

The Shitkickers



J a s o n
B r y a n

Legal mumbo-jumbo

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Published by me

First edition

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Do not attempt to copy. You won't get your bike back and you'll go to jail.

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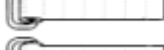
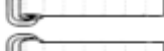
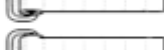





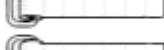
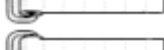
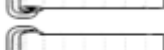




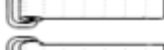
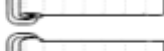
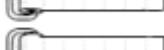
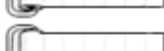



Sign up for the newsletter and be kept up-to-date on sequels and whatever else I have up my sleeve...

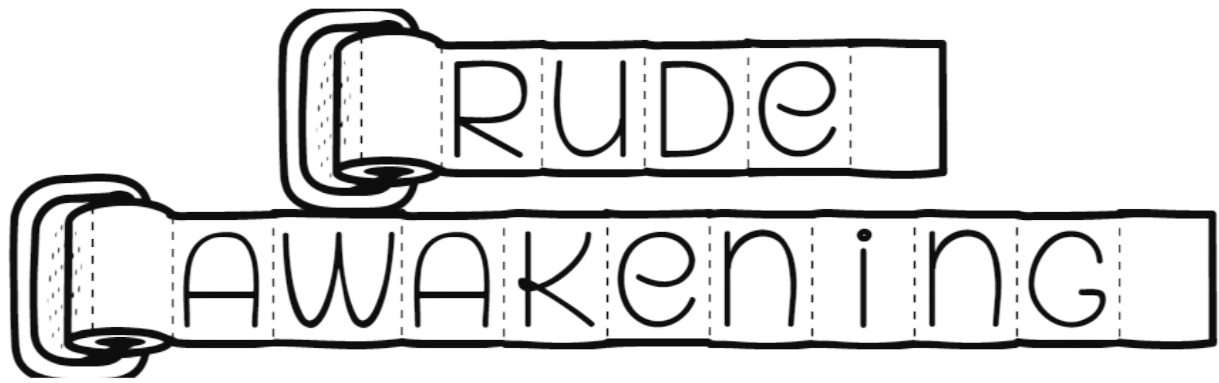
Dedication

To SJ and SRJ, love you both dearly



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Reaching for the coffee pot, the handle is well-worn and used; it still does the trick, however, filling it with water and pouring it into the machine.

Ken remembers to double the number of scoops his girlfriend brews with. Lifting his arms high towards the ceiling and straightening his back in a stretch, another yawn contorts his face. He laughs- having farted from bending over to pick up a beer bottle beside the couch. Impatient, he pours himself a half-brewed pot of concentrated java, the foggy mug warm in his hands. Slow sleep-in feet bring him to the cozy chair next to the couch by the window, a big, fat, fluffy and overstuffed lay-z-bro. A cloud-like texture, the corduroy fabric is a sponge for worries.

The view overlooks a back alley in Vancouver's notorious DTES neighbourhood; the Downtown Eastside. An absolute potpourri of action and noise at any time of day or night; seagulls and pigeons swooping all over, street-dweller improv, high-octane supercars revving, honking taxis and addicts having melancholic outbursts. Something is always happening down below, for better or worse. Ken's nemesis are the firework bangs; they make having a sleep schedule an impossible

dream. He gazes off across Burrard inlet and into the horizon, a few wisps of mist play among the meadows and deep green rainforest of North Vancouver's rolling hills.

He instinctively picks up his phone, swiping it to check for texts for the first time in hours. His girlfriend, Allie, isn't home; her work calling her in late last night; well, not his home, her home where he has been sleeping over. Awakening rudely several times through the night by thunderous booms from the grimy alley five stories below.

Sorry Kenny

UwU

Double shift at the hospital

More new weird respiratory cases

I'm off at 1:00 can u get me?

Steam twirls and dances on the coffee surface as a car honks outside; Ken looks at the clock- it digitally glows 12:22 in red.

Dashing to the fridge and opening the freezer drawer, he dunks a handful of ice cubes into his too-hot-to-slam-and-now-spilling java. Dropping the P.J.'s right in the kitchen, his pants drape over a nearby chair. Ken shimmies into his pair of jeans, noticing his belt could use an extra notch. His somewhat crisp white and blue button-up shirt fits baggier than usual over his biceps, next week he'll be back in the gym. Spending the last week with his girlfriend, her love of delivery food expands his waistline while his wallet slims. Running his hands through his longish hair, a smudge of grease lingers in the spot between his knuckles. He concentrates on gulping the cooled-down coffee, kicking his feet into an old black pair of running shoes. Ken scrambles to leave, taking his time to carefully remove his bike

from the hook embedded in the concrete wall, a multi-coloured custom pro vintage bicycle.

Out the door, down the hallway to the elevator, he gets on, and it stops on the 2nd floor. A blonde woman in a fancy beret gets on with her two pudgy black dogs; her handbag is clearly hand-painted to match her linen dress and wooden clog shoes. Lifting her phone, she begins to send a text and lets slip the pugs of noir; Ken uses his bicycle frame as a shield. The pair of round snorting fur loaves both try and squeeze by the bicycle, their 8 frantic legs skittering on the elevator's tile floor and their wrinkled faces smush together like a greedy two-tongue, four-eyed spider going for a kill.

Ding.

With a friendly grin at her and a chuckle at the panting pups, he receives a thorough sniffing in the last few seconds of the elevator ride.

Through the lobby, beyond the security doors and in the street, Ken jumps in the saddle. Popping a modest wheelie, he bounces off the curb, hustling for speed along Cordova street, weaving on and off the bike lane to avoid hazards. Avoiding uncapped syringes, dodging brown skid marks, bunny-hopping over puddles of vomit. Legs a blur, he flies through a wave of green lights, flicking into top gear with his wrist, the streets of Gastown become Crosstown, Crosstown to B.C. Place stadium, and with burning muscles pumping pedals- he ascends the ramp to the Cambie Street bridge.

Ken tears down the bike path at first; he slows to a stop near mid-span. He is fast and doesn't need rest, but he does need the view. The faded green railing, the tan walkway, and the deep blue water below-with Science World's dome all shiny in the background. Leaning his bike against the rail, he admires

the city he grew up in; it has changed so much, so fast, fostering so much growth in him along the way. People bash it online, but he loves it anyway. His job helps make a difference, his employer's cranes building much of the urban skyline over the last few years.

If there's one thing he loves more than Vancouver, it's his amazing girlfriend, Allie. He smiles, recalling the last week spent off-work together- having been inseparable each day. She particularly enjoys the waffles he presents to her each morning with a different kind of fruit and an ever-increasing amount of whipped cream. Her gourmet tastes and naturally competitive mindset triggers her desire to compete- she needs to playfully outdo him. Yesterday morning, she surprises him in bed, a colossal mountain of whipped cream on top of the maple syrup-soaked baseball-glove thick pancake underneath and, in the middle sticking straight up, a big ol' yellow banana.

He remembers it like a rocket of sweetness lifting off.

Enjoying the daydream, he leans against a nearby bench and feels something in his back pocket. Reaching his hand inside, he pulls out some folded-up paperwork in a creased plastic sleeve. With a closer look, it reads something about expiring yesterday- his car insurance. He grimaces, now realizing that he forgot to renew it.

Checking his phone, it is 12:35, and he has 1% battery power. Squinting and concentrating, the pieces of a plan come together. Rush to the local department store, London Rugs, renew his expired car insurance tag, scoot back home to his car- and he can be at the hospital right on time.

Ken lifts his arm, holds his phone out, and smiles.

Click.

"C'mon battery, don't fail me now," he grins while texting

Allie.

*C you soon hunny bunny!
riding fast to get my car
phone dying
smooch*

Looking around, he checks if anyone saw him text that. One older lady may have given him some side-eye for riding without a helmet.

Back in the saddle, Ken rushes down the bike lane, past the police station, block after block to Broadway, flowing and navigating through traffic, deftly avoiding doors. He has a good sweat going arriving at his destination.

It is busy. People zip by with their heads down, clutching their purchases. A couple of cafes and take-out shops dot the bustling block, people all caught up in their own business, taxis pulling up to pick up and drop off. Ken walks his bike to the rack and nudges the front tire and frame into place. He crouches by his bike, unzipping the saddlebag and pulling out a new cable combination lock. Taking his time, he threads it through the front tire, frame, and rack, only it doesn't easily slide together like the first time he used it. Looking closer, the combination mechanism refuses to latch closed. Thinking it is only off by one or two numbers, he spins the 4-digit combination lock a couple times.

"Hmm.. shoot," he forgets the brand-new lock's combination.

Ken glances around. People of all sizes and colours move everywhere, finding their paths to and from commerce, nobody, in particular, paying any attention to him.

He wraps the unlocked cable around the bike rack, tucking

it together in a knot. Backing away from his bike to examine his jury-rigging- it's looking particularly tangled up. He'll only be a few minutes, anyways.

Walking into the London Rugs, the cool air conditioning carries warm perfumes and aquatic colognes from the beauty department to his nose. The official British Columbia Autoplan insurance booth is at the store's back; a clock on the wall reads 12:45. Ken's in luck; there's no line, the worker motions for him to have a seat. Smiling, Ken sits, unfolds his paperwork, and asks to renew.

Taking out his driver's license, Ken examines his wallet closer; something's off. The lady mumbles something about if he wants the same coverage; he nods as he removes and replaces cards from his wallet.

"-two-hundred dollars more this year, sir," she says.

"Uhh," Ken pats his empty jeans for any sign of his missing bank card.

"Shh--shoot," he stands up, patting down his pockets again, only now smiling as he recalls where he used it last.

"The beer! -oh, excuse me," flashes in his mind bubble up, him riding to a local brewery for a growler of beer last night. A particularly hoppy ale, a bit pompous without being ostentatious but indeed more bold than necessary. You want to drink it slowly as the initial effervesces overwhelm the soft fruit notes.

"Sir?" the nice Filipino insurance lady with the pink glasses says.

Ken's eyes stop glazing over; he's pretty sure he put it in the pouch tucked under his bicycle seat.

"I-I'll be right back, one sec!"

Leaving his paperwork and dashing for the exit, the

automatic doors slide open to the warm city air. Ken spots a gentleman in track pants and a black hoodie standing a dubious distance from his bike.

Fear. Guilt. Privilege. A mixture of emotions floods his mind as he stands in the breezy automatic doorway. What is this man's story? What would make him assume he is going to steal it?

Ken shakes his head for a moment, closes his eyes for a second, takes a deep breath, and walks over to the man beside his bike.

"Oh hey-" Ken says, waving with a friendly smile.

