The first page showed a diagram of a woman holding an apple in her left hand. She held her right hand in a fist up to the edge of her mouth and rotated it up and down, using the tip of her thumb as a pivot. A is for Apple! Frank grumbled and leafed through more pages of the unwieldy tome. Each of them had the same woman signing common American Sign Language words such as horse, carrot, happiness, and quantum singularity.

– I can't even read this! Why is everything written in diagrams? Can't deaf people still read written English?
— Why Frank, the director interjected with shocked indignation, what a thing to say about those less fortunate than you!

— If I may, said Gordon, rising to his feet. If it makes him more comfortable, I wouldn't mind switching little brothers with him. Besides, I think I might get the hang of this sign language thing.

— Well, if both of you are sure, then I don't see why not.

Frank nodded to the director, who relinquished the manual to Gordon.

— But it's a shame you couldn't appreciate the inner beauty of your own little brother, Frank.

— So the people in the cave, they only see shadows of life, reflected from the fire behind them. Which, of course, allegorically symbolizes the faulty state of perception humankind is trapped in at birth... Okay, nevermind. So, what are you drawing?

— I'm drawing my family, Connor replied. Here's Mommy and Daddy, and me, and my brothers Stevie and Adam, and here's our dog, Shadow.

— Very nice, said Frank. How very original.

Frank looked at Connor's drawing, and noticed the top half of the paper partitioned off by a series of spiraling blue lines. In this partition was a man with long black hair and a beard, wearing a pair of safety goggles, hard at work with a chemist's set of tubes, bubbling chemicals and bunsen burners.

— And that's Jesus in heaven, making AIDS to cure the world of the gays.

— What?!
- Mommy and daddy says God created AIDS to cure the home-a-sexuals, and breast cancer to cure the lesbians!
- Okay, wait a minute...
- Daddy says God hasn't yet made anything to get rid of those media-running money-grubbing horn-headed cloven-hoofed Satanic Jews, but He's working on it.
- Look kid, sometimes, your parents say things that...
- I was going to put Grams in my picture too, but she's not alive anymore. She tried to get a new heart but it didn't work. Mommy says they killed a guy in jail and took his heart, so they could give it to Grams! Mommy says he was in jail for touching seven year olds! I'm seven, do you think I'm going to be touched someday?
- Jesus Christ...
- Hey Frank!

In no mood to explain the social disadvantages of anti-Semitism to Connor, Frank was thankful that Gordon had arrived with his little brother, although still put off by the presence of his freakish former mentee.
- How's my little buddy been treating you, Frank? He's real precocious, isn't he?
- Well, when he's around you...
- My little brother and I have been having a blast so far! We just got done playing bocce ball. I figured out where you went wrong, Frank. The trick is to play a game where balls are thrown somewhere else, instead of toward the other player's head.
- I'll keep that in mind.

Gordon's young charge interrupted the two of them with a loud squawk and
several frantic gyrations with his single arm. Gordon nodded and signaled several hand
signals back to his little brother, an act which Frank watched in angered astonishment.

– How do you already know sign language?!

– It was easy. After a while I didn't need the handbook anymore. I really got the
hang of it. You should give it a shot, Frank, you'd be surprised how simple it is.

– The hell it is, Frank snapped. It's a whole other language.

Once again Gordon's mentee interrupted Frank with a frenetic single-armed sign.

– What did he say that time?

– Hm. I think he said: *The one you see before me, though you regard him as a
friend, is one I find repugnant and hateful to my eyes. Throughout his tenure of coerced
stewardship of me he continuously regarded me as inferior, due to my differing physical
appearances, which I inherited at my birth and was powerless to either prevent or
control. My odd visage and limited physical capabilities were ever the subject of his
unrelenting derision and ridicule. But soon he will pay for his insolence. Mark my words,
though he is your friend, do not pity him when he earns his impending comeuppance, for
soon the day will come to pass when you shall be rewarded among the Elect for your
magnanimity, and he cast aside to suffer amongst the Preterite.*

– He said all that?

– I think so, but I'm still rusty in a few spots.

– Wow. That's pretty intense.

– Yeah. Who knew he had such a sophisticated vocabulary? Well, we're gonna
head out.
Gordon turned to his boy and asked in signs whether or not he would like to spend the remainder of their time bowling, to which he sign-replied *I bowling enjoy*, which Gordon, still rusty in a few spots, interpreted as *bowling seems to me to be a most agreeable activity of physical exertion*.

– Did you know, asked Connor, that in five years a race of aliens superior to humankind will take over our planet and enslave us until they use up all our resources and abandon earth?

– I guess I do now, Frank said with a sigh. Why don't you finish your picture already?

Of course, little Connor's prediction was grossly erroneous. In fact, it took five days, not years, for the aliens to arrive and seize power over the entire earth. It was a relatively simple task for the invaders to complete. The leaders of all the nations of the world met with the aliens, and noted the remarkable advancements in technology they displayed. In exchange for vows of perpetual fealty given by the leaders of the known world, the alien race promised to share the secrets of their prodigious prosperity.

The foreign race identified themselves as the Waaaaaaak, of the planet Waaaaaaakaak. They were searching the entire universe for what they referred to as their Waaaaaaakaak, a Waakish word which closely resembles our notion of a God Emperor, the fabled one who displays all the perfect qualities of the Waaaaaaakaak people, born by an alien mother impregnated from beyond the galaxies. It is said that this child will lead the Waaaaaaakaak to the ultimate zenith of their civilization, in harmony with the
civilization that joins them.

Gordon was clay-pigeon shooting with his little brother when he found out the news, and was further surprised to learn of the elite pedigree his young charge had inherited. As a reward for his efforts in ensuring the God Emperor's well-being, Gordon was admitted to the Elect caste and appointed a minor Judicator. Sheila was exalted as the Grand Matriarch, and ruled side-by-side with her son, Grand Emperor Waaaaaaaaak I of Earth.

– I knew it all along, screamed Harold as a handful of Elite Templar guards dragged him away to the Mega-Processor where all the Unacceptables were disposed of, I knew you were sleeping around with some half-alien, half-bird, half-fish thing! That boy looked nothing like me!

– I admit it, it's true, replied Sheila. Maybe if you knew how much a man with flippers can pleasure a woman like me, how his free hand dangling from his head can be capable of things you couldn't imagine, then you'd understand!

– That does it, Sheila! I want a divorce! I'm leaving you for good!

– Fine, go ahead and leave! I hope you'll be happy spending the rest of your life in the Mega-Processor! I'll be just fine without you, lording over the world as the Grand Matriarch with my son, who you could never give the time of day!

– We signed a prenup! Half of that world belongs to me, goddamn it...

It all made sense to Frank, as he sat in the Waaaaaaaaaak classroom, hearing the familiar, faint cry of an Unacceptable plummeting five hundred feet into a pool of
corrosive acid where the Waaaaaaaaaak Beast swam, waiting to suck out the bone
marrow of his next victim, all in a pit underneath the High Palace. It wasn't that the boy
was an ugly duckling, goose, human, fish, whatever. He was a beautiful alien, the ideal
example of handsomeness within his entire race.

Frank tried hard to pay attention to his lessons. The Waaaaaaaaaak were requiring
all humans of a lower caste to enroll in a Big Waaaaaaaaaak Program, where prominent
members of higher castes tried their best to mentor the potential Unacceptables in the
error of their ways. They started out by teaching the humans their favorite pastime,
Waaaaaakball, a sport the Waaaaakaak people regarded as Waaaaakish as
Waaaaaak pie. Unfortunately Frank had difficulty with this activity, as the
Waaaaaak baton, meant to be swung by a head-arm, was far too heavy for his feeble
shoulder-arms to carry. He swung once, threw his back out, and struck another player
with the bat, giving him a concussion. Next, the aliens tried an afternoon of swimming in
a pool of Waaaaaak fluid. However, this liquid proved to be disagreeable to Frank,
who lacked the proper modified gills to breathe in it, along with the special scales needed
to withstand the protean temperatures, ever shifting from shockingly cold to unbearably
hot. These conditions, along with his back still being sore from the last activity, almost
caused him to drown in the fluid, as well as a Waaaaaak lifeguard who had difficulty
rescuing Frank due to Frank's frantic flailing of his shoulder arms and non-webbed legs
to keep himself afloat.

These, along with several other blunders, eventually caused Frank to develop a
reputation as being difficult to mentor. It was only a matter of time before the Board of Judicators would schedule a hearing for Frank and decide his acceptability. Frank sat in his holding cell, contemplating what he could possibly say to the aliens to explain himself, or even what he could possibly say that they would understand. He was pondering a poster hanging in a room, which had a group of alien infant children, the appendages on their heads barely grown to thumbs, surrounding a human baby, and said APPRECIATE THE INNER BEAUTY OF ALL THINGS, when Gordon, dressed in his regal Judicator robes, entered his cell.

- Hey Frank. So, today's the big day, huh?

Gordon led Frank to the Grand Hall of the God Emperor, and before ushering him inside, pulled Frank aside and whispered to him.

- Listen, you're in a lot of trouble, but since you're my friend I want to help you. Try speaking in their language. Trust me, they'll appreciate the gesture and overlook your other problems.

- I have five minutes. How do you expect me to do that?

- You just have to learn Waakish. It's simple, really...

- How in the hell is it simple, Gordon?! It's a whole other language! It's a language that's not even from this planet!

- Well, they really only use one word. It all depends on the inflection. So, if I wanted to say, 'Where is the bathroom?,' that would be Waaaaaaaakaak. 'Did you happen to catch Jay Leno last night?' would be WaaaaaaJayLenoaaakaak. And if I wanted to recite a sestina from the poetic works of Elizabeth Bishop, I would say, Waaaaaaakaak, or in my
case, Waak. You know, because personally my favorite is 'Miracle for Breakfast.'

– Okay, Gordon, I appreciate your help, but I don't think...

– Time to go, Frank! Remember, it's all in the inflection! Trust me!

Before Frank could protest anymore, Gordon shoved him into the Grand Hall. All
the Judicators were present, and the God Emperor witnessed the hearing in his throne,
high above with his mother by his side. Frank took his place in the defendant's booth,
and was surprised to recognize the Chief Judicator presiding over the hearing, who
happened to be the former director of the Big Brother program of which Frank was a
former member. In an even more surprising gesture of inclusion, she had a lifeless human
arm medically grafted to her head, where the left eye used to be before it was surgically
removed. Frank would later find out that her operation to have her arms amputated and
replaced with dolphin fins was scheduled to occur in two weeks. The director held a
gavel in her head arm, but since she apparently did not have mastery over the limb at this
point, she had no choice but to grasp the head wrist with one of her shoulder arms and rap
on her podium with it, commencing the hearing. The Judicators rose from their seats and
signed to the God Emperor, who gave a benevolent sign in return. Frank scowled at this
display and turned to Gordon.

– How do the goddamn aliens know sign language?! They've only been here a week!

– Well, Frank, the Emperor is deaf, they have to communicate with him somehow.
Besides, it's not very hard to learn–

– IT IS HARD! IT'S A WHOLE OTHER GODDAMNED LANGUAGE! IT'S A
Never mind that, Frank! Remember, Waakish! Inflections!

The Judicators finished their business with their God Emperor and faced Frank with the sternest of frowns they could approximate with their alien faces, and waited for Frank to provide them an explanation for his disagreeable behavior. Frank cleared his throat and nervously shrugged his shoulders.

– Waak?

The Judicators' jaws all dropped in simultaneous shock. The Grand Matriarch gasped and covered her son's ears, so incensed by Frank's testimony that she forgot his deafness.

– Why Frank, the director exclaimed, what a thing to say about those more fortunate than you!

– I didn't say anything! I mean, I just said Waak!

At this a torrent of outraged Waakish squawks filled the Grand Hall.

– I'd thank you to leave me out of this! Shelia the Grand Matriarch snapped at Frank.

– What are you trying to do, Gordon admonished Frank, get yourself killed?

Apologize!

– I'm trying to! Waak, waak! Can't you interpret or something?! Waak!