"Sup?" the man briefly peeks over his shoulder, a blonde goatee and cigarette at the corner of his lips.

"Yeah uh, that's my bike-, I have to-"

"Uh actually- yeah, this is my friend's bike-" says the man without turning around as he finishes unwrapping the chain to pull the bike free.

Ken laughs.

"Uh, ok man ha-ha... I need my bike," Ken's smile fades, putting his hand on the bicycle seat.

The man stands up and twirls to look at Ken. He's unshaven with bushy brown eyebrows and a babyface, black rings around his eyes, his scraggy bleached blonde beard resembling gallows for BBQ droplets and ketchup stains.

"Why?"

"Why? W-what do you mean why? It's mine, come on," Ken pulls the bike towards him.

"Hey man, calm down. Why's it yours?" The would-be thief grips the other end of the bicycle and blows smoke in Ken's face.

"Look! ok?" Ken points at the polished aluminum seat; a

small zippered pouch hides under it.

"I know what's in there. If this is your friend's bike, can you guess what's in there?"

The man holds onto the bike by the handlebars and leans his face forward.

"Probably some good weed," the man in the hood laughs; Ken recoils from onion and cigarette breath.

"No, I went and got some beer last night, and I left my card in there; I forgot to put it back in my wallet because-

The hooded man yanks the bicycle out of Ken's hands and walks backwards fast.

"I need this more than you do, pal."

Ken rushes over and grabs the back of his bike. The hooded man almost kicks him when he throws his leg over the seat. Halfway on the bicycle, he tries to ride it away, Ken holding on with a tenacious grip. The two men look like a very frantic wheeled pretzel as people begin to look over.

"Hey- hey!" Ken remains firmly attached, "-give me back my bike!"

"Reeeee!!!" the hooded man squeals most unusually, "-he's hurting me! I'm disabled! I'm disabled! Reeeee!!! Help!" The hooded man shakes and convulses, squealing as he does so, kicking and flailing his arms around.

Ken lets go of his bicycle and glances around in embarrassment; a few people draw their phones up to record as Ken points towards the hooded man.

"This guy is stealing my bike!"

"Nope, it's mine, and this guy tried to assault a disabled person!"

The hooded man with the bleached blonde goatee pounces on the bike, making a rapid escape through the

unhelpful crowd and down the street.

"Hey!" Ken runs in a chase, "Hey! You!"

But it is all for naught; he sprints to the end of the block- his bike, the thief, and his bank card are gone.

"Shhh-shhhiii-oot!!!" Ken balls a fist up for a split second.

People walk by with their heads down; nobody cares or pays any attention to the brazen robbery save for a single, solitary man still recording on his phone.

He looks right at Ken.

"Don't pick on the disabled, ya friggen' goooo-f!"

The Vancouver summer heat beats down upon his face as he strides back to London Rugs. In frustration, Ken explains to a perplexed insurance lady about a crazy bike thief before running out of the store and jogging six blocks uphill towards home. Turning the corner and into the alley, coming to a garage door which he opens with a fob. He rents a modest basement suite, but it has its perks: a shared garage and upstairs neighbours that are, thankfully, seldom home and quiet when they would be.

Hopping into his blue STI Subaru with the shiny gold wheels, the engine starts with a burble. Pushing the shifter into gear, the whistle of the force-fed engine tempts him to speed with every push of the throttle. Ripping along Cambie and turning on 16th, the rally-bred power always makes him smile, no matter what. Driving down Oak towards the hospital, his gas pedal foot trembles.

"No, no, I'm not getting pulled over, stop it," Ken says to himself, turning on his stereo and playing some EDM that thumps in his trunk.

Typically he pulls right into the E.R. parking lot, but this time a frowning Allie is standing right on the curb at the lot's

entrance.

"Ken, it's almost 1:30; what happened?" Allie says through the open window, Ken turns the stereo volume down, reaching to open the passenger door.

"I'm so sorry honey, I- uh- some guy stole my bike, and I couldn't text," he lifts his phone to show her- it's totally dead.

"I was texting you; my grandfather is waiting for us at dim sum. If you knew you were going to be late, I could have taken a taxi."

Allie closes the door and puts her seatbelt on, her enormous glossy black handbag at the base of her shiny black pumps. Remembering the ratty shoes he's wearing, he feels hot in the face.

Ken drives towards crosstown, a dingy yet chic international community jammed between Vancouver's skid row and Chinatown. Allie's cousins, uncles, grandparents and associates frequently dine at several luxurious restaurants nearby. She always says they're great for the family business, and Grandpa Chang is a prominent, highly-respected community member who knows everyone in the neighbourhood. To see and be seen is essential. The Chang family roots go back for generations, and not without controversy, either, although Allie just ignores it and doesn't talk about it.

Down 12th avenue, Ken hangs a left on Main as Allie checks her phone.

"1:45 and Grandpa says he can't wait any longer and must eat."

Stuck in 3 lanes of traffic with a red light ahead, Ken comes to a stop behind a bus at 2nd and main. The light turns green, and the other cars move, the bus not budging an inch.

Tapping his steering wheel and counting the glares-per-minute of his passenger, he decides lunch can't be any later. Looking behind him, Ken can't quite see if anything is behind the silver car passing him now.

"You're clear," Allie calls out, with Ken looking in his mirror, feathering the throttle to nudge around the bus.

Honk!

A loud truck horn blares, accompanied by a particularly nasty squeal of brakes and skidding tires. A truck's grill approaches fast in the side view mirror.

Ken floors it, listening for the whistle of the turbo spooling; he side-steps the Subaru's clutch. Twenty-one pounds of pressurized atmosphere tumbles through the intake and into the engine, intercooled air swirls by gushing injectors, the valves open below to suck the air and fuel inside. Blown then squeezed, a blue spark ignites the mixture with precise timing, the bangs propel forged aluminum pistons back and forth three times the length of the car in under a second. Six copper-ceramic pads of the clutch plate clatter and scrape as they bite into the spinning iron flywheel storing tremendous forces, transferring the power to three torque-biased differentials. All four tires momentarily slip then grip- the sticky rubber launching the car forwards. Allie's neck snaps back into the headrest; Ken blows through the new red light at the top of 1st gear.

"Slow down, sheesh!" Allie shrieks, pinned in her seat; the growling boxer engine exhaust drowns her out as they pass under concrete arches of Skytrain tracks.

"Sorry, babes," Ken pushes the clutch in, skipping 2nd and shifting directly into 3rd, now wondering about Allie's neck.

Reaching from the shift knob, he touches her knee, giving

it a gentle double-squeeze.

Speeding along Main, the sound of a motorcycle starting comes from a side street. A flicker of a shadow in Ken's rearview.

Is that a white and blue helmet-

"No..." Ken mutters, "no, no, no-" pulling into the left turn lane and driving into Chinatown. If his memory is correct, Allie's grandfather's favourite dim sum should be just up ahead. With his hand shaking slightly while resting on the gear knob, he slows down, looking for somewhere to park in front of the Grand Wok.

"What are you doing? It's across the street, by that black Mercedes, see? -you can park underground ahead; look, there!"

Allie points with her beautiful nails towards the fancy dim sum place, a distracted Ken envisioning a stern-faced Grandpa Chang staring him down before gorging himself.

Ken's first meeting with Grandpa Chang is at Allie's last birthday. His firm handshake, his hands rough, and he remembers the old man wearing a distinct cologne along with a finely tailored suit. Other than the meeting, he completely ignores Ken.

The second time, an invitation to meet her family at a dinner gathering, an exquisite feast; the old man has expensive tastes. Sitting at the head of the table, Grandpa Chang looking regal in his silk suit, and many of the younger men in attendance all try and mimic his style and mannerisms. Ken remembers it more like a club meeting than a family get-together, the wannabes openly copying Grandpa Chang. Everything from how he parts his hair to his smile at others and slight bowing motions when greeting the elderly. Then the

feast comes, the most ginormous Alaskan King Crab Ken has ever seen. Restaurant staff placing the crab platter in front of Grandpa Chang next to a massive golden wok full of steamy fried noodles. The gruff old man never once smiles at him.

Finding an empty spot right in front of the restaurant's wide-open windows, Ken smiles meekly as he pulls over and parks.

"I just texted him; I'm sure he'll be watching for us -oh, there, -look!"

Sure enough, Ken turns and can see Grandpa Chang in the window; the old man crosses his arms with a sullen look on his face- until a police officer blocks the view.

"Hey sir, I need your license please, did you know your insurance expired?"

"Ken!" Allie groans.

Ken's head twists to face the front windshield with both hands on the wheel; he grits his teeth, cringing while Allie yells at him about his insurance- the officer asking him again for his license.

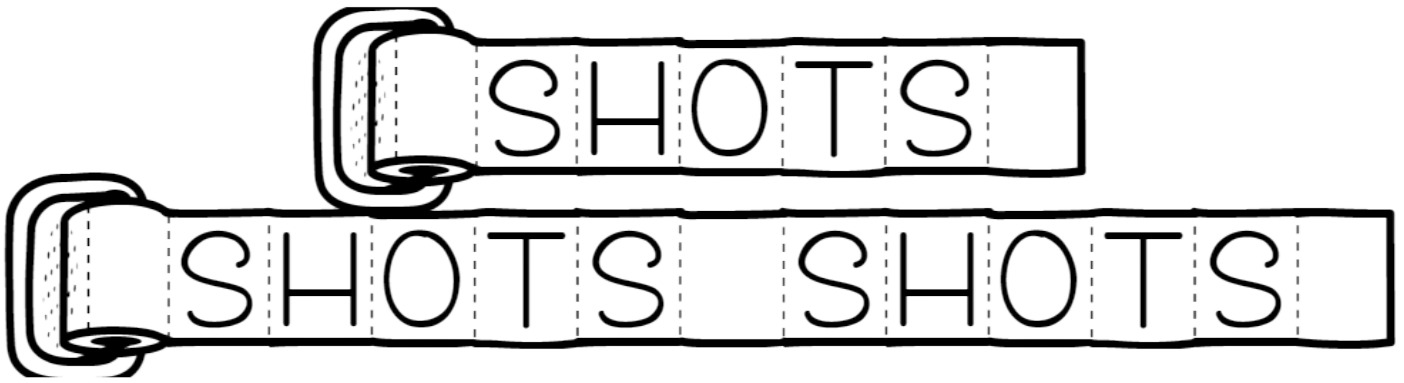
"I told you last week, oh, I-I can't... Grandpa Chang is watching, Ken-" Allie gets out of the car, "-oh my god, hurry up. We are already so late!"

Handing the officer his license, Ken watches Allie cross the road to go inside. Some of the little senior Chang wannabes in their cheaper suits stand by the black Mercedes, smoking. Their eyes follow Allie's steps, turning back to smirk at Ken when he's handed a blue slip by the cop; the scribbled writing shows over \$500 in fines. The officer tells him a tow truck is on its way. Minutes pass, Ken, making use of the time to lock his car, staying in a positive mood by thinking about his last week with Allie.

"Well, thanks, officer, sorry-" Ken backs away from his car, putting the ticket in his wallet and sliding his jittery hands in his pockets.

The cop nods and gets back on his motorcycle. Hearing a diesel engine coming, Ken spins to see the tow truck driving by, then reversing as close to his front bumper as it can. The driver saunters out covered in chip crumbs and operates the screeching hydraulics to lift the blue Subaru. With the driver getting back into his truck, Ken has to bang on the door and remind him, it's an all-wheel-drive car, the transmission will break if he doesn't put dollies under the rear wheels. After a futile argument with Ken, the reluctant driver begins to properly lift the car's back as well.

Tired, Ken is also hungry, his feet sore, and, looking at the restaurant, Allie waves to him from the window. He smiles and waves back, his forearm hit by a sudden raindrop. With a pitter-patter on the dirty sidewalk below him, Ken looks to see tiny dots darkening the concrete as a cloudburst begins to pour. His shirt is wet, lifting his head, the tow truck pulls away from the curb, heavy-footed acceleration pushing gassy coughs from tired mufflers. Ken's reflection in the wet car windows, his smile flips upside-down; his umbrella rides away comfortably in the backseat of the Subaru.



After an awkward lunch with Allie, Grandpa Chang, and the rest of Allie's large extended family, Ken finds himself walking towards his favourite downtown watering hole. Waiting to cross for a light, glancing down at his feet puts a frown on his face. His inside right pant leg has a few greasy marks- little hugs from his kidnapped bicycle's chain. Opening his hands, tiny black flecks of handlebar rubber still dot the lines of his palms. Ken takes a few deep breaths.

Walking through Chinatown, he crosses over into the Downtown Eastside, where the storefronts are impossibly filthy- stains run down the walls and windows, leaving little dried rivers below tattered awnings. Wafts of overpowering urine scents, the grime and litter underfoot form a carpet of questionable steps.

Ken walks by a shuttered alcove.

A gravelly voice calls out.

"Spare any change, maaaaan?"

"No, sorry."

"Hey fuck you, man, you've got nice clothes, man, you can afford..."

Ken keeps walking a little faster.

Crossing at Carrell avenue and Hastings street, a hunched-over man shambles towards him, heading opposite. "Smokes, weed," the man says, craning his bent neck up, passing in very close proximity. Ken gives a friendly smile.

Continuing down the street, he side-steps some of the poop he nearly hit on his bike earlier, several brown footprints form a fecal mosaic. In the process of avoiding the shit smear, Ken kicks a used needle at someone lying in a doorway. The vestibule dweller grumbles and sits up suddenly, startling Ken, who offers an apology. Groaning, the tragic figure slumps back over.

Across east Cordova and through the doors of his favourite Irish pub, two of his pals sit at the bar. Sports play above on the multiple large monitors, beer mugs and shot glasses surround a couple of chums. One of them is clearly wasted, kicking the brass foot rail and cheering at every hockey bodycheck. The wood's deep brown hues and the rounded, crafted countertop make the corner seat Ken's favourite place to peruse the room.

"Kenny K!" The shorter Australian man yells, kicking the brass rail and throwing his hands in the air.

"Another round of shots, pronto!" The taller handsome man says, pile driving his index finger into the bar with enthusiasm.

Ken smiles, sitting at his corner stool. Reaching over the countertop, he plugs in a phone-charger cable to revive his lifeless phone.

The bartender walks over, a pretty hapa mixed like himself; she pours three usual shots, putting one each in front of the men.

An hour passes by in a blur of drinks and sulking.

He doesn't wanna talk about it.

Banter passes another hour.

Allie texts him, having gone with Grandpa Chang after lunch to check on some local seniors, the summer heatwave hitting them hard. Another double shift coming up, things are getting really busy at the hospital, and her volunteer commitments are clashing with her schedule. The way she writes, he can tell she's upset. There are some leftovers from lunch in the fridge, her dog Sparky really needs a walk soon, and Grandpa is really unimpressed by Ken being late.

"I love you, Kenny, but please be more considerate okay?" She writes, signing off with several poop emoticons, many angry red faces and a single yellow smiley reaching out with a hug.

Ken puts his head down on the bar.

"Bro?" The Australian rarely ever sounds concerned about anything other than his next beer or cigarette.

"I think Kenny's dead," says the taller, well-dressed man in his trademark deadpan delivery.

"Three more shots," says the Australian, "-these ones on my favourite Canadian!"

Ken lifts his head up and can't bring himself to smile.

"guys, I-," Ken's eyes glaze over, showing off his no-insurance ticket and beginning to tell a slightly exaggerated, forlorn tale of his most unfortunate day. Several more shots later, the bar is rotating almost as much as the yarn Ken spins. The six-foot ten bike thief with arms as big as Jeff's leg and the world's most shameful Chang family dim sum.

The Australian, overcome with laughter, nearly falls out of his stool for the fourth time.

"So- what did the gramps say again?"

Ken's face scrunches up, and he laughs at himself, half ready to headbutt the Melbournian drunkard gaslighting him.

"He said to Allie not to dump me because my Canadian half can't keep a schedule or pay a bill on time."

The Australian laughs hard, the stool topples over, and his fresh pint dampens the carpet.

"C'mon mate, get it together," says the tall, handsome British gent, picking the Aussie up off the floor to put him back in drinking position. Jeff works like a chef would on a stack of uncooperative, semi-conscious jello. With a thud, the door to the pub whips open, a curly-haired blonde woman bounds towards Ken and the lads.

"Hey, Nina!" The Aussie shouts, his finger swirls in the air for another round.

"Nooo... nooo!" Jeff says.

Nina pushes aside the stools to slap the bar top.

Ken snaps his head up.

"Mike, Jeff-"

Nina whips her head around to look at Ken, his face a portrait of inebriation and despair, "-Ken?"

"Ugh," Ken groans.

"You look positively flummoxed," Jeff says.

"Whatever that means," grumbles Aussie Mike in his gravel-and-dead-frog tone.

"Hey drunkies, eyes over here, you won't believe what happened-"

Nina wiggles her phone at the boys.

Grinning, she taps on the phone and waits, losing her smile and tapping again. With Jeff and Aussie Mike losing interest fast, she fumbles around trying to get a video to play.

Ken's droopy eyes see she's not making progress.

"Your next hot online date?" Jeff asks, finishing his drink with a few gulps.

"Mate, one- one m-m-more round," mumbles Aussie Mike.

"Yes!" Nina exclaims with a smile; an image loads up and freezes. A kaleidoscope of shadows and lights, the triangle play icon over the middle. Tapping on the unresponsive play button over and over, Nina tosses the phone on the bar.

"Ugh!" she whines, "I hate this loaner phone!"

"Loaner?" Ken asks.

"Yeah- shit, were you here the other day?"

"No, he wasn't; he was off with the mysterious girlfriend, Allie, who we never see," says Jeff in his most smarmy tone.

Ken shrugs and nods.

"Some crackhead grabbed my purse from under the bathroom stall," Nina lifts up her new tiny black purse hanging off her shoulder.

"I'll tell ya," Nina shakes her head and wiggles her finger in the air, "I ain't ever taking it off again. Do you know how hard it is to get another driver's license during a plandemic?"

"Plandemic! -right," laughs Jeff.

"Bull-isssh," mumbles the Aussie under his breath.

"I guess we should be moving 6 feet apart again," Jeff looks around and winks at the bartender.

"I didn't see nothin'," the bartender replies with a grin, wiping down a glass and putting it on a rack above them.

Ken reaches for Nina's phone, "May I?"

"Sure, it's the second last video I recorded." Ken swipes away dozens of open apps on her phone; a baking tutorial app, a puzzle game, and about fifty browser windows. A few dozen swipes, and they close, Ken able to play the movie. Numerous

shadowy figures begin to move on the screen; Attached to a hand with elegant azure nails is a middle finger raising towards a group of men. "That should-"

"Should what, Ken?" Says Nina.

Aussie Mike, Jeff, and Nina watch a frozen-in-place Ken, one of his eyelids twitches, his brow furrowing in an odd, pulsating manner.

"Haha- uh, mate?" laughs the Australian, "-you about to throw a wobbly?"

Tapping on the bar with one finger, Jeff doesn't take his eyes off Ken's intense staring.

"Ken? Ken?" Nina shrugs at Aussie Mike.

"I've never seen him like this," Jeff remarks, a freshly arrived whiskey gets shot back.

Ken's hand begins to shake; he puts the phone down; beads of sweat appear on his forehead as he wipes them away with a balled fist. The video replays from the beginning again. The confrontation, her giving the finger, the window going up. The car is hit multiple times by things that go splat and things that shatter. Near the end, just before Nina's tire-squealing escape, a single frame of blurry video has his heart racing.

"M-my bike," Ken whispers.

"What!"

"Spit it out!"

"Ken? Ken?"

"Guys, I-" Ken sits back in his chair and stares outwards.

"Oh, look, he got the video working," Nina snatches the phone from the bar and shows Jeff and Aussie Mike.

"What is... NO!" Jeff recoils in his barstool.

"Yes, that's exactly what you think," Nina grumbles.

"Oy... rewind that-" Aussie Mike leans in with his one good

eye.

"-yep- that's dookie. A big, fresh one."

Jeff scowls, "ruffians! vagabonds!"

Nina puts her phone back on the bar top, pulls over a bar stool and sits down, ordering a Guinness.

"You guys, this week- hmmph," Nina frowns, "All my daughter wanted, all she wanted, was her favourite sushi, right?"

Nodding, Jeff smirks, tapping the bar in his effort to summon tomorrow's headache.

"So, that means, a trip to Dunbar, they have the best tempura batter and just the freshest, ocean-caught, organic, glut-"

"Snob sushi," Aussie Mike prattles off as he blows on his foamy beer.

Nina smacks the Australian on the arm.

"Hey- my kid gets the best, okay?" Nina has a drink of her Guinness.

Ken picks up Nina's phone, the video plays in a loop, his focus intense.

"So, anyway," Nina continues, "I circle the block; my kid is freaking because a boy at school drew on her backpack, which, obviously, means a crush. And- well, there's no parking; I'm playing therapist here to an 11-year-old, so I decided enough of that; I'm parking a couple blocks away and walking, no biggie, right?"

"Sure," Aussie Mike folds his arms on the bar and rests his chin down, giving a zoned-out Ken a push with his elbow.