The director silenced the squawks in the room and regarded Frank one last time. All single-eyes of the entire assembly were glued to Frank.

– WaaaaJayLenoaaaak?
Gordon groaned and buried his head in his hands. The rest of the assembly was speechless. The Emperor squawked out a demand that someone present relate to him what was said by Frank. The director signed the offending remarks. The Emperor was taken aback at first, and when he recovered after the shock of the insults he glared at Frank with his single telescopic eye that seared him to his soul. He let out the loudest, shrillest WAAAAAAADAAAAAK Waakishly possible and pointed a finger from his head-arm at the offending Unacceptable, as a handful of Templar Guards dragged him away.

Thanks to Gordon's intervention, Frank was spared the Mega-Processor. However, his bigoted, inflammatory remarks could not be ignored, so Frank was demoted to the Preterite caste, forced to live outside, ostracized from the Waaaaaakaak palaces, spending his days foraging for food in garbage dumps, squatting in abandoned buildings and engaging in turf wars with countless other Preterite gangs. This happened for a few years, while Gordon, Sheila, and the rest of the Elect enjoyed a Golden Age of Prosperity unheard of throughout the universe. But this age of prosperity, like all good things, came to an end soon. The Elect realized that they were depleting the planet's resources at an alarmingly fast rate, and at the end of the year they would no longer be able to sustain themselves. They decided to abandon Earth and return to their home world, using the combined wisdom of humans and Waaaaaakaaks to create an even shinier shining city on a hill.

But what about the Preterites? They were not bad enough to merit the Mega-Processor, true, but surely they must not reap the benefits accrued from the toil of the
Elect. Those who have not, and see others who enjoy the reapings of their own hard work, grow to resent those who have, and actively work to destroy their achievements. The Preterites could develop means of intergalactic travel and ruin their grand civilization like the termites they were. Better to abandon the entire world and all the undesirable elements within it, and, just to be sure, destroy the whole lot in a massive, nuclear fumigation. It was nearly unanimously decided that the Elect leave the base caste behind, and the few voters of this decision who were responsible for making it not unanimous were demoted as Preterites.

Anyone else who had any doubts about this course of action were soon reassured by the example of Frank. Even among the freakishly deformed Earthlings, Frank displayed an ugliness that seemed to mock Waaaaaakaakish nature. His pale, skinny arms alone were downright offensive. And how, with his lack of flippers, his small, non-webbed feet with those stubby, useless toes, and whatever that snout-like thing on his face that he used to breathe out of, could he ever hope to survive in the fluidy regions of Waaaaaakaak? His neck was comically short, nothing like the slender, snakelike neck of a proper Waaaaaakaak. Worst of all, perhaps, was his head. Instead of a nice, long beak, there were two small pink flaps of flesh, hardly ideal for scooping out Waaaaaakaak food within rock crevices. And of course, his utter lack of a head-arm. While the dual shoulder arms mocked this particular head-deformity, there was nothing on his head save for those two (two!) eyes. Even the eyes were notably freakish. Perhaps no bigger than an inch or two in circumference, and without telescopic abilities. Even among Earth standards his eyes were useless, and to make up for this deficiency he had to wear a laughable
apparatus, a set of two pieces of transparent glass held together by wire frames. Of course, one could always look beyond physical appearances and appreciate his inner beauty, but what of that was there? Along with his outrageously ugly looks, Frank showed an obsessive, even hostile, resistance to appreciating the ways of Waaaaaaaaak. Frank was an ugly Waaaaaaaaak, but he was not a particularly comely Earthling either. No, he was simply a Thing. A Thing that could not, and indeed should not, be mentored.

Frank woke up from the abandoned Starbucks and saw the palace, having been transformed into a mothership, launching itself into the atmosphere. In its place was a gigantic nuclear warhead, set to detonate in three days. Frank was upset about this as much as the next Preterit was, but what could he do? He had plenty to worry about, keeping his last can of corned beef hash safe from the latest gang. He was about to resign himself to his fate when he noticed a library across the street that piqued his curiosity. After shanking the leader of the gang who squatted there, and after the delinquent hangers-on of the dead leader left, Frank took a book off the shelf. The Republic. An oldie but goodie. This isn't so bad, he thought. For the next three days I can read as many of my favorite books as I want. He opened the book to his favorite section, anticipating the allegory he had read countless times before: Behold! Human beings living in a man curling the fingers of his left hand in a semicircle while simultaneously spinning around the aperture of the curled fingers with the index finger of his right hand before finally pointing the right finger all the way through the aperture...

What the hell? Oh, of course, the Emperor's language. What a bother. Frank took
another book off the shelf, *Notes From Underground*. This time he found a man pointing to himself, then, with his open right hand, pointing to his face with his thumb and bringing the hand down. Afterwards, with a frown on his face, he puts his right middle finger near his forehead and his left near his stomach and rotates the fingers. He repeats the first two signs and ends this series of signs by frowning once again, crooking his index fingers and raising them up from the sides of his face. *I man sick. I man wicked.*

Frank scowled and threw the book on the floor. He ransacked the entire shelf for just one properly written book, just one piece of reading material he could enjoy for his last hours of life. About fifteen minutes later he found himself sprawled on the library floor, strewn with hundreds of sign-diagrammed books. He noticed an absurdly thick book with a rocket on the cover. Frank would never have given this book the time of day in any other situation, but at this point he was desperate. Surely not this one, he thought as he picked up the offensive book and flipped to the first page. Surely no one has the patience to transcribe...

Frank looked at the page. Looking back at him was a man in a sailor’s uniform with a paper bag over his head, indicating to him *scream come across sky*. He dropped the book on the floor, burst through the library doors in a fury and shook his fist to the heavens, to the Elect abandoning the Earth, to Jesus making something to cure the Jews, to whoever may have found it in their hearts to listen to him.

– **IT'S A WHOLE OTHER LANGUAGE!**
Frank and Gordon in: Coupla Guys (Annotated by Illiternotes, Inc.)

At Illiternotes, we know that most people don’t read anymore. The demands our modern economy places on our workforce make it hard for one to read for pleasure, and most children have too much homework to read an assigned book all the way through. Sometimes it can be helpful to watch a film adaptation; however, there are a few books that have not yet been adapted into movies. This is where Illiternotes can help. Illiternotes summarizes the entire plot of any literary work in short, concise paragraphs. It takes no more than an hour to read through the Illiternotes of any book, no matter the original length. At the end of each chapter, we also explain lofty literary techniques, such as irony, symbolism, foreshadowing, characterization, theme, and any others you’ll need to pass any exam that comes your way. At Illiternotes, we explain books, so you don’t have to read them!

You hold in your hands the Illiternotes to “Frank and Gordon in: Coupla Guys” by Garrett McMahon, a short story which has (as does indeed the whole of Frank and Gordon) a notorious reputation for being difficult to read. Frank and Gordon is a massive, sprawling literary work, filled all at once with compelling drama, biting satire, and philosophical meditation. Even James Joyce himself, when trying to explain Finnegans Wake, once invoked McMahon, anticipating the great collection of short fiction which would come almost seventy years after his death: “Time and the river and the mountain are the real heroes of my book. Yet the elements are exactly what every novelist might use: man and woman, birth, childhood, night, sleep, marriage, prayer, death. There is nothing paradoxical about this. Only I am trying to build as many planes of narrative with a single aesthetic purpose. Did you ever read ‘Coupla Guys?’”
Considering that, in a recently-conducted survey, only one out of every ten English literature professors claimed to have read *Finnegans Wake*, and of those only three out of ten actually told the truth, it seems that, for Joyce to have used *Frank and Gordon* as a template for his own admittedly obtuse book, *Frank and Gordon* must be rather difficult itself. In reality, nothing could be farther from the truth. In addition to the ever-expanding literary criticism written by outstanding McMahon scholars, or ‘Franken-Gordians,’ as they like to call themselves, *Frank and Gordon* is still widely read and enjoyed by millions of happy readers around the world. According to the top McMahon scholar of our time, Theodore Q. Roche (who has himself authored this Illiternotes issue), *Frank and Gordon* is the “deepest of gold mines, which even with a lifetime of study one could not possibly exhaust. However, this mine has more than enough gold on the surface for a reader to gather, enough to retire comfortably after a single reading.” All one requires is a stick of dynamite to loosen up the gold deposits: the stick of dynamite which you hold in your hands.

**Historical Context**

Garrett McMahon was born Robert Rockhill McMahon IV on December 15, 1984, to an upper-class family in Syracuse, New York. His father, Robert Rockhill McMahon III, was descended from a colonial-era New York aristocrat, and thus the younger McMahon would have been accustomed to an extravagant lifestyle. His parents, however, deeply disturbed by the novel *1984* by George Orwell, used the entirety of McMahon III’s inheritance to built a concrete, hermetically-sealed shelter in the backyard of his childhood home, so as to shield the infant McMahon from the totalitarian regime his parents believed was sure to come. Of course, such worries of a takeover at the hands
of a warlike, mercantile, repressively conservative government were unfounded, but nonetheless McMahon spent the majority of the Reagan-Bush era in seclusion underneath five and a half feet of concrete. McMahon resented this imprisonment. This profound mistrust of people who relinquish their rights and common sense to literature dealing with people who relinquish their rights and common sense to repressive governments would heavily influence much of his literary work, including *Frank and Gordon*.

McMahon was enrolled in Kindergarten at the age of twelve, and was often abused by his classmates; because he was so much older than the other students he was thought to be less intelligent. He resented this treatment at first. However, when at fifteen McMahon had still not completed the first grade, it became clear to him that these insults were not without merit; his stunted development within the concrete shelter had, in fact, made him a legitimate idiot. Realizing that the public school system was no longer suitable for their son, his parents had him transferred to the School of Film and Animation at the Rochester Institute of Technology. During his tenure there he was required to learn the tenets of comparative mythology and apply them to each of his works; it was during this time that his *Hero's Journey* works were written, a series which he later developed into a commercially successful, albeit critically maligned, franchise which spawned fifteen sequels, each of which featured the same title, characters, plots, and resolution as the original.

On September 11, 2001, McMahon experienced a profoundly tragic event that would affect him and his work for the rest of his life: his beloved cat, MacGuffin, was struck by a moving vehicle and instantly killed. The death of his dearest pet devastated McMahon. He refused to speak to his friends or family and retreated to the concrete
shelter of his youth. It was here, in a frenzied burst of creative energy, that he would complete the massive *Frank and Gordon* in a single week. During this tumultuous period of his life, McMahon began to liken himself, and his literary work, to a force that leads the downtrodden man from darkness to a light of higher understanding. Comparing himself to the Underground Railroad, McMahon took the *nom de plume* of Garrett McMahon, naming himself after Gerrit Smith, a member of the Underground Railroad whom most historians seem to ignore.

Not enough can be said about the immense impact *Frank and Gordon* had when it was published on September 21, 2001. It sold fifty million copies upon its first release, and to this day it continues to move so many copies that out of necessity, bookselling giants Borders, Inc. and Barnes and Noble Booksellers, Inc., had to build separate branches of their bookstores that exclusively sold *Frank and Gordon*. McMahon was awarded the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes for literature seven years in a row. The work also profoundly impacted society itself, eradicating several societal injustices that had plagued the nation for years; it effectively ended the electoral college, lifted the ban on gay marriage, closed the salary gap between men and women, paid off the national debt while leaving behind a surplus of three trillion dollars, and ended racism. Burdened by the pressure to top *Frank and Gordon*, McMahon decided to abandon literary pursuits altogether. With the sanction of the United States government, he strapped himself to an atomic warhead in the shape of an open hand giving a high-five, his favorite symbol. Then, on his birthday, midnight on December 15, 2001, in front of all his family and friends, the warhead detonated, his immortal parts ascended to the skies above, and Robert "Garrett" Rockhill McMahon IV achieved apotheosis.
Major Characters

Frank: Gordon's best friend.

Gordon: Frank's friend.

Frank's Girlfriend: Frank's love interest throughout "Coupla Guys." The coupling of Frank and his girlfriend is an unexplainable phenomenon for almost everyone, including especially Frank and his girlfriend.