"So I'm walking back to my car-"

"The green beetle?" Jeff pipes up.

"Yes-"

"Ah, the booger mobile, cheers!" Jeff raises an empty shot glass to his mouth and savours the last drop.

"Anyways," Nina toasts and takes a drink, "-so I get back to my car, and my daughter is hiding sideways on the backseat when I open the door, so I ask her, what's going on?"

"Yeah?!" Jeff interrupts.

"Turns out, she says, don't look at the park mumma, there's-"

"A pervert! I knew it-"

"Jeff, let me finish the damn story!" Nina screeches.

"-So yeah, anyway- of course, I look around, and what do I see? -A couple of bums on a bench, a stack of bikes next to them, drinking and smoking and waving at me-"

"You couldn't leave well enough alone-"

"Shut it, Jeff!"

"Jeff, you're a prick," Aussie Mike chimes in.

"Naturally," Jeff says, proud of himself, "but where did the poobombs come from?"

A mustache of Irish foam coats the top of Nina's lip, chuckling as she lowers her glass.

"-well, of course, I put down my window and yell to stop being a creep to a mother with her 11-year-old, to which they yelled even more disgusting shit that my daughter shouldn't have heard, so yeah, I gave them the finger."

"You didn't just give the finger," Jeff says coyly.

"Umm-"

"Did you let them have it?" Aussie Mike smiles.

"Yeah, I may have said a few things..."

"When did the poobombs-"

"Okay, so, I gave the finger and told them they are utter garbage and need to find themselves love, light, and healing.

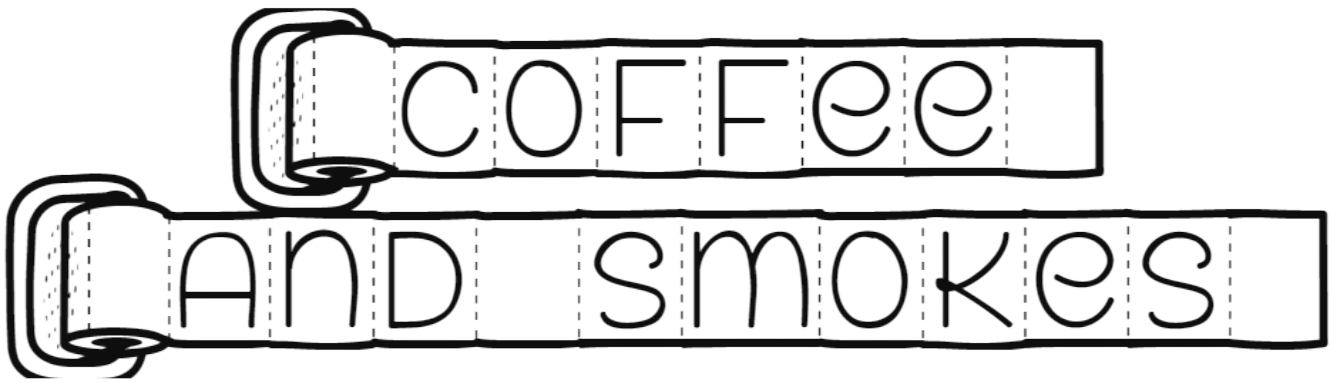
And then I put my windows up, well- that's when unholy brown bombs and beer bottles began to pelt my car, and I peeled outta there, after taking the video!"

"Exciting! Poo-flinging adventures!" Jeff quips.

"Peachy," the red-nose Australian replies, his lips wet and one eyelid droops.

Typically the chatterbox, Ken commands everyone's attention as he says nothing. One by one, everyone stares at him. He uses two hands to hold the phone; his shaky thumb keeps tapping the same part of the video timeline. A crimson hue spreads across his face, and the veins on his forehead bulge out.

Nina and the crew huddle over to watch what Ken is looping. Unsteady shadows flicker, brown smears blot on the window, an engine roars and tires squeal; Ken pauses it on a single blurry frame. A blonde goatee'd man, his arm stretches out to hurl poo; he stands next to a brightly coloured, pro vintage custom bicycle.



The pub's door bursts open, the cohort of four friends rush out toward Nina's car in a secure lot nearby. As they all pile into the green Beetle, Ken pokes around with his hand to put down the window next to him, feeling a bit tipsy. "Ken's not looking too good, eh chap," Jeff slaps Ken on the shoulder from the backseat.

"Oy, let's grab some coffees and smokes," grumbles the Aussie.

Nina drives out of the underground parking, opens her sunroof, and cranks some rock music.

"Lucky for you guys, there's a 24-7 right there," Nina says, her hair blowing in the wind as the music shakes the car, flying down Richard's street towards the park in question. A few minutes later, the pals are over the bridge and bombing through the west side. A few more dizzy moments go by for Ken until they pull up to a 24-7 convenience store, a forest park across from it.

"Where were they?" Jeff peers into the pitch-black tree line.

"Further up, they're past that one big tree- I parked on the other side right there," Nina points- a stout oak tree enshrouds

a distant streetlamp; underneath them both lies a beckoning dark pathway.

Aussie Mike opens his car door and falls out onto the curb.

"Don't worry, 'twas only me 'ead," barks the Aussie; standing up, he lights a smoke.

"Right," says Jeff.

"Ken, what do you want in your coffee?" asks Nina.

"I'll come in," Ken staggers out of the car, a slow wander through the sliding doors of the brightly lit 24-7. Nina follows Ken and the Aussie in the store. The gang shops and collects a few water bottles, several packs of smokes, and trays for some large coffees that Ken nearly spills on his shuffle to the front counter.

"Hey man, you party much tonight?" says the cashier with an accent.

"No- no... I have, well, nothing to party about, just-

Ken sighs, putting the coffees down and with a gesture at Nina to pay.

"-too many jerks out there... man."

"Oh, I hear you buddeh!" the man behind the counter laughs and rings up the bill, "-you should see, asshole from the park, they come in, every night right around 11 PM, they take coffee, never pay, I call cop, and they do nothing. Real asshole eh!"

"Rea- really?" says Ken.

Nina grabs the bags off the counter, "-coming?"

"Oh yeah, real asshole man!" the 24-7 worker replies. Ken smiles, following Nina out the door, the crew gets back in the green beetle with the freshest coffees and their hydration needs covered. Aussie Mike stands beside the car, flicking his new green lighter, burning another smoke. He leans inside the

passenger window with a grin.

"We really doin' this?" Everyone looks at Aussie Mike.

"Yes," Ken sips his coffee, "I'm doing this, just- just follow me in case; I'm sure this guy will understand I just want my bike back. If I'm willing to come to find him in this park, he'll know that I'm serious. It's my bike. Besides, I mean, maybe he was just really high and really thought it was his friend's bike, who knows?"

"Oy, that's crazy talk mate, no way dem thugs gonna hand you back your wheelie."

Nina nods at the inebriated Australian.

"Look, it's my bike, my risk; stay in the car if you have to," Ken has another sip of his coffee. Looking at his phone for the time, 11:30 PM, he opens his door to step out.

"Ok, look, it's now or never, just follow me up to the entrance; if you hear me yell, then come. I'm not looking for a fight, ok?"

Everyone nods but Aussie Mike. He rolls his eyes while taking a long drag, blowing a massive cloud of smoke.

Jeff, Mike and Nina follow Ken as he crosses the quiet street to case the park. They catch up with him, peering around the thick tree near the entrance.

"Oy, we gon' bumrush 'em?" Aussie Mike finishes his sentence with a hiccup.

"We need a battering ram, something thick and hard, Mike. I'll pick you up and use your head!" Jeff grabs Mike and grapples with him; Nina delivers a swift kick in Jeff's butt to end the horseplay.

"Shhh!" Ken peeks around the corner for a few seconds; he pulls back and turns to Nina.

"I see it, same guy, same bike. I can see four of them just

sitting around a couple of tents. You can see the glow of their phones." Ken points around the tree.

"Can you see them?"

Nina takes a quick peep.

"Yeah," Nina whispers.

"I can barely see it, but that's my bike for sure. It's just over there, leaning against that tree by the orange tent. Every time a car drives by, I can see the chrome handlebars shine in the headlights."

Jeff leans in to whisper, "you say the word, bro!"

Ken shakes his head.

"Guys- I'll handle this like a gentleman; stay here; I'll be right back."

Nina nods as Aussie Mike rolls his eyes again, yet another cigarette blazes between his lips with two more smokes tucked behind each ear.

Ken walks into the darkened park. Streetlights nearby cast long, tricky shadows that dance as cars drive by; their headlight beams penetrate into the murky greenbelt to reveal Ken's bike propped against a tree. Fifty steps into the park, Ken steps off the path and into a grassy clearing where the circle of bike bandits dwell in folding chairs. Having coffees and smokes while on their phones, noticing Ken, their surprised faces glow blue from screen shine.

"What the- "

"Hi, I'm just here for my bike-"

"Your bike?"

"Yes, please, not here for trouble, I just-"

"Get a load of this guy," growls a voice.

"Not so fast, dummy-"

As Ken goes to take back his bike, someone's hands are

on his back with a forceful shove. In the dark, Ken trips as he lets go of his bike, a misstep on damp roots; he twists his ankle and loses his balance. His cheek catches the scratchy bark of a nearby tree as he goes down.

"Ahhhg," Ken feels his spine slam against a knotty root.

"Get that idiot outta here," curses another man.

"Fuck off, buddy," another voice, with Ken lying on the ground, the next few kicks knocks the wind from him.

"Oof!"

"Drag that dumbass," the voice of the goatee'd bike thief.

Ken skids across the ground from the force of the continued blows. Hands forcefully grab his ankles, dragging him along the grass, back into the light near the curb and dump him on the concrete sidewalk.

"And stay out!" Yells one of the men.

Footsteps bound over, Jeff moves to help sit Ken up, Nina using a napkin to wipe some bark remnants away from Ken's sore, bloody cheek.

"What happened?"

Ken grunts.

"What does it look like," he gets to his feet and grabs his jaw in pain, "-they knocked me down and beat me up; I must have hit a tree trunk with my face."

"Bastards! Immortal and lascivious men dwelling in parks!" Jeff stomps with a dramatic frown.

Aussie Mike emulates a chimney, clouds of smoke eject from every hole on his face.

"Oy Nina can take 'em; she's in Mossad, highly trained-," Aussie Mike's chuckle turns into a fit of coughs.

"Haw haw very funny, I'm not going near those creeps, but I know who will!" Nina's face turns into a clever scowl.

"I'm callin' the cops!" Nina whips out her phone, taps it three times before making eye contact with Jeff, pointing at the Aussie with a nod. Ken dabs his bloody cheek on the napkin Nina gave him; his sore back presses against the car, and his face oozes away.