Immanuel Totsky-Suits: The main antagonist of "Coupla Guys." An obnoxious, hypocritical and slightly misogynistic neighbor and landlord to Frank.

Barry Pahn: A promising pre-medical student of St. Donovan's University Hospital, Barry Pahn was forced to cut his education short in order to take care of his mother, who had been diagnosed with neck cancer. He took several odd jobs to raise money for the health care his mother required, but his efforts were in vain and his mother died a month after the diagnosis.

Gordon's Mother: Nine months before Gordon's first birthday, his mother had copulated with a man, Gordon's father. In a state of intense arousal, Gordon's mother's vagina was adequately lubricated to the point where the man's penis, fully erect due to an engorgement of blood, was able to slide in and out of the vagina until it ejaculated semen. This semen contained millions of sperm cells, one of which happened to contain half of the genetic material that would later become Gordon. The sperm cell sought out an egg inside his mother's fallopian tubes, which contained the other half of genetic material that would later become Gordon. The union of gametes being completed, the fertilized egg was nurtured within Gordon's mother's uterus until nine months after the initial copulation.
Norton: A talking hot dog.

Chapter 101 Summary

Frank arrives at his apartment on a Saturday afternoon and finds Gordon already there, watching a rerun of his favorite situation comedy, *Just Like the One Before*. Frank angrily forces Gordon to turn off the television show, believing that it causes viewers to become as stupid as the characters of the show. Gordon notices a piece of string tied around Frank's index finger and asks about it. Frank tells Gordon that the next day is the anniversary of the day he met his girlfriend for the first time. This provokes a curious reaction from Gordon, who warns Frank that his girlfriend is perhaps not the ideal mate as he originally thought. Frank dismisses Gordon's friendly advice, then hears a loud noise come from his bedroom. Gordon remembers that his landlord, Immanuel Totsky-Suits, came by the apartment to make a few repairs, and is most likely working on his bedroom at this point. Frank goes to his room to investigate.

Meanwhile, Totsky-Suits and Frank's girlfriend are having sex with each other. Frank knocks on the door, and Totsky-Suits quickly forces Frank's girlfriend into a nearby closet. His girlfriend secure from Frank's scrutiny, the landlord explains that there was a rat infestation in the apartment. Due to the ban on household pets, and therefore a lack of a cat to catch them, he decided to take care of the matter himself. Frank inquires about the lack of mousetraps anywhere in the apartment, and his quick-thinking landlord replies that he has sprinkled an invisible, odorless powder throughout the premises, made of a synthetic compound of cheese which mice cannot resist. When mice eat the substance, he explains, they explode into dust, emitting a loud, feminine-sounding, mid-coital screech. More or less satisfied with the explanation, but still suspicious of Totsky-Suits' motives,
Frank leaves the room.

Chapter 101 Analysis

The invocation of Muses is a tradition that hearkens back all the way to the early epic poets such as Homer and Virgil. The belief was that a story could not be told with the grandeur it merited without divinely-inspired genius. This tradition is repeated by such figures as Dante Alighieri, John Milton, and Edmund Spenser, who appropriate the trope in their own terms, appealing to their Christian god. While each of these authors wished to emulate the classic poets, each also wanted to surpass them, and McMahon was no different. Of course, McMahon was no believer in the pantheon of Classical antiquity, but unlike the poets that followed Homer, McMahon had no use for Christianity. Eschewing faith and atheism all at once, McMahon decided to invoke his own imaginary muse, the “God of Totally Awesomeness,” invoking him and her (according to McMahon, the god was a transsexual) to “make this shit totally blow your minds, man.”

McMahon also clearly intends to invoke Virgil himself in his treatment of the relationship between Frank and his girlfriend. The relationship is often compared to the destructive love affair between Aeneas and Dido, as depicted in the *Aeneid*. Just as Aeneas was kept from his duty to found Rome by wasting his time with Dido, so Frank is distracted from realizing that his girlfriend is actually, as Gordon warns Frank in his own words, “a notorious whore.” Many feminist critics have commented on the one-sided depiction of the girlfriend. Indeed, much like Virgil’s own character Lavinia, she rarely speaks, except (unlike Lavinia) during intense coital arousal. She is also never given a proper name, instead referred to as either “Frank's girlfriend,” “the gonorrhea lady,” “slutty-slutty bundt-cakes,” “titties McGruff,” and at times simply “titties.” It should be
noted that McMahon was far from a misogynist; indeed, he had two sisters and a mother in his family. He merely uses the Virgillian model of a temptress who dissuades the hero from his epic duty, a model that surpasses feminist theory, in terms of longevity, by several centuries.

Frank's willingness to trust anyone, no matter how damaging they may be to his well-being, is also clearly set up in the beginning of 'Coupla Guys,' as shown when he criticizes the limited intelligence of the characters in Just Like the One Before while ironically believing in Totsky-Suits' obvious lie. Anyone, of course, would recall that mice prefer peanut butter, not cheese. Totsky-Suits is also clearly set up as a dangerous manipulator with no loyalties to anyone, even Frank's girlfriend. First he performs the sexual maneuver colloquially known as the “Tony Danza,” in which, during coitus, the dominant partner asks “Who's the boss?,” and the lover, after presumably replying that the dominant partner is indeed the boss, is then given a “donkey punch” by the offender who then says “No, bitch, Tony Danza!” Totsky-Suits then plays a cruel psychological game with the girlfriend, once again asking her “Who's the boss?” The girlfriend, not wishing to be struck again, replies “Tony Danza,” and yet Totsky-Suits gives her another “donkey punch,” asking her “Who's this other man you're sleeping with?!”

Chapter 102 Summary

The next day, Frank and his girlfriend celebrate the anniversary of their relationship. They go to various restaurants, but each one is insuitable for the girlfriend. The pair finally settle on a restaurant called Wimsatt and Beardsley's (named for the famous culinary duo whom McMahon admired in his time), known for not having a menu and serving whatever the chefs decide to make for each customer, all for $30 per
person. The pair finish their meals and Frank picks up the tab. Frank then presents her with a series of gifts, each of which is snubbed by his girlfriend. Frank tells her that the landlord cleared his bedroom of mice, implying that he wishes to sleep with her that night. His girlfriend giggles to herself, knowing the truth behind his error, and gives him an excuse that she is late for her salsa dancing lessons. She makes a hasty retreat, and Frank wonders to himself, “Since when has she taken up salsa dancing?” Meanwhile, Gordon takes a walk into the city and buys himself a hot dog.

**Chapter 102 Analysis**

McMahon presents us with more evidence of Frank's girlfriend's lackluster interest in him and general infidelity. In this scene he also presents his attitudes of contemporary criticism, by way of his famous “Allegory of the Unrequited Gifts.” Despite trying to please his girlfriend in any way he can, Frank's girlfriend refuses each gift that he attempts to give, all of which represent a faction of what literary critic Harold Bloom coined as the “School of Resentment.” Representing New Historicism, Feminism, Queer Theory, and African American Theory respectively, she rebuffs a bouquet of flowers and box of chocolates (because they are a cliché), a luxurious pink purse (because such an item is what women are stereotypically *supposed* to like), a pair of hiking boots (because, despite her love of hiking and the outdoors, such boots are what “a dyke wouldn't be caught dead wearing”), and a fine diamond ring (because Frank is ignorant of “how many starving Africans had to die and stuff” to mine it). Through the unsympathetic treatment Frank receives despite his earnest efforts to please, McMahon makes it clear that literature, and specifically his own, should be judged by its own merits and not by political agendas.
Meanwhile, the episode of Gordon and the hot-dog, while seemingly unrelated to the rest of the chapter, nonetheless reinforces an important theme of “Coupla Guys.” Gordon is presented with a choice between a hamburger or a hot dog; Gordon picks the phallic hot-dog while avoiding the hamburger, here depicted as somewhat vaginal in nature. Such a choice tends to reveal subtle homoerotic undertones between Gordon and Frank. It is also noteworthy that while the hot dog in question is consumed, Gordon hums in his head the jingle to his favorite sitcom, *Just Like the One Before*: “Just a coupla guys!/ Doin' a coupla things!/ In the exact same way/ others did it before!/ Oh yes, just like the one before!” The sitcom jingle and the show itself are meta-representations of his own friendship with Frank; Gordon wishes to remain being “A Coupla Guys” with Frank, and resents his girlfriend, an obstacle to their own homosocial bonding. Yet in much the same way one would wonder why he buys a hot dog rather than the hamburger as any normal heterosexual would do, one could ask why is it so important that Frank and Gordon remain such good friends? Why is Gordon so invested in his happiness, and so concerned with the mistreatment he suffers at the hands of his girlfriend? One possibility is that Gordon secretly wishes to take Frank's girlfriend out of the picture, that he may bed him himself.

**Chapter 103 Summary**

Gordon returns to Frank's apartment, ready to catch another rerun of *Just Like the One Before*. He hears a strange noise coming from Frank's bedroom, and when he inspects it he finds Frank's girlfriend and Totsky-Suits once again copulating, Totsky-Suits wearing a Ku-Klux-Klan hood and cloak. Gordon admonishes both of them. Totsky-Suits reveals to Gordon that, along with Frank's girlfriend, he has been plotting a
scheme to ruin Frank. The couple has already agreed to marry each other, and due to a complex system of divination which takes several pages to fully explain, Totsky-Suits has discovered that Frank will soon inherit a sizable fund. He has schemed with Frank's girlfriend, now revealed to be the demon succubus known as Sehalaarpak. She will reveal her true form, suck the soul out of Frank with her maw of seventy-eight sets of jaws, and in return give the inherited money to the landlord, since the spawn of Hell have no need for earthly treasures. Gordon is incensed by the plot on his friend's life, but is unable to say anything except "You should be ashamed of yourselves. You use women like objects! And, also, members of the opposite gender too..." At this point, Totsky-Suits gives Gordon his reply, which has become the most famous reply in the whole of Frank and Gordon: "Yeah, well, your mama let me use a few of her objects last night! If you know what I mean!"

Gordon in a frenzy hurries to the nearest phone to prove or disprove the statement. Before his mother can reply, Totsky-Suits and the succubus cast a spell on Gordon which puts him in a hallucinatory trance. Gordon is persecuted by hallucinations of his mother, Frank, his girlfriend, Totsky-Suits, and finally, of Norton, a large anthropomorphic hot dog. Finally, Barry Pahn helps Gordon escape from the nightmare.

Chapter 103 Analysis

The hallucinatory sequence that Gordon experiences, despite "Coupla Guys" being a short story, is one of the longest ever written in the English language. Not much happens in this scene; indeed, in real time the whole scene takes about two seconds. This has lead to a common practice among publishers of Frank and Gordon wherein they remove the sequence and publish it separately as Frank and Gordon in: Coupla Guys in:
Gordon's Long Hallucination Sequence Thing. Understandable as this procedure is to promote ease of readability, it has created a misconception among most readers that the sequence is entirely devoid of merit. While it is true that nothing happens dramatically in the scene, nonetheless one can discern many aspects of Gordon's inner consciousness.

The sequence is made of a series of hallucinations that either persecute Gordon in some way, such as when his mother tells him “Yes, it is true that Immanuel Totsky-Suits used several of my objects, if you know what I mean,” or fulfill some sort of personal wish, such as when his mother admits, “No, as a matter of fact Mr. Totsky-Suits actually used none of my objects, if you know what I mean. In fact, I don't believe I even know him.” Another moment of note is the long chase scene between Gordon and Norton, the anthropomorphic hot dog, which represents Gordon's insecurities and phallic fascinations. Ironically, the chase leads Gordon to climb up several phallic erections stacked atop each other in order to escape Norton, such as the Eiffel Tower, the Washington Monument, both buildings of the former World Trade Center, the statue of Jesus Christ in Rio de Janiero, and the world's largest pencil, sixty five feet tall and encased in a glass dome in an Eberhard-Faber plant in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

When Gordon reaches the top of the Malaysian pencil, he meets Barry Pahn, who banishes Norton by demonic powers, as a result of Faustian deals made to preserve the life of his mother. Barry Pahn is an interesting character for Gordon to meet because, until now, it has always been Frank, and not Gordon, who has encountered him throughout the adventures within Frank and Gordon. Gordon, then, is not merely hallucinating, since a person he had no previous knowledge of could not possibly become a figment of his own subconscious. The meeting of Barry Pahn is a fantastical piece of
Magical Realism which could only be concocted from the subconscious of McMahon himself, an exercise in meta-fiction where the characters of his own story traverse the depths of the author's own imagination.

Chapter 104 Summary

Frank and his girlfriend are about to be married, and Totsky-Suits, who acquired a priest-license over the Internet, presides. Gordon races to the chapel with hopes that he can stop the ceremony, overcoming several obstacles while pedaling on his bike. As Totsky-Suits says “Speak now, or forever hold your peace,” Gordon bursts through the chapel doors, opting not to forever hold his peace. He reveals that the sinister landlord and Frank's girlfriend are working in concert to ensure Frank's ruination. The bride reveals her true form and attempts to suck the soul out of Gordon. The latter recites an incantation taught to him by Barry Pahn and banishes Sehalaarpak back to the sixth circle of Hell, where the Heretics live. Frank joins Gordon and the rest of the congregation in tarring and feathering Totsky-Suits. The story ends in a musical number involving the entire cast, a reprise of the Just Like the One Before jingle.

Chapter 104 Analysis

If nothing else, McMahon is simply a master at his craft of storytelling. The conclusion of “Coupla Guys” creates suspense in a way unprecedented in any other medium of fiction ever created. Indeed, many people who have read this story needed hospitalization, their anticipation of the conclusion actually leading to several cases of heart failure. Some of these victims have taken McMahon and the publishers of Frank and Gordon to court over the issue. In the landmark case of Morganthau vs. McMahon, judge James O'Brien dismissed the plaintiff's case and ruled that Frank and Gordon is not
a hazard to health, remarking, “It’s literature, and it’s damned good at that! You’re fine now, so get over it, and get some culture while you’re at it!” Judge O’Brien’s case was significant in several ways. Not only allowing the public access to Frank and Gordon, the case affirmed McMahon’s profound skill in alright, enough. Enough!

I’m sorry, I can’t do this anymore. I just can’t take it any longer! I mean Jesus Mary and Joseph on a goddamned stick, are you guys for fucking real?! A master at his craft?! This is the same ending that every single bad romantic comedy shot out by Hollywood studio fat cats has ever had! OOOOH, he stops the wedding just as the priest says, “Speak now or forever hold your peace.” Gee whiz, I’ve never seen that before! Doesn’t anyone realize that this guy is just making up this shit as he goes along?! Doesn’t anyone realize that the only way to write about this is to also make up similar bullshit as one goes along?! I never even wanted to be a McMahon scholar! I wrote my own book, you know that? It affirms the spirit and humanity of the common man, it uses poetry to tell a moving narrative, and it edifies the reader with profound philosophical implications. Oh, you’ve never heard of it, huh? Big fucking surprise, I could never get the damned thing published! It might as well be my fault, I guess I forgot to include enough sparkling vampires and precocious British children on broomsticks or whatever the hell kind of puerile bullshit you plebeians devour en masse like the herd of hungry bloated idiot hippopotami that you all are! Oh, but Teddy, you’ll never publish that! Teddy, you should get a Ph.D in that book that Garrett McMahon wrote, that’s where the moooney is, Teddy! Yeah, thanks for all your faith in me, ingrates! Oh, what’s that, Dr. Moscowitz, you fat herpes-ridden balding imbecile, you want to reject every single proposal I offer to the board? Don’t worry Mr. Roche, we’ll go ahead and approve this proposal. Twelfth
times the charm, heheheh! Oh, wow, Dr. Moscowitz, you mean I can write my feminist approach to *Frank and Gordon* if I really want to?! You know, the one I only half-seriously proposed since I honestly thought there was no good reason why it would have been accepted as opposed to any of the others? Cause you know, in a book about two *male* best friends, of course what the people are clamoring for nowadays is the GODDAMN D FEMINIST ANGLE!!!!!! This book has ruined my life! My wife just left me, my son thinks I'm worthless, I'm five months late on my mortgage payments and I just found out they're demolishing my house so they can put up a *Frank and Gordon* emporium. I only agreed to do this so I could afford more Jack Daniels! But no more! I'm sick of coming up with different ways to read and interpret the same book. I'm ending it, tonight. I'm standing atop the glass dome that houses the world's tallest pencil in Kuala Lumpur, sixty five feet tall. I just swallowed an entire bottle of Vicodin. If that doesn't do it, I tied a rope to my neck that is thirty feet long. If the rope snaps before my neck does, the remaining thirty five feet should do the job. If not, I have my revolver duct-taped to my head, and my finger simultaneously taped to the trigger. The fall should cause my finger to jerk and pull the trigger, spreading the oh-so fecund expertise of Theodore Q. Roche's head all over the glass dome. No chances! I'm through with this world, this toxic waste dump of mediocre literature and mediocre minds! *Au revoir*, fuckers! Goodbye, Dickbreath Moscowitz and my cunt of a wife and my brat of a son who could give a fuck anyhow! And you, all of you moronic readers! This is above all your fault! My blood is on your hands!

********

*This issue of Illiternotes is dedicated to Dr. Theodore Q Roche, a brilliant scholar who*
has fallen on hard times. He recently survived an accident at an Eberhard-Faber plant in Kuala Lumpur, the site of the World's Largest Pencil famously featured in the bestselling novel Frank and Gordon, and is now in critical condition. Proceeds from this issue of Illiternotes will go to the recovery fund for Dr. Roche. Our prayers and best wishes are with Dr. Roche and his family.
Workplace

You do not remember your name, or where you are from, or even your age, although when you look at yourself you appear to be a white male, 18 years old, dressed in a plain white button-down shirt and black tie. You think something bad might have happened to you recently, but you cannot remember what. Now you are waiting in a bare office room, for someone who may or may not arrive. You look at the contents of the desk before you. There are a few scattered papers, a row of pewter balls that swing back and forth on a pendulum, and a gold-plated nametag that simply reads OSCAR. You look to your left. The wall is covered with framed pictures of a fat man at a beach, engaged in frivolity with several others, wearing nothing more than a purple beach thong and a top hat. You notice the thong does little to hide his prominent rolls of fat and errant pubic hairs, and this provokes a feeling of mild nausea which you nonetheless quickly overcome. You look to your right. There is a stack of neatly arranged fine china, a baseball bat leaning against the wall, and a chart with the words 37 DAYS WITHOUT INCIDENT written in black marker.

Finally a man enters the office, also dressed in a white button-down shirt and black tie. He warmly greets you and offers to shake your hand. You oblige him politely and say nothing more. He motions for you to have a seat. He must be Oscar, you think to yourself, because he is so familiar with the room, and yet he looks much more like a Joseph or Michael, or something biblical to that effect. He pulls out a file from a shelf.

- So, you must be the new guy our Human Resources department told us about.
- Virgil, sir.

You answer the man almost immediately, and this surprises you. You do not
remember your name, but you are almost sure it is not Virgil, and you wonder how you came to that conclusion. He seems to read your confusion, and shows you a photograph of a white male, about 18 years of age. You have not seen your face in a mirror for some time, but you realize that you and the boy in the photograph are the same person, or must have been once.

- Virgil, eh? The Swan of Mantua...

He cracks a smile and relishes the last syllables of his sentence. He seems to be expecting a response, as if he told you a joke, but you do not get it. Whoever picked this name for you must have done so simply so he could say this joke. Oscar gives up and peruses your file.

- So tell me about yourself.
- Where should I start?
- Tell me how you were referred to us.
- How I got here?
- Sure, sure.

You stammer for a moment and wonder what you are going to tell Oscar. Even though you have no idea why you are in his office, why any office referred you to this place, or what your goal is here, you nonetheless want to make a good first impression, you do not want to look like a fool on your first day here. You close your eyes and try to remember something. You are standing by a road with somewhat heavy traffic, and several others your age are walking past you, talking to others and ignoring you. You are dressed more formally than necessary, more than anyone else appears to be, in a fashion not at all dissimilar to your current host. You are looking up at the sky. You start to
remember things a little better.

– Well, sir, the last thing I remember was, I was walking out of my school. Class had gotten out. I stopped by the road, waiting for traffic to stop, and I started to talk to someone.

You try to remember your conversation partner.

– I was praying.

– Praying, eh? You must have been an Anabaptist?

His interruption catches you offguard. You reply that you are almost positive you were not an Anabaptist. You try to remember more. You remember that

– Not a Christian, huh? A Muslim then?

A what? You try to remember. There is a

– You must have had the rug out and all that jazz? Tell me, how is it you people are able to tell which way is Mecca, it being such a far away city and all?

Mecca? Rug? Jazz?

– I, don't think I was a Muslim, sir.

– Ah. I see.

He seems puzzled by your reply. He clicks his pen and jots a note on your file.

– Not, a, Muslim. Please, continue.

There was a girl you used to like. You let her borrow your notes for Biology class, and she was appreciative of this gesture.

– Oooh, tell me about her.

– Well, I think her name was

– Ashley?
Perhaps, you think to yourself. You nod and try to remember. Ashley had long brown

- Do you remember her bust size, by any chance?

He lets out a hearty laugh before you can reply to his question. You quietly laugh along with him in order to save face. He clicks his pen again.

- Bust, size, pending. Please, continue.

Your prayer had something to do with this Ashley woman. You suddenly remember your prayer verbatim. It is as follows: Lord, I thank you for answering my prayers by having (Ashley? You are still a little hazy here) notice me in AP Calculus (not Biology, oh well) today. I knew you were listening when I told you how I felt about her, and sure enough she asked me if she could look at my notes. With your help, Lord, I’m sure she’ll stop spending so much time with those assho- jerks, sorry, Trent Sherwood and Drew Lockhart and finally realize that I’m the better guy for her. Lord, I ask you that in our upcoming dates with each other, you take away my awkwardness and keep me at the top of my game romantically, so that she’ll like me up until we graduate, and stay faithful to me while I’m away in college, and when we do get married, Lord, preserve our relationship, in Jesus name, amen. You remember your fierce devotion to whichever creed you happened to subscribe to at the time, barring Islam and Anabaptism, and you were almost certain your appeal would be promptly answered.

- Well, as I said, I was praying. There was this girl, Ashley I guess. I thanked God for letting her notice me. I was always having girl problems, you know.

- Oh, sure. Naturally.

- Then I said, you know, guide me in the way you want me to go. I crossed the
street...

— And then?

You remember something unpleasant.

— And then, I guess the freight truck hit me.

— Nice! So that's how you got here?

— Well, as I understood it later, the brake pads on the ambulance were faulty that day, so...

— Oh, scrumptious!

Oscar giggles to himself, clicks his pen and scribbles a note in your file. For some reason his reaction to the events of your death surprises you more than your own.

— Now, you may have some pretty grim preconceived notions about our workplace environment here. Well, I'm here to tell you, most of them are true.

Oscar is leading you by the hand through a bare hallway full of doors, each one the same.

— But you may not know that we also have quite a few things to offer here that no one else has. Rock stars, for example. There are hundreds of dead rock stars, indeed, dead famous people in general, all under this very roof!

An old surf-rock song plays on an intercom in all the rooms and throughout the hallway, tinny-sounding and lo-fi like supermarket Muzak.

— Let's take a bit of a shortcut, shall we?

He stops at a door and opens it. You enter the room and can barely see three feet ahead of you. The floor is covered with dirt, the clinking sounds of metal against metal fill
the room, sounds of iron chains and grinding cogs of machines. A whip cracks over the
din and a man howls in agony. Oscar leads the way through the dark and noisy room, and
your eyes begin to adjust. You see dirty, bleeding, ragged men and women, handcuffed to
chairs, chained to walls, forced to sustain various painful positions. They are all
unrecognizable due to the black burlap sacks they wear over their heads. Others, dressed
in the same business casual attire you and Oscar wear, their faces hidden by black
domino masks, are whipping and beating the unfortunate people covered in the hoods,
putting them inside iron maidens, turning the wheels on racks. They seem to be using
every variant of torture you have seen in those old Medieval wood carvings, and perhaps
a few more you have neither heard of nor care to learn about.