The group stands beside Nina's car; in many long minutes, the Vancouver police roll up as Nina digs through her glovebox. She finds a few wet-wipe packages and opens them, followed by aggressive swipes of Ken's stinging gash.

"Hold still; it's a sanitized napkin!"

A tall silver-haired officer gets out of his car and walks up to Ken with a notepad in hand.

"Just what happened here, sir?"

Ken explains he went to get his stolen bike back and gives a description to the cop. Unique markings on it will prove it's his bike—a dot of orange paint on the front tire's sidewall, the saddlebags, the zippered pouch under the polished aluminum seat. The blonde goatee man is the mugger who stole it from him—right in front of London Rugs on Broadway.

"Did you file a police report?"

"Well, uh- no," Ken replies.

"Ok," the sardonic officer nods, "hang tight," he says, "we'll have a chat with them."

Jeff and Mike crack jokes with a female cop that arrives on the scene, Nina still picking bits of bark out of Ken's wound.

"Promise me, you'll put some tea tree oil on this tomorrow, ok? I don't want it to scar," Nina says.

At that moment, a black BMW drives up and parks behind the two police cars. A figure gets out of the passenger seat. The stranger's face obscured from the streetlight; they stand in the shadow of the large tree at the path's edge. Waving at the

silver-haired cop, the shadowy stranger waits as the cop walks over to them. Ken folds his arms.

"Hmm," Nina points at the distant figure, turning to Jeff. "Who's that over there, you suppose?"

Jeff shrugs.

"Crackhead babysitter?" quips Aussie Mike as he chain-smokes.

"Yeah, SWIVEL or whatever they're called," Ken grumbles.

The figure turns and walks down the path with the policeman in tow. Standing still with his arms crossed, an eternity seems to pass by Ken. Jeff monologues along, giving his play-by-play, a series of detailed observations of the multiple layers of drug-fueled chicanery and alcohol-powered hijinks leading to Ken's discontent. The Australian keeps belching- Nina facepalms at the juvenile scene.

The officer emerges from the park without any bike in tow. Walking next to the dark figure, they nod to each other and split; the stranger gets into the BMW, pulls a u-turn, and roars away. The lady cop approaches the other cop standing with Ken.

His bicycle is officially a hostage.

"Officer-"

"Sir, you're lucky you're not being charged," The cop raises his voice.

"Those gentlemen told me you walked up and snatched their bicycle, attempting to steal it without any identification at all to prove it's yours."

"I s-s-said it-"

"Yeah, we checked the markings you mentioned; the aluminum seat with storage pouch wasn't there. Nor was there an orange paint stripe on the front tire; look- we can't have

anyone walking up to someone in a public park and grabbing their bike in front of four people, ok? Also, the disgusting slurs about poverty and addiction you used while assaulting them would make any-"

"B-but- I didn't-"

"-Any charges against you eligible for hate crime prosecution- do you understand?" The officer stares into Ken's eyes. Ken hangs his head and sighs; Nina pats him on the shoulder.

"Next time," the cop says, speaking quieter, "file a police report. Give me something to go on. You try this again, and you could end up with assault and hate crime charges, do you understand?"

"-and," the cop turns to face the street, "-as for your friend, THAT one is going to jail." The now-sneering cop points at Aussie Mike, his pants around his ankles, having a whizz on the side of the police car.

"Oy stop starin' yer giving me stage freight!" the cockeyed Australian hollers between cigarette puffs.

"Fright, he means fright," Nina sighs.

The female officer joins the silver-haired one in tackling the Australian; all three splash around in his substantial urine puddle.

Jeff pulls out a flask from his sports coat. "Cheers, mate," he says, having a long swig.

Nina looks around. "Ken?"

Ken sits in the back of Nina's car with his eyes closed, his bruised face presses against the cold glass. Nina and Jeff nod at each other. In the green VW beetle, she watches and waves in her rearview at Aussie Mike, and he smiles; the cops toss him in the back of a squad car.

A short while later, they park outside Allie's loft in Gastown, Ken's lately full-time residence as a lacklustre, part-time dog-sitter. Jeff holds a sleepy and drunk Ken up as Nina fiddles with his key fob to open the front gate. After the elevator ride up, she opens and holds the door open, struggling to find a light switch. Ken slumps on the couch still in his muddy shoes and dirty clothes, oozing blood from his cheek smears on the pillow, and a twig sticks out from his hair. Jeff and Nina stand over Ken, unconscious on the sofa, his wounds receiving licks from Sparky- Allie's rather cute and hyper black pomeranian.

"I guess we'll leave the keys on the kitchen table and the door unlocked?"

"Sure," whispers Nina; she puts his keys on the table and walks to the front door with Jeff.

"What's that smell?" Jeff says.

Nina switches on her camera light to pan it around; a few dog turds and lake-sized puddles of dog pee litter the condo floor.

"Poor guy," Jeff says, "first beaten by park pirate crackheads, now savagely assaulted by Gastown's most privileged pup."

Nina chuckles and walks out along with Jeff; the front door closes with a soft click.

Ken awakens with a startle; the lights are on, and dog barks ring in his ear.

"Ken!"

It's Allie. The couch vibrates with every one of her stomps.

"Sparky peed in the hallway- oh my, there's poop in the living room. I said to take him for a walk, and what's up with

this mud? Where did this mud come from, and- oh- oh my gosh, the couch! Why are you bleeding on my couch! Ken!"

She stomps to the bathroom, a cabinet door squeaks, and she stomps back over beside him. Allie lifts Ken's head up, putting a towel under it.

"Ok, you know what- whatever! I'm going to bed; we'll talk about this tomorrow; good luck at work. And don't be late," Allie sighs; the lights turn off after she crawls into her bed on the other side of the condo.



Ken is already awake when his alarm rings out at precisely 7:00 AM, thanks to the noise outside. Leaning out the window to look for the source of the racket, he spots a screaming man; he's been punching a dumpster for the last half an hour.

Boom!

"AhhahhhhhHHHhhhhaaaaAAAahhhhHHHhaaaahhh!"

Boom!

"Frrrigggggg!!!"

Boom!

"Ahhhhh-ahhhhhh-AHHHH!! FUCK!!!"

For a moment, Ken can relate. Not to the man punching the dumpster repeatedly but to the metal bin being beaten. Ken's forehead hammers inside, ringing with the ghosts of last night's revelry. Shot after shot after shot, followed by a rude shove head-first into a thick tree. He smiles- flexing his cheek muscles; they are sore. Running his hand across his face, feeling multiple large, crusty scabs, giving him icky shivers up his spine.

Ken closes the window, instinctively drawn towards the automatic coffee maker; it bubbles away half-finished. A good time for him to grab the pot and pour himself a pitch-black

cuppa joe. Looking down at his favourite mug, the steaming coffee is far too hot to drink. When he pops the freezer drawer open for a couple pieces of ice, a few bottles of frosty booze catch his eye for more than just a moment.

Fumbling around in one of the kitchen drawers, he finds his old metal flask, a good friend to him from back in his bachelor days. He quickly recalls a memory of the first time he brought it to Allie's. She and her friends playing cards and sipping sake; at the same time, he DJs and drinks whiskey from his flask- She has a few sips and turns bright red. Allie always buys the cheap stuff, Ken replacing it with some quality liquor. He always says to her- if you're going to slowly poison yourself, it might as well be with a quality toxin. After quickly rinsing out the slim steel liquor canteen, he fills it to the brim with ice-cold East Van Vodka. Ken smiles at the silly hipster owl on the label. Popping it back in the freezer, he opens the hallway closet to stash the canteen in his sport coat pocket, returning to the kitchen.

Plop!

Plop!

Two large cubes of ice in his coffee, seconds later, he's sipping it and almost forgets about his sore cheek.

What a disaster.

It is just a bike.

Ken stands at the window and drinks his coffee; an occasional bang of a trashcan mixes into the regular background racket.

It is just a bike.

"It's just a bike," he whispers to himself.

He can replace it.

Flashes of the thief, Ken's hands can feel the yank as the

bike slips from his grip, and now- a self-criticizing attack.

Why- oh fuck why- WHY didn't he fucking defend himself!

Ken feels the frustration and resentment well within him, squeezing the coffee cup tight for a moment, his brow furrowing; calm down, everything will be okay. It is just a bike. It is just a bike. It is just a bike.

"Fuck," he whispers, feeling bad for swearing.

I totally messed up; damn- Ken bows his head and touches his tender cheek, fingers probe to see how deep the bruise goes.

Ken shuffles around Allie's place in an attempt to clothe himself. Wrinkled slacks, a stained button-up, and a drab blue tie he means to replace. His sport coat still looks good under most lighting.

Ken stands in front of the bathroom mirror; his face looks more hamburger than handsome, his relaxing morning fades into the thought of commuter chaos. With some of Allie's foundation, he covers the worst of the scratches and uses a moisturizer on his face to look somewhat alive. After double-checking he has all of his things, Ken creeps over to Allie's bed to give her a kiss goodbye on the cheek. She doesn't respond.

Back to the kitchen, he downs the coffee, Ken pops open the freezer for some hair o' the dog. The trick being you drink enough to make the headache go away, but not too much to upset your gut. The aftertaste of hot coffee meets cold vodka, a great breakfast, he thinks, if you're an aficionado of vomit. Out of the apartment and down to the street, Ken flags a cab. The wait is made beside a trashcan in case he barfs. At least his head hurts less.

The cab squeals to a halt; Ken slips the driver a \$20 and

tells him to keep the change. A \$3 tip isn't enough to get a "have a nice day" as he steps out onto the sidewalk, a half-block from work.

Burrard street buzzes with cars and people. Panhandlers, save-the-earth types and groups of NGO workers with clipboards harang him for attention as Ken makes his way to the head office of Rise Helicopter and Crane. A specialty construction company, Ken works in sales and arranges for helicopter delivery of construction supplies, along with long-reach and super heavy-duty rating cranes.

"Hey, Ken," the older portly gentleman at the front desk says.

"Bob," Ken nods his head and ducks into the elevator; usually, he has time to stop by and have a laugh with him about some random fact or dumb news story, but not today.

The sales and marketing team is spread out in an open concept plan through the maze of cubicles and past the conference rooms. Ken previously building himself a little privacy shield behind a bookcase full of industry magazines, along with a few short potted plants.

He sits down at his desk and signs in to his corporate email account. Hours passing as his brain goes into auto-pilot, answering emails, making a few friendly calls, the day going by smoothly. After a few conversations with old clients to offer discounts on their next lift, a priority email dings in his inbox, giving him a slight startle. Clicking it, he's relieved it's nothing too major; a company-wide bulletin that all medium-duty cranes are out of service due to a recall. Suzanne, his bubbly-but-nosey co-worker, emails him a reminder: it is Bob at the front desk's birthday. Ken takes some change out of his desk, making a mental note to get a fast-food gift card for the

friendly old guy.