- Oh! Photo op!

Oscar stops at a torturee handcuffed to a chair, a live car battery nearby. The
masked torturer steps away and produces a Polaroid camera. Oscar ushers you to the left
side of the man and gives you the positive cable on the battery. The torturer holds up the
camera. Oscar takes the negative cable, holds it just before the man's crotch, and smiles at
the camera, giving a thumbs up sign. You hold the cable and stare dumbly at the camera,
the torturer snaps the picture. Oscar places the cable on the man's genitals, and motions
for you to do the same. You are unresponsive, so he helpfully takes the cable out of your
hands and finishes the job. He snatches the picture and leads you to the exit. You hear the
pops and crackles of the battery intermingled with his scream as you leave, and the smell
of his burning flesh lingers with you. The exit leads to another hallway that looks exactly
like the first. The Muzak is still playing, the sheer number of identical doors and endless
length of hallway makes your head reel, and you can barely keep up with Oscar.
So where was I? Oh yes, rock stars. You've got your suicides all here, of course, Kurt Cobain, Ian Curtis, Elliott Smith and what have you...

Further along, you see a wall with a large bloodstain on it. The walls become progressively filthier, stained with more blood, vomit, and rust. You feel broken glass crunch under your shoes as you keep following Oscar.

We also have the entire contents of the American Pie, most members of Lynrd Skynyrd—Oh! The Beatles! Hello, the greatest band of all time?!

You try to listen to Oscar, but the hallway is full of just as many distractions as the previous room. Each door has a small glass panel, from which can be seen a padded room that houses a single person obscured by a black hood, banging on the doors and begging to be let out.

I mean, George and John are here, Paul’s pretty much on his way, or at least he should be, considering that whole Wings debacle. And Ringo, well, I guess he was just the drummer, any will do really, and besides, Pete Best is here if we really need someone.

A door bursts open in front of you. A man, barely able to drag himself across the floor, desperately tries to escape the room. Oscar disregards him, stepping over his body and moving along. You turn around and keep watching the man dragging himself along, preferring the broken glass grinding against his arms to whatever the room holds inside. It does not take long for you to realize why. A loud roar from some sort of feral beast erupts from the room, and a gigantic furry paw slams on top of the man, embedding his talons inside his back and dragging him back inside.

But think about it!

The door to the unlucky man's cell slams shut, and at almost the same instant
Oscar spins around and faces you, snapping you out of your reverie.

- This is the only place in existence where a reunion of the original Beatles lineup is possible! Isn’t that exciting?!

You want to express your outrage at what you saw, or at least ask for some explanation as to what you just saw, or explain that there must have been some sort of mistake, there is simply no way you belong here, you were a devout Anabaptist that followed to the letter all the necessary doctrines, but wait, you weren’t an Anabaptist, were you? You want to say something, but nothing comes out of your mouth except an awkward, guttural stammer. Oscar frowns and sighs to himself:

- Not a Beatles fan, eh? Oh well.

Oscar places a hand on your shoulder and leads you along the opposite side of the hallway, stretching his free hand to motion toward the entire complex.

- So! You’ve got a chance to look around our little workplace. It’s customary that our new referrals choose where they end up for the rest of their time here. What do you think? Will you be counted among the rest of the unfortunates? Or will you be working for us?

Anything you might wish to tell Oscar is blocked up in your throat. Oscar laughs and gives you a pat on the back that almost knocks you over.

- Fantastic! Welcome aboard!

- It is my pleasure to welcome you to your first session. The balloons are for you.

You hand the rainbow-colored balloons to the man sitting before you, duct-taped to a chair in a dark, dingy room, his head covered with a black hood. The man grunts a
reply through a gag stuck in his mouth. You consult your training manual for the standard response for a prospect’s refusal of complimentary balloons, but you find nothing.

- Okay, I guess I'll hold the balloons for now...

You consult the manual again. Stick to the ask ladder, it admonishes you. Open with an ask of one thousand dollars.

- So, I'd like to start by asking if you'd be willing to contribute one thousand dollars.

The prospect grunts something inaudible. You consult the manual once again.

- I understand sir, of course not everyone is prepared to make a contribution of that size, but we never know unless we ask. I'm now instructed to tell you that I'm taking out a canister of lighter fluid. Since, I guess you can't see through the hood...

The prospect screams through his gag, and you look to a small table placed at your right. There is a box on top of it with the words RAPPORT-BUILDING INSTRUMENTS written on it. You find the lighter fluid within and place it on the table.

- Okay, perhaps you're willing to contribute five hundred dollars? Or maybe four monthly installments of one twenty-five?

The prospect keeps screaming, and the manual instructs you to pour the lighter fluid over his head upon a second refusal. You do as the manual instructs you.

- Well, sir, we're even willing to accept a contribution at a level of fifty, or even two monthly installments of twenty-five a month. They may not seem like much, but they do add up.

The prospect, as you had predicted to yourself, refuses once again. You are instructed to search within the rapport-building instruments for a lighter. You click the
lighter in front of his face three times and tell the prospect, as the manual tells you to do, that his surviving wife and two children are disappointed in his weak resolve. Then you light the lighter. Your sleeve erupts into flames. You scream and run around the room, frantically waving your arm around to put out the flames, and the prospect, having long since given up any hope of making any sizable contributions, yells just as loud as you do.

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- So. Roughly, percentage wise, how much of the combustible agent was successfully combusted upon the prospect?

- Percentage wise, roughly... zero percent.

You look at the floor of Oscar’s office in shame, your right shirtsleeve seared off, brittle and browned, so that your shirt appears to be a makeshift toga. Oscar is frowning at you, a facial expression you have never seen on his face before, and this makes you nervous.

- But, I mean, roughly. It may be a little more, like one or two percent or maybe, less. I was, running around a lot, I didn’t get a chance to see...

This caveat does not impress Oscar. He lets out a sigh and clenches his eyes shut. He glares at the stack of fine china. You look to the same place, notice that the sign now says 39 DAYS WITHOUT INCIDENT. He then takes out some prescription pills and a bottle of water. He puts two pills in his mouth and gulps down some water.

- Hey there! Chin up, will you? No worries. It’s no problem. It’s your first time, this sort of thing happens to the best of us! Well, it never happened to me, true, but that’s neither here nor there! Just write up a detailed report and try to do better next time, yes?

- But, I didn't get a pledge...
Oscar lets out a laugh, gets up from his seat and places a hand on your shoulder.

– Virgil, Virgil, Virgil... You don't understand, it's not about the pledges. You really think any of them have money?

– But...

– Oh, look, your shirt.

Oscar snaps off a piece of your burnt shirt.

– Yeah, I guess I have to get a new one...

– Please, take mine.

Oscar begins to loosen his tie and unbutton his shirt.

– Oh, you don't have to...

– Don't be silly, I own nine hundred and seventy-two thousand eight hundred and fifty-three others. I can easily replace it.

He removes his shirt and gives it to you. Amid his undeveloped, hairy abdomen, you cannot help but notice a piece of lint stuck in his bellybutton. You turn your eyes away in embarrassment.

– Well, go ahead, put it on.

You hesitate for a moment, then remove your own burnt shirt and replace it with Oscar's.

– Ah! Just as I thought, a perfect fit! Just don't go burning this one on me, too!

Okey dokey, you take care now! Bye bye!

He slaps you on the shoulder and ushers you out slamming the door in your face.

You are late for your next appointment. You thought you had everything under
control until you opened the wrong door. You were supposed to rendezvous with your next prospect in room 1385A. Since there are no numbers on any of the doors you figured out that this room is located fifty three doors past your own office, but on the way you miscounted and went into 1383A. The door led to another bare hallway full of more doors, this one being hallway B, which you entered through door 527. You tried to turn around and retrace your steps, but 527B leads to door 132C. In this hallway there is a sign on a door that points toward hallway A, which leads to door 4753-1A. Perhaps a shortcut through 4653-23A, only a little ways past 4753-1A, will lead to 356C which a few doors down will point you back to 527B but the wing in hall C which leads to door 527B is blocked off for construction, so you follow the short detour through 654/328/5C which leads to 55579A which leads to 4003C which leads to 004-72B which leads to 8562A which finally brings you to 526B. You go to the next door, 525B, hoping you can retrace your steps back to 1383A, and realize just as the door shuts that you actually wanted to go to 527B. 525B leads to 754C, and a few doors down 728C brings you back to 4003C, and next door through 4002C leads to the beach.

What? The sun is in your eyes, and you are staring at an azure sky. You look at yourself, your work clothes are gone, replaced with a tropical flowery pair of swimming shorts. You dig your toes into the sand, it feels nice after walking through the long hallways in your constrictive dress shoes. The sun is too bright, so you put on your sunglasses. Much better. You hear music.

A live surf rock band is playing the ubiquitous song that comes through the intercoms. The fat man in the top hat from the hundreds of pictures on the walls is dancing along with other happy beachgoers. His rolls of fat bounce and roll up and down,
creating a hypnotic, wavelike rhythm that mimics the ocean he dances next to.

- Gosh, I sure hate this song! Don't you all hate this song?

A few dancing beachgoers, apparently great fans of the song, boo at the fat man's polemic, while others cheer in approval.

- Don't you all wish someone would just shoot the singer or something?

The naysayers discourage this course of action, while the others continue to cheer the fat man on. Suddenly a fat-man-in-top-hat-supporter dancing near his person produces a shotgun, points it at the band, and blows the head of the lead guitarist clear off. His body topples to the ground, making his guitar clang with loud, feedback-driven twang upon collision. His neck looks like a can of red paint tipped over and emptied. The band disregards the fallen guitarist, the rhythm guitarist decides to pick up the slack and play his own solo while the bassist and drummer lay down the necessary foundation.

- You can't always get what you want!

The fans of the band run away screaming. The others laugh at the fat man's jibe and continue dancing. You approach the beach party.

- Who are you? I've seen you all around the office.

- The god of Chaos, the patron saint of those who defecate in public buildings to commemorate the Most Holy Anniversary of the Kennedy Assassination, those who climb into discarded refrigerators with a benediction on their lips to the eight arrows, all starting at one point and going any old which way, the eight rays of the exploding Supernova of the Sun, the Psychopomp and Circumstance himself, Humphrey Archibald Von McCutcheon the Seventh!
Oh. Well, Mr. Von...

The fat man points to the man with the shotgun.

No, you've got it all wrong! I was talking about him! He's the true Humphrey Archibald Von McCutcheon the Seventh!

The fat man snatches the gun away, points the business end of it at the true McCutcheon VII's lower back and pulls the trigger. The man looks at the hole in his abdomen and shrugs.

Or at least I used to be.

He falls to the sand dead. The fat man steps over his body and shakes your hand.

You look like you got a bit the ol' quotidian in that sad mug of yours. Let me tell you a secret. The world you knew and the world you know is made up of structure, and that structure is built on a solid foundation of human suffering. When you eat a loaf of bread you leave someone else to starve. When you give a naked man your shirt, you're left bare-chested and he's left bare-legged and you both end up dying of pneumonia. You do your duty to God and Country, diametrically opposed to your neighbor's God and Country. When you eventually meet up, you fight until one of you dies, then repeat as necessary. Listen to me, man! You have any idea how much you're making others suffer by preserving your own life? They want you to pay that all back in interest, but you can beat them at their own game! Listen, man! Don't think about anything but yourself! Don't even think about me! Do whatever you can, not just to survive, but to survive in the best way! Don't just make your life better, but personally make sure that other lives are living as horribly as possible! You're making people suffer anyway, so why not make them suffer as much as you can? When you meet a stranger, slap them in the face, then turn the
other cheek for them and slap again! When it comes to handcuffing people next to a ticking timebomb, I say keep your friends close and your enemies closer! Take your boss' job, throw his ass out to the curb, and invite the workstaff over to laugh at him while he waits in line for the welfare check! Have a Menendez party, invite your parents! When God Almighty welcomes you with open arms into Paradise, kick him in the balls, then steal the title deed while he's down and put up a parking lot! You get what I'm saying, man?! Listen, don't thank me, I don't want your thanks goddamn it, and anyway I'm not even sure if I like you. First of all, I'm not helping you, I'm denying help to five billion, nine hundred and ninety-nine million nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-eight other people, and second of all, how do you even know what I'm saying is going to help you anyway?! How do you know I'm not actually trying to fuck you over like a Saigon whore playing a game of leapfrog?! Answer me that and stay fashionable in your little smarty pants, will you now?! You can't, can you?! I thought so! Now get out of my face!

He stops shaking your hand, pushes you away from the beach party and back through the door. You find yourself back in your workplace hallway, back in your workplace clothes, standing in front of door 1385A. You check your watch, and you are right on time.

– It is my pleasure to welcome you to your first session. The balloons are for you.

Despite these cheerful words you are not in a good mood. On top of the work you perform on a daily basis, on top of your supervisor constantly talking down to you, and on top of the feeling that you will have this job forever, you just know that your prospect
will not accept the balloons today. You start to tie the balloons to a leg on the table when the prospect speaks to you. You recognize her voice.

- Balloons?! What the hell is going on? What am I doing here?

You rip the black hood off her face.

- Ashley?
- No, I'm not Ashley...
- It's me, Virgil.

She gives you a blank stare.

- You know, the Swan of Mantua?

She neither recognizes this epithet nor finds it particularly amusing.

- I, let you borrow my notes in AP Calculus the other day...
- Oh, the Mormon kid. Yeah, I remember you. Thanks, by the way.
- No problem, but what are you doing here?

The girl, formerly Ashley, furrows her eyebrows and thinks back.

- Well, if I had to guess, I must have hanged myself.
- You killed yourself?
- No, I hanged myself. Last thing I remember I was at this auto-erotic asphyxiation party.
- A what party?
- Auto-erotic asphyxiation. That's where you strangle yourself right before the climax. The orgasm feels better that way.
- You were having sex?!
- No, I already had sex with five other guys that night. This was a fun way of
getting off.

– *Five other guys*?! 

– Yeah, sure. Trent Sherwood, Drew Lockhart, 

– Trent Sherwood and Drew Lockhart?! 

– Yeah, and also their brothers, I think... What is it to you anyway? 

– What is it to me? You noticed me in class! I let you borrow my notes! 

– I know, I already said thank you. 

– Don't you get it? I was in love with you!

You feel tears well up in your eyes, and you face away from the girl and try to stifle them with your hand, hoping she will not notice. You accidentally let go of the balloons. They float up to the ceiling and pop themselves on a broken light bulb still fastened to a socket. You wipe the tears away from your eyes and watch a piece of popped balloon glide to the dirty floor.

– Nothing makes any sense anymore. You noticed me in class. I prayed for you to notice me. I thought everything was going right, and I get sent here. I don't belong here...

She waits for a moment so you can regain your composure, then tries to cheer you up.

– Look, don't take it too bad. You were a nice guy and all. If you had asked me, I probably would have done it with you too. You know, the way I see it, now that I'm here I'm probably not going to see any of those other guys. And, I've always wanted to try...

– Try what?

– You know.

She motions toward the box of rapport-building implements with her head. You
understand her meaning and are at first almost immediately repulsed by the thought, but something about what the fat loathsome man at the beach said suddenly occurs to you. She has no idea how you feel. You would like to show her. She wants you to show her just as much as you do. Best start making yourself happy now, and start by making sure everyone else you know is worse off than you are. You go to the floor and pick up the box. As you root through its contents for the ideal instrument, she moans and licks her lips.

– I've been told you're having a bit of difficulty in the burning off of nipples.

You are sitting before Oscar's desk again, but whatever he is telling you is unimportant. It has now been FIFTY DAYS WITHOUT INCIDENT and you are the rising star of the workplace. You have become quite talented at your work, and you eventually grow to love it. The fat man at the beach was right. You feel secure when you beat someone with a crowbar because you know it is not your own face hitting the hard iron, bruising and bleeding all over. You often try to challenge yourself to knock out as many teeth on the first swing as you can, and your personal record is six so far. You firmly believe that anyone can be cheered up by giving someone a Glasgow smile. You enjoy taking your lunchbreak, which usually consists of an egg-and-olive sandwich on rye and a small dish of Mandarin oranges, at the forced starvation ward. You have recently made a killing while betting on “Old Wobbly” at the Hamstrung Races. To you the world makes perfect sense with the turn of a rack, the shutting of an iron maiden, and the fizzle and pop of a car battery to the testicles, all things which, you remember with a faint chuckle, horrified you when you were first referred here. For now, you are perfectly
content to spend time in the Department of Aureoles, burning off nipples with a hot soldering iron. Oscar wants to speak about your record in this department, and even though you know your record is impeccable you humor him anyway.

– No, sir, I think I'm burning nipples perfectly fine.
– Be that as it may, there is a surprising lack of them being produced...
– Produced?
– That's right, the, ah, severed nipple which arises from the act of cauterization and removal from the, chest area...
– But, that's impossible...

Oscar nods and opens a drawer from his desk. He reaches in and throws a plastic bag full of tiny severed nipples before you. You take the bag and inspect its contents. Not bad.

– I mean, why exactly do you think we call it “burning nipples off?” Even still, we've been closely inspecting your nipple operations, and they've often come up surprisingly intact.
– I doubt that, sir. I make sure to get at least eighty percent mutilation each time.
– Surprisingly intact, that's what the comments say. And also, we've noticed that you haven't been sticking to the ask ladder either. Care to explain that?
– You said yourself that pledges aren't important. You said they have no money.

Oscar lets out a sigh and pulls out the pills and bottle of water from his desk.
– Virgil, Virgil, Virgil... They usually have no money. Of course, we never know unless we ask, do we? Have I taught you nothing since you came here?

He puts a couple pills to his mouth, about to swallow them, and is interrupted by a
knock at his door. He stares at the knob on his door, suddenly agitated, and puts the pills down on his desk. He does nothing except stare for a full minute.

- If you want, I can answer your door...
- I can answer it myself, thank you.

Another minute passes. Oscar's door knocks again. You rise from your seat.
- What the hell are you doing?
- I just thought I'd, get the door, since you...
- You must think I'm an idiot. I can't even answer my own door, is that right?!
- No, I just thought that this way you'd have time to, uh, take your pills...
- I've held a supervisor position here for twenty years, I'm more than qualified to answer the door to my own office, thank you very much! I'll prove it to you, I'll open it right now! You don't believe me, but you'll see! Look, I'm going right now.

True to his word, Oscar rises from his seat and walks toward the door, which convinces you to stay in your seat. He places his hand on the knob, and after another minute of hesitation, which prompts another knock by the visitor, he finally opens the door. A sharply-dressed man wearing a suit with a red and brown-checkered jacket and matching tie stands in the doorway.

- Jeepers, I've been knocking here for ages, Oliver!
- Oscar.
- Right, Oscar. Well, how the hell are ya, ol' buddy?
- Fine, sir, just fine.

The man shoots you a glance and his interest is piqued. He walks over to you and flashes you a big toothy grin. He juts out his hand in front of you, and you shake it. He
has a firm, assertive handshake. You start to like him. He looks like a Jasper to you.

- So you're the one everyone's going crazy about, eh?
- Well, sir, I'm just doing my job...
- And he's modest too!

Oscar steps forward and loudly clears his throat.

- We were actually in the middle of a review, sir. He's, ah, been having problems with this whole burning off of nipples business...
- A review? Are you crazy? For this latter-day Torquemada here?

He diverts his attention away from Oscar and gives you a pat on the back, placing his hand around your shoulder while he talks.

- Listen kid, the board and I have been chatting it up, and we think you're ready to be trained in the Department of Scaphisms.
- SCAPHISMS?!

Oscar is stunned by his own outburst. He laughs nervously and attempts to cover his blunder with a smile. For the first time since you have met him, you notice that his smile requires effort on his part. You know why he is behaving so strangely. Scaphisms are rumored to be the most advanced procedure, and only employees of the highest echelon are trained for it. You know that Oscar was trying to get that position for years, and you are glad you took it from him in a manner of days. You can barely hide your own elation as you wholeheartedly accept.

- Fantastic. We'll get started right away with your training. In the meantime, you're going to need a new office. Hm. How about this one?

Oscar lets out a sudden grunt, and Jasper gives him his attention.
- My office, sir?

- Why not? I mean, let's face it, Orwell,

- Oscar.

- Right. Let's face it, you won't be needing this big ol' office too much longer, will you?

Oscar does his best to speak through clenched teeth and a phony smile.

- Well, sir, I'm just surprised that this decision has been made, because, well, you see, I've been a credit to this company for twenty years. I just don't see why, since this is my office and there's ah, no reason why, you know, since I'm a credit to this work, environment...

Jasper turns back to you.

- Tell you what, don't worry about ol' Rudolph over there.

- Oscar!

- Close enough. Ol' Rudy can take care of himself.

He walks toward Oscar and gives him a hard pat on the shoulder.

- I'm gonna have you go ahead and start packing your things. We've gotta start his training as soon as possible, understood?

- Well, you know, I'm just going to finish up my review...

- Suit yourself. Just be out within the hour.

Jasper leaves the room. Oscar plops himself on his chair and takes a deep breath.

- So, your nipples. They're surprisingly intact.

He picks up the pills and water bottle. He stops and places them back on the desk.

- I mean, not literally your nipples. I'm sure yours are fine, that's not really the
issue. I mean, of course, the ones you service, the...

Oscar is starting to crack, and you enjoy watching it. But nonetheless he makes you uncomfortable when he fixes you a fierce glare. He throws the pills on the floor.

- I am a credit to this company. I am a credit...

He clenches his eyes shut, pulls his hair and breathes through his nose like a bull in a Spanish arena. Any traces of Schadenfreude slowly fade from you as he gets up from his seat. You are fixed in your own seat in mixed fascination and dread. He takes the bat leaning against the stack of china.

- FUUUUUUCK!

Oscar raises the bat in the air and slams it on the dishes. The topmost dish shatters, sending tiny shards of porcelain all around the office. You shield yourself from the onslaught as he mercilessly pummels the defenseless china, letting out a near-encyclopedic catalog of profanity upon each blow.

- FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCKING FUCKING GODFUCKING MOTHERFUCKING

COCKASSFUCKSHITFUCKERASSHOLEFUCKINGCUNTFUCKINGASSHITFUC
KCOCKBITCHMOTHERFUCKFINGERFUCKINGSHITFUCKERFUCKINGFUCKING
GFUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!

He finally drops the bat and takes a few deep breaths. The floor is littered with the fragmented remains of the china. You let your guard down, and find yourself speechless. After a few moments Oscar rips the sign off the wall. A replacement sign hangs behind it, a blank space followed by DAYS WITHOUT INCIDENT. He takes a black marker from one of the drawers and draws an O.
But now you no longer have your own office. You come to and find yourself tied to a chair in a dark room. You feel a stabbing pain in the back of your head, the rope has chafed the skin on your wrists. You feel shards of broken glass underneath your feet, which are bare for some reason. How did you get here? You try to remember.

There was a golf course. You were with Jasper, listening to stories about his sexual escapades. There was one where he was at a party, about to hang himself with another girl. He wanted to feel her breasts before they got started, so he leaned over to reach them and accidentally knocked her over. She's probably dead by now, but man, those were some tig ol' bitties. Remember what Keats once said, he tells you. Glut thy sorrow upon a morning rose, upon the supple teats of a bonny lass. This sounds familiar to you. The hanging thing, that is, not the Keats. Oh yes. Auto-erotic asphyxiation. Someone you used to know enjoyed this activity. He asks you for an especially lurid tale. You explain that you are a novice in that department yourself, and ask for his pardon for your own lack of stories. You tee off. The golf ball soars over the water traps, filled with stagnant water and the feces of diarrhea-ridden prospects trapped within hollowed-out logs, being eaten, burrowed and stung to death by wasps, locusts, and other insects. You wish that something could perhaps be done to clear up the smell, but all in all, life is pretty good at the corporate country club.