A few magazines smack on Ken's desk.

Ken looks up to see Suzanne from marketing beaming a broad smile at him.

"Brought you the latest industry bullshit you won't read-how was the staycation?"

Her face scrunches up.

"Oh- what's that scratch from?"

"I, uh, was just jogging at night- a raccoon spooked me, and I ran into a bush by accident," Ken laughs for a moment.

"Well, I know Ken, and it's not some story about getting drunk and pickin' fights at da club or nothin'!" Suzanne makes a silly face as she puts her dukes up, throwing a few jab-cross combos.

"Easy tiger," Ken blinks one eye by accident as an out-of-place hair falls onto his eyeball. He turns a bit red thinking she may-

"Something in your eye?"

"Uhh, yeah, I- ah, what did you come over here for again? I mean- I don't mind the chat but-"

"Helivator was found guilty of several safety violations, and our oil, gas, and logging sectors just blew wide open. I just happened to be schmoozing in the right place at the time time. Here, look-"

Suzanne puts down a business card on Ken's desk, he picks it up.

"Mark Leblanc, Vice-CEO of Vroomx oil," Ken sits back, studying the card, "-impressive!"

"So, check your messages; you just had your biggest client dropped right in your lap," Suzanne smiles at Ken and leans in close to whisper.

"Just remember ya' girl in marketing when you get that next promotion," with a head bob and a wink, Suzanne backs away from Ken's desk.

"See you at lunch?"

"Uhh- maybe," Ken looks through his phone for the message.

"Yeah, hello, Ken?"

...laughs...

"you- your friend Suzy, -she",

...laughs...

"-can really shoot sambuca,"

...muffled sound...

"yeah- another round!"

...laughs...

"listen- she"

...laughs...

"-call me, we need some choppers and a few of those heavy duties for the pipeline, call me- she's got my card-"

...laughs...

Ken grins; a client like this could really help him move up in the company. He needs this, painfully aware that his meagre savings for a mortgage downpayment haven't grown much. A rush of excitement hits him; Ken peers out towards Suzanne's desk; she notices Ken looking over, returning his look with a smile and a wave. Ken gives a thumbs up, ducking back behind his strategically placed magazine rack.

Ken's first day back at work from a week off is going much smoother than he has anticipated. There are no headaches at all, a few trips to the coffee machine and late lunch at his desk; he leaves two messages with Mark at Vroomx but hasn't

received a callback. That is until the red digital clock on his desk ticks to 4:55 PM.

Ring!

Ken picks up his work phone.

"Oh eh- hello," crackles the voice on the line.

"Mr. Leblanc, hello, hello!" Ken says enthusiastically.

"Oh- yes-hello, can you hear me? Call me Mark."

"Yes, Mark, hello, Ken here. I have your card-"

Mark laughs, "Yeah, your co-worker, she's quite the ham, listen- I have a couple of real heavies, I'm talkin' big time 'eavy lifts comin' up. I uh, need three of your biggest and could probably use an engineer or two to go over our lift plan."

"No problem, Mark, and what day do you need to book this job for?"

"I'm thinking Wednesday at, say, 7 AM start?"

Ken looks at his calendar. It's Monday.

"This Wednesday?"

"Yes, please," replies Mark.

Ken stands up to look out over the open floor plan of marketing, gazing far back to the engineering department, where a couple of heads poke out above cubicles.

"Yes, if you can get me your plans for review immediately, I can guarantee the service for Wednesday. I just sent you an email, so you can just reply to that."

"Ah! Right, hitting refresh- got it! I'm sending the plan now."

"Okay, sounds good Mark, I'll get back to you tomorrow; we'll see you Wednesday!"

Ken copies the plan from the email to a USB stick on his PC.

"Great, take'r easy, Ken!"

The phone hangs up, Ken jumps to his feet, taking the USB stick and booking it to the engineering cubicles. Power-walking down the row, a young guy about Ken's own height with brown hair and an extra big nose is getting up from his desk and putting his coat on.

"Steve- no, you're Kyle?"

"Seth, actually," replies the big-nosed man with the long, stylish brown wool trenchcoat.

"Oh, Seth, sorry, hey-, I'm Ken," Ken slips his hands into his pockets.

Seth picks up his laptop bag from the desk and throws it over his shoulder.

"Listen uh, sorry to bother you," Ken can feel his hands shaking in his pockets a little, "I just booked a huge, rush job, could-"

Seth looks Ken in the eyes, expressionless.

"You want me to stay late?"

"If you could- please, it's a big client, Vroomx, super high priority, big time," Ken pulls out the USB stick, offering it to Seth.

"I have places to be, like- I need more notice in the future, okay?" Seth takes off his laptop bag, throws his coat on the back of his seat and snatches the USB stick from Ken's slightly-shaking hand.

"Thanks," Seth mumbles as he pulls his office chair out and sits down again, "-I'll have it ready for you tomorrow."

"Great! Thank you, I'll make it up to you. I just got the order at four fifty-five; I didn't mean to ruin your plans-"

"Yeah, but you did, so- whatever," Seth opens the file on his screen, going silent, clicking his mouse with more force than it needs.

"Sorry, just please make sure you CC sales on the final plan, okay?" Ken says, turning to walk back to his desk. After recording his hours worked, he shuts down his PC and departs the office.

Leaving his work, Ken spots the bus to his girlfriend's place just as it pulls up at the stop a few meters ahead. Ken pauses for a moment. Earlier in the day, Ken plans to pick up his towed car, but on second thought, the dog really needs a walk and some company. Also, Allie will kill him if she comes home to another nasty mess.

Ken hops on the bus and soon bounces off in Gastown, beeping himself through the security gate. Unlocking Allie's apartment door, a very fussy black pomeranian wildly greets him. After a quick glass of water and a bathroom break, he finds and snaps the leash on Sparky, the pair now exiting the apartment. Taking the fire escape, man and dog quickly descend the stairs and arrive on the street level. The snorting, impatient hound scrambles all over for sniffs- Ken's arm looking like a windshield wiper flapping back and forth on high.

"Easy, easy!" Ken struggles to go by the artisan ice cream shoppe where teens and other dogs mingle; the crowd moves with intent to tangle in Sparky's extendable tether.

"Ex-excuse me, pardon me, I'm sorry," he maneuvers the crazy-dog-on-the-cord in a spastic ballet to separate from the pedestrians.

Down the street and one runny, very smelly poop later, Ken uses a few subway napkins from his coat pocket to pick it up. Accidentally getting some on his hand.

"Ahhh, shh-oot," he grumbles, wiping his hand on the vintage brick sidewalk, then smearing a nearby tree.

"Hey buddy, you're live on cam; learn to clean up after

your dog, stupid!"

Ken pivots to see a rather chubby man with an unkempt beard in a backwards hat holding his phone up, pointed towards him.

"What? No- stop, I'm- cleaning it, see?" Ken says, holding up a subway napkin with splotches of pupper fudge.

"Finish the job, bro!" The fat, rude man says, pointing at a couple of butt cookies remaining on the sidewalk, the phone moves in closer for a shot of Ken's face.

Using a newspaper scrap, Ken scoops the last of the poo into a garbage bin; he sighs as the fat man puts away his phone. The rude obese fellow claps when Ken walks away.

"What a jerk," Ken laments with a frown, turning the corner and briskly walking back towards his girlfriend's place.

Later that night, after a hot shower to relax and a semi-sweet chai tea, Ken has some soothing piano music on while he texts with his bored girlfriend at work.

I have to administer more laxatives tonight

Poo party LOL!

Raylaxabute 5 ml makes the seniors GO

Ken chuckles. Allie loves to look at the funny side of the human body. It helps her never stress out when working as a nurse. On their first date, she called people "stinky stuff bags" because we're so full of yucky stuff, but it is still so lovely to cuddle on the outside.

That giggle of hers- and the bit of food stuck between her teeth at the time- a cute moment he'll never forget.

"Ur funni babe," he writes back, lying on the couch with a pillow under his head, his feet up on the arm.

LMAO, it is better than using ur finger let me tell u

Not wanting any more of *that* conversation, he puts his phone down. A big yawn and a stretch, his eyelids of lead. Memories of his bike intrude on his tired mind; what a special gift it has been, given to him by a special person.

Being realistic, the sentimental mindset is for fools.

Shit happens. Boohoo. Life goes on.

"It was just a bike," Ken whispers.

"I can buy another one," he mumbles to himself, dozing off.

Sparky's jingling collar is heard, unclipped nails tapping along the floor and stopping beside the couch. Lowering his hand to the floor, Ken smiles and pets the soft, warm dog.

Everything is going to be okay.

The next day, Ken wakes up at 6:55 AM and feels refreshed; no alarm is needed. Feeling the abundance mindset vibe flow through him, breakfast is now an expression of his culinary genius. A fresh cup of perfectly roasted, small-batch Peaberry coffee and a fantastic avocado toast sprinkled with organic Peruvian chilli oil. Each bite is Michelin-worthy and would elicit praise from any swearing British TV chef.

His bright blue tie matches his beaming smile and re-found joy projecting out into the world. Ken grins in the mirror; today's going to be great, he thinks, giving himself a small spray of cologne.

Leaving Allie's place, he is again rewarded by karma with perfect timing; the bus arrives the second he walks up, and a window seat is available.

"Ahh, manifested!" Ken relaxes in the vinyl transit seat; he

smiles and watches the streets go by on his way to work.

Arriving at his stop, the Amnesty International street agent walks up to chat but ends up just getting a big, cheerful, smiling high-five from Ken. The office building entrance has people hurrying about—business people and many others, with their coffees and tote bags dashing every which way. Stepping inside the foyer, Ken dodges an oblivious and inconsiderate man carrying a tray of drippy coffees through the lobby.

"Ever heard of a lid, pal?" remarks a familiar voice; Ken looks and grins at the front counter corporate security guard.

"Bob! How are things?" Ken walks up and leans against the elevated reception desk where the older, heavy-set man sits in a reclining chair in front of several monitors.

"Keepin' out the barbarians, as usual- elevator 3 now has coffee all over the floor, one sec-" Bob clicks away at his keyboard momentarily before turning back to Ken.

"I've been great, had a week off and Allie, and I had some fun, but- she's been called into work a lot, and uh- I keep forgetting to take her dog out so-uh- yeah- can you also dispatch a janitor to my life? Haha, a bit of a shitshow-" Ken laughs half-heartedly, his fist drops on the countertop while he sighs.