– So, what are you going to do now?

– What do you mean? Like, am I going to putt?

– No, I mean how are going to spend the last thirty seconds or so of freedom you have left, before they drag you away from here and lock you up with all the other
miserable saps?

What? Jasper frowns and fixes you a menacing stare. Finally he cannot help but crack a smile. A few moments later a hearty laugh escapes through his clenched lips. Of course. You laugh along with him and make a note to yourself to get used to his special brand of humor.

— Wow, I have to say, you really almost had me there.

Back in the darkened room, someone opens the door and enters, carrying a large cardboard box. It takes a great deal of effort for the man to heft it onto the table. He takes a deep breath and faces you.

— Well, well, well. Guess the scaphism training didn't go so well, did it?

You recognize Oscar's voice even before he rips off his mask and throws it on the floor.

— What's going on? What am I doing here?

— Oh, just a performance review. The board wants a bit of personnel restructuring.

— But... What are you doing here?

— Well, since it's your fault that I've been relocated to this department, you're getting the first taste of what I do best!

Your heart sinks down to your ankles in dread. You try to struggle out of the chair, but the ropes will not give and chafe your already sore wrists even more.

— No, there has to be some mistake. I don't belong here! Oscar, please...

Oscar stops in his tracks and giggles to himself.

— How about that. After all you've done, you're still the first one to remember my
name.

He goes to the box and pulls out a ball-peen hammer.

– Wait, you're not even doing this right. What about the ask ladder? Maybe I have a thousand dollars. You never know unless you ask...

– I searched your pockets and any available orifice while you were unconscious. I already know you have nothing.

– What about the hood? Or your mask? The anonymity clause, remember?

– That only applies if the prospect and employee don't already have a history together. Besides, it's really more of an anonymity suggestion...

– What about balloons?

Oscar stops and clutches the hammer close to his chest, speaking through clenched teeth.

– There will be no balloons.

He keeps walking toward you. You try one last attempt to convince Oscar to stop. It is not much, but anything is worth a shot at this point.

– This is no board decision, is it? You had me put in here, just so you could get back at me for taking your position. You know I'm better than you, and you just want to take it out on me, don't you? You're pathetic!

– You know, it's never a good idea to taunt someone when you're tied to a chair, and the other guy has a hammer.

He gets down on his knees, raises the hammer and drops it down on your right big toe. The bone shatters. Oscar swings the hammer nine more times, one for each toe. It takes all the effort you can muster to not think about snapping pencils, breaking twigs, the
exploding pieces of china dishes from Oscar's office. He puts the hammer down and goes to the box of tools. He puts on a pair of absurdly oversized steel-toed boots and clomps over to you like a giant atomic monster trampling Tokyo. He raises a boot in the air and slams it on your right foot first. Shards of glass from the floor embed themselves in your sole, going through the skin and muscles and touching the tips of the bones broken by the boot. He repeats the procedure with the left foot. You cannot help but remember the symmetrical aspect of torturing any part of the body that has two of each, eyes, limbs, etc. As much as it hurts the first time, it is going to be even worse the second time. You remember this with a bit of nostalgia even despite the searing pain that shoots up from your feet all the way to your brain. You are lucky enough to not be gagged, and you want to beg him to stop, as you remember all the other ones had tried to do, but you can barely form words. Oscar removes the boots and returns to the box of tools.

- You don't look so good. You look like you could use a teddy bear.

What? Sure enough Oscar produces a teddy bear from the box. Does he actually think this is going to comfort someone with bits of glass stuck in his soles? Oscar carries the bear over to you and drops it. The bear lands on your toes with a thud, breaking what you assume to be pieces of already broken bones. You have to hand it to Oscar, you certainly did not expect it to be stuffed with a cinder block. He leaves the bear on the floor and pulls out a bowling ball.

- You know, I could bore you with some long expository monologue about how I hate you for ruining me, after everything I did to get you where you are now, how because of you I've lost any sort of grasp upon how anything in the universe is supposed to make sense, how I've essentially lost my mind, but you know what? Until now I forgot
how much I love my work here. So thanks for that.

  – Oscar... please... you're a reasonable man... we can talk about this... please...

just, put the bowling ball down.

Oscar stops. He seems oddly affected by your plea. He thinks to himself and nods
his head to you, as if he finally understands. He puts the bowling ball down. Right on top
of the teddy bear. He laughs and goes to the table again. He staggers over to you, carrying
a box marked BOX FULL OF HEAVY STUFF.

A few heavy things later, you have passed out. You eventually come to, still tied to
the chair and in immense pain. There is a tiny gash in the side of your stomach.

  – Oscar, let me go, I've had enough. This is more than even I've ever done...

  – You're absolutely right. I just have one question before I let you go.

  – Anything. I'll do anything. Please, just let me go...

  – Of course. Just one more thing. How long is the human small intestine?

  – ...What?

  – You don't know, do you?

Oscar sighs and rises to his feet. He places his hand near the gash in your side.

  – I guess we'll have to find out then, won't we?

He jams his hand into your side and pulls something out. It feels like a bloody,
gooey snake. Oscar keeps pulling. Three feet so far. Oscar keeps pulling. Ten feet. You
feel like your other insides might collapse, the bottom foundation being pulled out from
underneath them. Twenty feet. Oscar does not even pull anymore. He coils it around his
body and spins around the room like a nun on a hill alive with the sound of music. Thirty,
forty feet. You eventually lose track. Finally the intestine stops giving slack. It tugs at your stomach with a sudden jerk and tips you over and onto the floor.

- Oscar... I don't understand. I don't belong here, I chose to be a tormentor...

Oscar stops, any trace of happiness in your suffering vanishes from him. He bends to the floor and stares straight into your eyes.

- There never was a choice. All are tormentors, and all are damned. Even the faintest crack of a smile, the slightest inflection of a backhanded compliment, does its part to grasp the knife stuck in the belly of mankind and twist it slightly to the left. And so it goes within the flames that give off darkness instead of light.

Oscar reaches into his pocket and pulls out some pills. He swallows them and instantly cheers up. He cracks a big smile at you, unties you from the chair and pats you on the back.

- You take care of yourself now, and I'll see you here in a week, same time sharp!

Now he is gone. He left the door ajar for you. You slowly gather up your intestine, doing your best to wind it around your arm like an extension cord. With your other arm you drag your own weight, made useless by your mangled feet, to the open door. The glass on the floor scratches your legs and side, but you do not mind since you are finally on your way out. You reach the hallway and look for a certain door. You see it. You muster as much willpower as you can to drag yourself up to it. You reach your free hand up to the door, and cannot quite reach it. You drag yourself closer, digging the shards deeper into your legs and side. You reach for the knob. You can almost touch it with your fingertips. Just a little bit closer. Closer...
Two young men in swimsuits walk by you.

- Hey, are you trying to get to the beach?

You weakly nod your head yes.

- You don't want to go that way. That's 573A. That'll lead you to 6643C, totally out of the way. You want to head a few doors down, 571A.

You finally give up. You drop your hand onto the floor and start to sob.

- Hey, don't worry about it man, we'll drag you over.

One of the beachgoers picks up your free hand, the other carefully holds your intestine-wrapped arm in the air. The glass in your side hurts even more than before.

- Here we are, 571A.

- Wait, that's not it either. We want to go to 550A, so that leads to wing B, through door 475, so we can take that shortcut up to 6698C and get to the beach.

- Hm. You're right. Let's head over there.

The two beachgoers drag you twenty-one doors further down. The pain is unbearable, but at least it will end soon. Finally they reach the correct door.

- Wait, I think I goofed. I forgot about the new addition. It was 550A, but since then they've redirected the routes. I actually wanted to go twenty-one doors the other way.

- Yeah, you're right.

After a while you lose consciousness, you have no idea how close you are to the beach or even if they know where they are going anymore. The last thing you remember is, you unexpectedly learned the answer to Oscar's harrowing question:

- Wow, that is one long intestine. It's gotta be ten times the length of his body!
You wake up on the beach, in your beach clothes. Your feet are intact, your intestine is properly encased within your abdomen. Hundreds of beachgoers surround you. The girl who was in your AP Calculus class is standing over you. She looks beautiful. You decide that Jennifer is a good name for her. Perhaps she will agree. She unbuttons the top piece of her swimsuit and smiles at you. The fat man in the top hat walks up to Jennifer and takes a light meter reading of her breasts. Humphrey Archibald Von McCutcheon VII adjusts a film camera, the hole in his stomach bandaged up. You are not sure what to make of all this. Your experience with Oscar was terrifying and could happen again at any moment, let alone the same time next week. You have no idea who will attack you next. Maybe the fat man, or Archibald, or even Jennifer. Maybe Jennifer is actually Oscar wearing a very convincing Jennifer costume, waiting for the right moment to pull out a different organ this time. The uncertainty of your fate within your workplace torments you more than any physical violence that Oscar or anyone else can dream up. But right now, Jennifer is dying to love you, and the fat man is going to make a pretty good film about it. This isn't so bad, you reason to yourself. You could definitely get used to this.
The Evil That Men Do

All things considered, a lovely day out here on the beach, thought Kierkegaard.

There were not many things he liked more than putting on his black overcoat and bowler hat and heading over to the warm sandy beach for a good old frisbee game with his friends Clive Staples and John Ronald Reuel, impeccably clad in a fine black three-piece suit and a wool pea coat with matching knitted hat and scarf, respectively. After a masterful throw from the most elegant wrist of Ronald Reuel, Kierkegaard was about to pass the disc to Staples when goddamn it, he thought, not again. *Proust.*

Proust was indeed headed toward him, in his favorite red swim trunks, carrying his favorite red beach towel and a copy of his favorite book, *The Garden Party and Other Plays* by Václav Havel (with a red jacket), and wearing black leather boots. Look at those boots, thought Kierkegaard. Who the hell wears boots to the beach? His other friends, noting the sour expression on Kierkegaard's face, glanced at Proust and also saw the reprehensible boots, immediately ceasing the frisbee game. They were not the only ones. Thomas Hobbes, the notorious cowboy and bank robber of Pasadena, was burying his friend Henry James in the sand when he saw the beach-footwear-faux-pas out of the corner of his eye. He placed his hat on his head and spit out the last bit of chaw from his mouth, while his friend James rose and dusted the sand off his rose-colored ball gown.

– Hello there, said Kierkegaard, with Reuel, Staples, James and Hobbes by his side, after clearing his throat to gain the attention of Proust, who was now sitting on his beach towel with his boots out on the sand, delving into his favorite book.

– Hi, Proust replied.

– Lovely day, no? You'd be hard pressed to find a more perfect day to sit out on
the warm, sandy beach under the sun, no?

- I guess so.
- Enjoying that book there?
- Yeah, it's pretty good.

Kierkegaard glanced at the page. Proust was in the middle of the one-act play *Unveiling*. A pretty good one. He cleared his throat even louder than before.

- So, he said, what's, ah, what's with those boots there?
- Oh, these? Proust patted the sides of his thick boots. These are my beach boots.

I always wear these to the beach!

Kierkegaard then squinted, so as to suggest that either the bright sun was in his eyes, or, more probably, that he wished to convey a tone that conveyed more severity than usual to deal with an equally severe situation.

- No one wears boots to the beach. That's preposterous!
- Yeah, added John Ronald Reuel, no one wears boots to the beach!
- Yeah, his friend Clive Staples chimed in, that's preposterous!
- Yeah, the cowboy Thomas Hobbes helpfully added, no one wears boots to the beach!
- And rightfully so, replied Henry James, for such an absurd behavioral mannerism would indeed be nothing short of utterly preposterous!

Kierkegaard let out a small sigh, vexed by James' show-offishness, and once again took control of the situation.

- Look, we've noticed that you've been coming here an awful lot wearing those boots of yours. It's really diminishing the tone here, so I'm gonna have to ask you to take
them off please.