"My man, you need a weekend away with your woman, somewhere fancy, none of that sit-on-the-couch shit, that's how the romance dies," Bob says, his eyebrow raises.

"I mean, you're not having problems; with her, are you? She's so easy to please! Just get out of the house-"

"Yeaahhh- about that, I uh-" Ken scratches the back of his head.

"Drank too much? Talked some shit?" Bob grins, "been there! Flowers, my man... flowers! Wait, no- Allison- right?"

"Allie, yeah, she-"

"Her greek place, remember? She loves that greasy pita pal. You gotta give her the ol' greasy pita right in her lemony potato! Heh heh heh!" Bob makes a rude gesture with his hands that happens to be funny at the moment.

Ken laughs, "Yeah, that's actually- actually a really great idea -the greasy pita part, I mean."

Bob picks up a pen from his desk, kicks back in his chair, slides backwards while lifting his hands over his head like he's doing a basketball free-throw. Tossing the pen high in the air, it lands in a cup next to the monitors with a clink.

"Swoosh, baby! Nothin' but net!" Bob raises his hands triumphantly, spins around in his office chair obnoxiously a few times and returns his focus back to the screens in front of him.

"Kid, take the bad with the good; life's all about getting kicked in the jewels and seeing how little it slows you down, speaking of slow- where's maintenance, if someone slips on that coffee- that's my ass!"

Ken laughs, feeling the day's first big smile across his still-aching face. Bob must be noticing the rough patch on his cheek and kindly doesn't ask.

With a wave, Ken makes his way toward the elevators to avoid more surly office workers in rushes. Elevator 3 has a lake of coffee inside; a cautious Ken traverses around it to push the 33 button.

The elevator moves fast, and with a ding, the doors open to reveal the open-concept office with Suzanne standing right there, her usual sly smile missing.

"Suze... what's up?"

"Not good, Ken, not good..." Suzanne walks with Ken to his workspace, a small desk next to a bookcase corner. The

company CEO leans against the bookcase with several other co-workers nearby, including the engineer he spoke to yesterday, Seth.

"Yeah, I spoke with Ken yesterday evening, he gave me the USB key, but there was no follow-up email. No priority notification, and I was off at 5:00 PM. So- I mean, I didn't know."

Seth finishes talking and looks over at Ken.

With a rush of heat to his cheeks, Ken puts his hands in his pockets so they won't shake.

"Uh, h-hi guys," Ken says.

The CEO looks right through him.

"Ken, you know the procedure- this was a big client. Why didn't you email it with the priority flag? I should have been CC'ed. I would have put a team of 2 engineers on overtime to review the document and have it to Mr. Leblanc before 7 AM. Now it's, what-"

"8:51 AM, sir," replies one of the other co-workers.

"It's almost nine, and we've just started the review for a job he booked for Wednesday morning? If he sent this to anyone else, I'm sure they've already gotten a quote back. I mean, do we even know if we can service this?"

"No, we'd need the full 2 engineer report first," says one of the other engineers Ken hardly knows.

The CEO sighs and turns to Suzanne.

"-and you, if you ever get a sales lead like that again, I mean-" The CEO laughs a mocking laugh. "If- if you're ever doing sambuca with Canada's biggest gas contractor and they're looking for cranes, bring me the card, okay? -chain of command, you don't take a client like that to someone like Ken."

Bright red in the face, the CEO glares at Ken. Almost totally bald, the little spikes of grey and white hair that stick up make him resemble a tomato on an unseasonably frosty morning.

"I don't know what you were thinking. Clearly, you didn't have your head in the game, and you weren't following the procedure. Take the rest of the week off, I want you to review the sales and booking flowchart, and I want you to write an apology letter to the department. You let us all down."

Ken nods sheepishly, trying to not make eye contact with anyone standing around. Suzanne, the long-nosed liar Seth and a couple of other stragglers still lingering. Their faces are all delightfully entertained by the drama.

"Okay, sorry, I'll make sure next time I'll follow the proper steps."

Ken picks up his laptop case from the floor, puts his coat back on and mopes back to the elevator.

He pushes the down button and sighs, his eyes close.

"Ken?"

It is Suzanne's voice.

Ken opens his eyes and looks over to see Suzanne; in her extended hand is his favourite candy bar, a Brix.

"Oh, that was totes brutes; I had this in my bag. It might be a bit squished," Suzanne hands him the Brix bar with the crushed side.

"I know it's your favourite; cheer up buttercup."

With a wink and smile, she punches him gently in the arm and walks back into the office; she turns around for a friendly wave as the elevator doors shut.

Back on the bus, and Ken stays on it a bit longer than

usual. Might as well get his impounded car; thinking about the daily lot fees is making him worry. Now especially, having been sent home from work for a week without pay. Riding public transit towards East Van, he watches for the stop nearest to the industrial park containing the tow yard. Hopping off the bus and crossing the busy intersection at Main and Terminal, Ken soon walks on a quiet side street and approaches the car jail. The caramel smacks in his mouth, he finishes munching the Brix bar Suzanne gave him. Sure nice of her.

Alcatraz probably looks friendlier in comparison to the impound lot. Barbed wire, fortified gates and a concrete brutalist style, the inside isn't much better with double-thick bulletproof glass with a tray to slide a payment through. Two workers in the back ignore Ken as he walks up for some service; everything about the facility makes for a shitty mood.

Looking around, the scratched-up counter, stains on the floor, and various "Do not swear at the attendant" messages are everywhere.

People in the back of the office are on their computers and totally must have heard Ken walk in, but they say nothing. He watches out the windows overlooking the tow yard; cars of all types and colours fill the spacious gravel and dirt field. Tow trucks speed in and out constantly, adding more to the haphazard pile.

"Can I help you?" A voice behind him speaks.

"Ah yes, here for my blue Subaru," Ken faces a blank-faced woman.

After a few silent minutes, the woman adds up a five hundred dollar tow and storage fee ticket for Ken to pay; she points to the back of the yard.

"Far back, left side," she says, Ken's debased credit card

returns to his wallet.

"Sure, thanks," Ken says, the door buzzes, and he steps out into the tow yard with his key fob in hand.

It reeks of gas and exhaust fumes. With Ken's head twisting around for safety, he plays human frogger with tow trucks. Fleet feet keep him alive; he's soon at the back of the lot and can't find his car. A few other people file into the yard and seem to spot their vehicles right away. Meanwhile, Ken patrols up and down the rows, no shiny blue Subaru to be found. Not until another guy moves his Jeep, behind it is a rather dirty blue Subaru sitting tight against the back wall.

Walking up to it, he notices the door handle has a few finger marks on it, smudged in brown dried mud.

He reaches out to the handle and pulls the door open.

"Strange," Ken whispers, "I know I locked it."

Inside, the car is as he remembered, but with quite a bit more mud in the footwell. Odd, he thinks, he always keeps it clean. Turning the key, the car roars to life, Ken reassured by the solid-sounding engine. His eyes close, and Ken takes a deep breath of relief; he put his seatbelt on and smiles. He'll go for a drive to relax, maybe pick up a fried chicken bucket and grab some Tennessee whiskey. Pho would be excellent, too.

He doesn't really need any drinks.

Everything is going to be okay.

With the clutch in, Ken slips into 1st gear with little effort, releasing the clutch to go and-

Ken hears crunchy sounds come from under the car.

"Wha-the..."

Getting out, Ken lies on his stomach in the dusty parking lot.

Mud and twigs stick out from the underbody and

suspension; one of the axles hangs loose and doesn't connect to the wheel anymore. The nasty sounds being from the broken part flopping around.

Ken frowns, leaping to his feet, opening the trunk to dig through the carpet for his stashed ECU tuner. It is a unique little device that can read the car's black box info. He keeps it hidden next to the spare tire. Snatching it, he quickly sits back in the driver's seat and plugs it in.

In seconds, Ken downloads from his car. The data pops up on the tiny screen to show data logs from recent driving, even hitting a top speed of 259 KPH, all happening after the tow.

Ken's eyes bulge out of his skull.

"A-a j-j-joyride?"

Ken stares at the screen.

"Y-you've got to be kidding me, no way, no way."

Ken taps the date and time column, the engine log he set up to tune his car clearly shows a lot of hard-driving. How? Who?

Inside, the car is quiet; beeps of reversing tow trucks cut the silence. Ken sits still, letting go of the steering wheel; his head hangs- moments later, he removes the data logger and throws the device in the glove box.

Tapping his phone to text Jeff, Ken scrolls through several photos of Jeff consuming alcohol and showing off various dates.

Ken writes to him.

*Bro you would not believe this
someone took my car for a joyride after the tow
damn keyless entry hack maybe? how?
friggen Duster's towing
WTF I need a drink*

Without another word, Ken gets out of his car and locks the door by habit, now cursing its futility. He uses the code to leave the tow yard. In the reflection of storefront windows, he notices himself walking the entire way to the bus stop with an unfamiliar expression on his face.

A scowl.

After a long wait, the bus pulls up, Ken gets on and takes a window seat. As the streets go by, his mind wanders; the thought of hot pho soup for dinner crosses his mind. A treat, he thinks, after a streak of misfortune. Jeff is well connected; he'll help him hire a lawyer, he'll get the money back for his broken axle and more for loss of use. Ken smiles, knowing that things will be okay, his faith in the law providing comfort. He can prove it; someone's going to pay.

The bus pulls up at a stop on Broadway, Ken's attention snared by the neon "liquor store" sign. Just under it, a man and a woman and a bike in a slow pedal away from the store. The woman sits on the handlebars, drinking from a two-litre bottle full of a fizzy purple liquid. The rider hits a bump; she grips the bottle too tight, causing her to cackle when the cheap booze squirts out and soaks a nearby person in a wheelchair.

The multicoloured-looking bicycle, Ken thinks, is a custom pro vintage model. His eyes lock onto the pair, flashes of the bike accelerating through the human traffic. The woman throws her head back, laughing, taking drags from a cigarette the rider passes to her. The bike's rider has a blonde goatee along with a big, stupid smirk on his shadowy, hooded face.

Ken sees himself in the bus window reflection. A furious panorama has taken over, his usual happy-go-lucky demeanour absent. His stare hurts inside his heart; he wills himself to let go; this isn't who he is. He's just tired, cranky, and in need of

some new thoughts.

Comfort food, maybe watching a comedy special while hiding in his home tonight. His eyes close, steamy noodle images float into his mind, scents of hot beef tingle in his memory. The pleasant thoughts of cozy dinners and comfy couches and tickles from Allie are bullied from his mind—something darker creeps into his inner narrative.

Outside of his control, thoughts of throwing boiling pho soup into the thief's face, Ken pictures holding the drunk tramp down so the handicapped person can use her as a ramp. Maybe a physical education would do the thief well; he's definitely in need of lectures from Professor Punch. Maybe Ken should be on that sidewalk now, in his blue tie and smart suit, tutoring by fists smashing faces, lessons via kicks busting asses.