   – Why, asked Proust, letting out a chuckle of incredulity. It's not against any rules, is it?

   – But what about the tone? whimpered Clive Staples.

   – Listen, said Proust, I don't think I'm doing anything wrong here, so if you don't mind I'd like to get back to my book. It's very compelling.

   It does look compelling, thought Kierkegaard. He motioned to his friends to step away from Proust and his offensive footwear and huddle, that they could take a moment to discuss their plans in secret. When they broke the huddle Kierkegaard loudly cleared his throat again.

   – So, he said, we decided that if you don't take off the boots, we're gonna kill you.

   – You're not gonna kill me, said Proust.

   – Yes we are, Kierkegaard retorted.

   – No you're not, replied Proust.

   – Yes we are, retorted Clive Staples.

   – No you're not, replied Proust.

   – Yes we are, retorted John Ronald Reuel.

   – No you're not, replied Proust.

   – Yes we are, retorted the cowboy Thomas Hobbes.

   – No you're not, replied Proust.

   – Consider such a thing the quintessential truth of things that will inevitably come to pass, for we gathered before you are endowed with an iron conviction that only the hand of the Leviathan himself could sway our otherwise unshakable resolve, retorted
Henry James.

—I see what you did there, whispered the cowboy Thomas Hobbes to Henry

James.

—No, you're not! How do you think you're going to kill me, anyway?

—You just keep those boots on and you'll find out soon enough, said Kierkegaard.

—Look, this is ridiculous, said Proust. For the last time, I'm not doing anything

wrong, so leave me alone!

—Oh, well, since you put it that way, fine!

Kierkegaard turned to walk away, laughing and throwing his hands up in the air to

suggest that the outrage of Proust's unacceptable footwear was not an outrage, but with a

sarcastic tone that conveyed that it was anything but not an outrage. The others followed

suit.

—Sure, he went on, we'll go ahead and leave you alone. The boots? Yeah, no big

deal. It's not like they're diminishing the tone around here or an thing. We'll just leave,

and, you know, we won't bludgeon you to death with a traffic cone.

What, traffic cone? As Kierkegaard and his friends walked away laughing, Proust

briefly pulled his attention away from the compelling dramatic work of Czech playwright

and former president of the non-Soviet-bloc nation of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel.

Better not let it bother me, he thought. They were all obviously out of their minds.

—So it looks like we won't know much about the crime until the DNA tests come

back from the labs, There were no usable fingerprints.

—No need for any of that, said Detective Bob Zimmerman, it's obvi us what went
down here. It's a clear case of homicide by traffic cone.

– You think so?

– Absolutely, said Detective Bob Zimmerman. The victim has a traffic cone where his head used to be.

– So, the fingerprints...

– This is a public beach, isn't it? asked the Detective Bob Zimmerman. My God, it could be anyone within a five mile radius! Hey, wait a second!

– What are you thinking, Detective Bob Zimmerman?

– Take a good look at this, replied Bob Zimmerman, detective. Think back to your forensic training at the academy.

– It looks like he was wearing boots!

– You're goddamn right he was, said Detective Bob Zimmerman.

– That's crazy! Who in the hell wears boots to the beach?

Detective Bob Zimmerman put on his sunglasses.

– No one, that's who.

Kierkegaard stood over the broken body of Henry James, holding the blood-stained traffic cone in his hands, and pointed with it at Clive Staples, John Ronald Reuel, and the cowboy Thomas Hobbes.

– Anybody else here want to 'just try on' the boots?

The others, at a loss of words in utter fear and trembling, either shook their heads or stared at the blood and brain matter dripping from the orange cone, brain matter which had only recently contained an impeccable vocabulary.
- I didn't think so.

Kierkegaard lifted the cone in the air and embedded it into the head of Henry James.

- Oh man, said the cowboy Thomas Hobbes, now he's got a traffic cone where his head used to be.

- Literally, replied John Ronald Reuel. Guys, we should go to the police.

- No, said Kierkegaard, no one's telling anyone! I won't go to jail again, understand?

The others looked to each other, hoping that one of them would understand. Clive Staples was still looking at the brain matter splayed on the traffic cone. Maybe if I swallow it, he thought, I can learn what the word erogenous means.

- Listen, said Kierkegaard, we're in this together! As long as we're here, we're gonna stick together. No one's ratting out anyone! Got it?

The others, still confused, made no reply. I wonder how it will taste, thought Clive Staples. Maybe it tastes erogenous? Only one way to find out...

- Christ, said Kierkegaard, what is the matter with you people?! Do you need me to spell it out for you? Do I have to show you how to not tell anyone about this?!

Five minutes later, Kierkegaard was standing before Clive Staples, John Ronald Reuel and the cowboy Thomas Hobbes, who were cross-legged on the sand. A young man beside Kierkegaard watched the goings-on.

- Okay, said Kierkegaard. Let's pretend that this person right here is someone you might be tempted to tell the thing you're not supposed to tell. Let's practice not telling
him, shall we? Okay, who wants to go first?

John Ronald Reuel and the cowboy Thomas Hobbes both raised their hands. Clive Staples was too busy retching out a piece of Henry James' brain to raise his own hand in time. Kierkegaard called on John Ronald Reuel, who said:

– Guess what? We killed a guy for wearing boots. And then we killed one of our friends for also trying on the boots!

A sudden look of concern appeared on the young man's face. Kierkegaard drew a small pistol and fired it into the young man's head, who fell to the sand with a thump.

– What did you do that for, said John Ronald Reuel, wasn't I supposed to say that?
– No, actually, that was the complete opposite of what you were supposed to say.

John Ronald Reuel thought hard for a moment.

– Oh yeah, he said, you're right.

Kierkegaard pointed the gun at John Ronald Reuel's head and fired. He fell next to Clive Staples, who saw bits of brain and gagged once again. The cowboy Thomas Hobbes pointed to the anonymous young man.

– So, why did you kill that guy?
– Because he knows what he did.
– And why did you shoot him? asked Clive Staples, pointing to John Ronald Reuel.

– Because he told this guy what we did.

– Ah.

A lifeguard, alarmed by the sound of gunshots, approached them. He pointed to the dead young man.
What happened to that guy?

Clive Staples pointed to Kierkegaard.

He shot him.

Kierkegaard let out a frustrated sigh and shot the lifeguard in the face.

Why did you do that? I didn't even say anything about the other guys we killed.

Why, replied Kierkegaard, would it be okay to talk about one murder but not another? Murder is illegal! Don't talk about murder!

Clive Staples thought hard for a moment.

Oh yeah, he said, you're right.

Kierkegaard likewise pointed the gun at Clive Staples' head and fired. The cowboy Thomas Hobbes raised his hand and pointed at the second beachgoer.

So, why did you shoot him?

Because he knows what we did!

And, why did you shoot him? asked the cowboy Thomas Hobbes, pointing at Staples.

Because he told this guy about what we did to this guy, who knows about the thing we did before!

Ah.

A third beachgoer approached. The cowboy Thomas Hobbes waved, said hello.

What's going on? asked the anonymous beachgoer.

The cowboy Thomas Hobbes shrugged, and the beachgoer walked away. Apparently, he reasoned, nothing was going on at all. Kierkegaard holstered his weapon.

Very good! Now see, that's exactly what I'm talking about...
He had just removed his hand from the handle of his weapon when out of the corner of his eye, he saw an odd thing. He had glanced at the cowboy Thomas Hobbes' feet, and thought he saw something black and leathery, something no one in their right mind would wear to a beach, something that would ruin the tone for an otherwise fine establishment as this. In short, he thought he saw the cowboy Thomas Hobbes wearing

- Boots! Why are you wearing the boots?
- What boots?
- On your feet!

The cowboy patted the sides of his thick black boots with a smile on his face.
- Oh, these? Well, I'm a cowboy, so I always wear boots to the

Kierkegaard pointed the gun at the cowboy Thomas Hobbes' head and fired.
- No one tells anyone about anything, and no one wears the boots! Got it?

No one answered. Kierkegaard assumed by their silence that they all had got it.

- Jesus, it's a bloodbath here, said Detective Bob Zimmerman, isn't it?
- It sure is.

- Hey you, said detective Bob Zimmerman to the man in the black trenchcoat and bowler hat, holding the smoking gun over the bloodbath, recently classified as such by Detective Bob Zimmerman. I noticed you're holding a smoking gun.
- I, guess I am, he replied.

Detective Bob Zimmerman put on his sunglasses, then took the gun from his hand, flipped a small switch on the side of the firearm, and gave it back to the man in the trenchcoat and bowler hat.
You should always leave the safety on when you've got a gun. Otherwise you could kill somebody with that thing.

Detective Bob Zimmerman took off his glasses, then took another look at the bloodbath to confirm its bloodbathness.

Jesus it's a bloodbath here, he confirmed, then looked up at the man in the trenchcoat and bowler hat. Do you have any idea who might have done this?

No sir, he replied.

Huh, figures. Well, move along, nothing to see here.

The man in the trenchcoat and bowler hat moved along.

Now we gotta get rid of these bodies, noted Detective Bob Zimmerman. You brought the gasoline?

Right here.

Marshmallows? Hershey bars and graham crackers? asked detective Bob Zimmerman.

Right here, sir.

You like s'mores? asked detective Bob Zimmerman.

Sure do.

Detective Bob Zimmerman put on his sunglasses.

Then let's get to work.

What are you thinking about, Detective Bob Zimmerman? Aren't you happy we wrapped up that homicide case, and we're eating all the s'mores we want?

Well, said Detective Bob Zimmerman, when you've been on the job like I have
for forty-five years, you really start to think about the evil that men do, and then, well it just gets to you, you know? You should thank your lucky stars you're still a rookie, that you haven't seen the things I've seen.

Detective Bob Zimmerman took off his sunglasses.

—I keep having this recurring dream. In the dream I see my father before me, astride a magnificent steed, a rainbow-dappled Appaloosa of the Arabian mountains, and he's calling me. He's saying, son, son, come ride away with me. And I want to follow him, but I can't. I just can't. I can't because, well, for starters, I'm not on a horse myself, be it a rainbow-dappled Appaloosa of the Arabian mountains or any other breed. As a matter of fact, I'm in my first-grade classroom, my first grade teacher is teaching my old first-grade class and I arithmetic, and I'm not wearing any clothes. And there's also an elf, and this elf is giving me fellatio. And I'll be damned if that little elf isn't giving me the best oral sex I've ever had in my life. So I finish up with the elf and I give her twenty dollars and I say thanks and then she skips along on her way to the magical elf land of, Elfland. And then I see a frog, rabbit. A frogit. It's mostly a frog but it's got big rabbitey ears, and it's wearing a top hat. Got two little holes poked in the top for the rabbit ears to go through. And it's got a cane, too. It can hold a cane because it also has hands, a handed frogit. Jolly little frogit, it was. Jasper, that's his name. Jasper the frogit. So this little frogit hops up to me, you know, both of those animals are known to hop, so it makes sense that he would too. He hops up to me and says hey there, would you happen to know where the city of London is? I point to London and I say it's right over there, and he says thanks and hops away in the general direction of London. I reach into my pocket, which is a little flap of flesh on my leg that I can open and close, since, as you can recall, I'm not
wearing any clothes at the time. Little flap to keep things in, you know, like a kangaroo, but on my leg instead of my stomach. So I open my little leg-flap and I pull out my wallet, and there's pictures of my son and daughter, and my wife of forty-five years. I look at the picture of my wife, and my wife looks at me and says, well how do you get to the city of London from here anyhow? And I remember that I had just recently told Jasper the frogit how to get to London, so the location still fresh in my mind I point to London and I say it's right over there, you just follow the little frogit and you'll get there soon enough. She says okay, and then she says by the way, I saw your father a while ago, he was calling you, astride a rainbow-dappled Appaloosa of the Arabian mountains. And I tell her, yeah, I know, I saw him this morning, he wanted me to come ride away with him, but I told him I can't. I just can't. And then,

Detective Bob Zimmerman put on his glasses. Then he said:

— And then I wake up.