Ken closes his eyes, sighs, and shakes his head. He takes a deep breath.

"Not who I am," he whispers to himself, his eyes open, attempts made to look around at something, anything but the thief and tramp.

Dusky rays spray gold against Broadway's low-rising buildings of stone and glass, the blue skies above crisscrossed with feathery contrails, while downtown's skyscrapers look like rows of giant gold bullion standing on end. Vancouver's beauty is unable to evict the ugly from his vacant heart.

The punk biker zigs and zags down the sidewalk, the handlebar-sitting tramp throws kicks at anyone in the way. Nearly running several seniors over, the vagrant couple shimmies down the busy path at unsafe speeds. Still drinking, every hysterical-to-them close miss of a pedestrian causes her 2L jug of cider to slosh and spill, usually on someone. Ken's face creases uptight as they slip away, laughing, into the horizon;

his brooding reflection rides with him the whole way home.

In what seems like forever, Ken makes it to his basement suite with the usually quiet, generally friendly people living upstairs. His own little private and humble sanctuary in the basement, his somewhat tidy abode, awaits after a week at Allie's. Opening the door, Ken notices he has some mail; he forgot some dishes in the sink, giving rise to a small cloud of fruit flies that fly up as if to say "hello!"

His living room is dark with the blinds closed, a nice little study area with a couch, it faces his desk and a large-sized TV screen. Ken sits down, tosses the mail on the coffee table and opens it all one by one. Junk. Flyers. Credit Card applications. A letter from the landlord, the rent goes up by \$200 per month to \$2000 if he re-signs the lease.

Ken sighs.

Plugging his phone in to charge, he logs into the laptop computer, and social media notifications pop up on the screen. Among the nonsense, overshares, and occasional rant is an invite to a photography fundraiser that evening, hosted by his old college friend, Marco P. Finlay, at his corporate office in Yaletown. Ken walks to his desk and pulls out a faded bag from one of the drawers. Taking out a camera, batteries, some lenses, he puts them on his coffee table and feels a bit thirsty.

A walk to the kitchen, he fixes a pineapple juice with soda water and has a sip; his couch beckons him back to flop down and mull things over. Outstretching his arms across the back of the sofa, his head sinks into the snug cushioning, thoughts crash against emotions and both derail.

He should be contacting Jeff or researching lawyers, something about his car. Every scenario makes him grimace;

just thinking about opening his laptop to study how to sue them conjures up some severe sneers. He feels like taking a break. Using the remote, he flips the TV on to some hockey, his anger starts settling; the Canucks' apathetic play mutates Ken's bitterness into boredom.

Maybe the charity art portrait event is what the doctor ordered, something upbeat, lighthearted and creative. Having won a local college award for his photography in his younger days, the vintage equipment in front of him is clearly up to the task. Skills from a decade ago will be tested tonight; he still thinks he has an eye for a good shot.

More sips of his favourite virgin drinks, a couple of sports highlights droning on, an enthusiastic Ken beams a smile while sorting his camera gear on the coffee table. Sending a few messages, the Aussie and Jeff already have plans, throwing an invite to Nina; she has her kid with her tonight. No problem, Ken thinks. It is always a good idea to go solo; it forces him to be more social, to make new connections.

After a quick shower and dressing, Ken checks himself out in the mirror. His best and least-wrinkled black button-up matches with the grey slacks that he imagines could look good on drunken poets and moustached psychiatrists alike. After doing his hair, he looks around for his semigloss dark-burgundy Bluvbhog shoes; Allie got him them for Christmas. They are sporty, rugged running shoes with the look of a dress shoe. Ken checks the battery on his camera and the storage space.

Half a battery and a gigabyte of room, enough for some portraits and a good cause to boot. The camera bag rests on his shoulder while texting Allie.

Going to social function 2 nite babez

At Marco's place don't worry... NO SHOTS! lol

Just a photo gig for fun miss uuu... :x

Out the door and down a few blocks to the bus stop, Ken smiles again. A pleasant summer evening, a multitude of floral-scented zephyrs gently caress his nose. The surprising lack of nausea-inducing wind makes his smile grow even merrier, his extended stays downtown- unfortunately- normalizing the smell of sick shits and rancid piss.

It is hot out enough for a trailer-park tuxedo, shorts and a tank top, just cool enough that his long-sleeve wouldn't be *too* muggy. The bus pulls up, and Ken gets on to find a seat by the window again. He opens the top of his camera bag, making some adjustments as the bus plugs along down Cambie street and over the bridge.

Ding.

Finding his stop, Ken steps out into Yaletown, busy with crowds of yuppies and various urban stereotypes. The dogs are much smaller, yoga pants nearly painted on, drinks are all double-digits, and some noses have a similar, particularly distinct sniffle. It all mixes into a bizarre elegance, making some great photography and stories for the water cooler.

Ken slowly makes his way to the PartyPeeps headquarters, the business owned by Marco P. Finlay. This ticket-printing company bankrolls his non-stop party lifestyle. Ken has to buzz to get in.

Bzzt!

"Hello?"

"Hey, I'm here for the charity event; Marco invited me-"

"Marco invites a lot of people; what's your name?"

"Ken K-"

"KEN!" a voice can be heard screaming in the background,

"Yeah?"

"Bro! Marco 911 here! Get up here, brooooo!"

The door buzzes in, and the voice comm falls silent.

Up the elevator and to the 4th-floor suite, the door opens to thumping music and a dark, laser-lit office. A young woman with a clipboard stands there with a smile. Behind her, rows of desks are pushed to the side to make room for the party.

"Oh, going early, I see," Ken says.

"Buddy!" Marco shoves the young woman out of the way.

"Marco! Good to see you," Ken reaches out his hand. Instead, he receives a big, sweaty hug.

"Buddy-" Marco pulls him in tight, booze and body spray odours intrude on Ken's nose. After the moist hug, Marco pushes by him, a couple of women walk in, and he makes crude sexual remarks to greet them. Gyrating his hips, he chugs a jumbo bottle of whiskey with both hands; Ken waits a few seconds for Marco, realizing he already forgot about him.

"Talk to you later, bud-" Ken walks towards the loud music, pulling his camera from the bag- adjusting the ISO, f-stop, and shutter speed for the low lights.

Snap.

Snap.

Snap.

Ken walks around taking photos of the hired models scattering about the office, the desks all jammed by the wall to make room for the show. Several drag queens, a woman on stilts in a flowing purple dress with vibrant green hair, a young African woman with a yellow corn snake around her neck and glowing blue contact lenses. In the far corner of the room stands a pixie-haired woman with heavy makeup; she wears a black dress in tatters. A feather boa around her neck, she is in character and miming faces- holding a cup and smoking a

cigarette.

"What are you supposed to be?" Ken says.

"I am your disappointed Russian mother," she delivers through a heavy accent, holding her crooked frown perfectly still.

"My kind of woman!" Ken takes a few photos of her and notices the pile of empty glasses.

"I thought this party started only like 30 minutes ago?"

The Russian girl turns and looks at Ken; he counts a dozen empty cups and loses track. Looking back at her, he wonders how much blood she has in her alcohol stream.

"Free vodka, I had to hurry," she says in a singsong voice, sarcastically tilting her head sideways.

"Free vodka?"

"Free," she replies, "-communist vodka!"

Ken points his finger at her and wanders off to find the bar. Packed with no-cost potato alcohol connoisseurs, the crowd jostles for a place in line. Discouraging for a moment, he oxbows around to see if he missed any other models when he can hear a voice behind him.

"Sorry, cameraman, your name?"

Ken circles back.

The Russian girl stands in front of Ken, double-fisting overfull highball glasses.

"Much easier to get free vodka when you are Russian, a girl, and pretty," she says, exaggeratedly fluttering her eyelashes and handing him a drink.

"Thanks, I'm Ken, by the way,"

"Well, Ken, vel-come to bodka central. I'm Yelena."

Ken strolls around the party with Yelena. She poses in front of some of the posters and art on the walls; he takes a

few laser light action shots as she gyrates under a spinning disco ball.

"I'm done," she walks off the dance floor after only a few minutes, "-besides, I spilled my drink. Are they still open at the bar?"

Ken looks over, and the line is just as long, if not longer.

"I'll get it this time," Ken walks back to Yelena's corner of the room with her feather boa and other props lying on a commandeered desk.

"A gentleman with a camera, how rare. I'm used to being asked for nudes by this point of the night."

Ken smiles and puts his drink next to his camera bag beside the Russian girl's props; his camera always remains around his neck. It beeps a battery-low warning.

At the bar, Ken feels a little bit tired while he waits. His camera is loaded with many great photos, and he's looking forward to editing them. He feels good about the small donation given to a women-on-stilts at a table for a sick children's charity, and he now has a new funny amateur mime friend. Overall a pretty good solo adventure. Time to go walk Sparky soon; he can't let himself forget.

"What'll it be?" says the woman behind the bar.

"A double vodka soda, please," Ken replies.

A few moments later, Ken is back at the Russian girl's desk with a few other guys around her.

"No, no, I'm good, thank you, I'm good," she says, looking away from the three men. One sees Ken walk up and taps the guy beside him on his shoulder.

"This must be the boyfriend, fuckin' bounce boys," says the tallest man with the mean face and slicked-back hair.

"Yeah, well, we'll be at the Champagne lounge if you're

down to party," says the shorter man in the white shirt and white pants as he moves to purposefully bump into Ken while walking by.

The three men leave, and the Russian girl sighs.

"Douchebags, a universal phenomenon, although, Russian ones are generally worse."

Ken grins; she takes her drink; he picks his up from the nearby desk and has a sip.

"I think I got some good photos. You have an email?"

"Here, take a card," she hands him a plain white card with an email address and the words "shitty friend" hand-written on the front, "will flake" scrawled on the back.

"I'm just trying to fit into Vancouver," she says with raised eyebrows and a cutesy head tilt.

Ken nods, the rest of his drink finished in a couple gulps.

"Good to meet you. I should say bye to the host, you know- Marco," Ken throws his camera bag over his shoulder.

"Sure, he's probably in the bathroom on drugs -the usual," Yelena packs up her stuff. The feather boa, plastic skull collection with poems written on each one, and what appears to be a taxidermy raccoon with smiley faces for eyeballs.

Ken waves to Yelena and leaves through the expanding crowd, shockwaves of bass pulsing in his ear, pounding into his thoughts. One drag queen notices Ken and takes him by the arm, a polite whisper for a shot of their outfit switch. He reluctantly agrees, despite overwhelming fatigue.

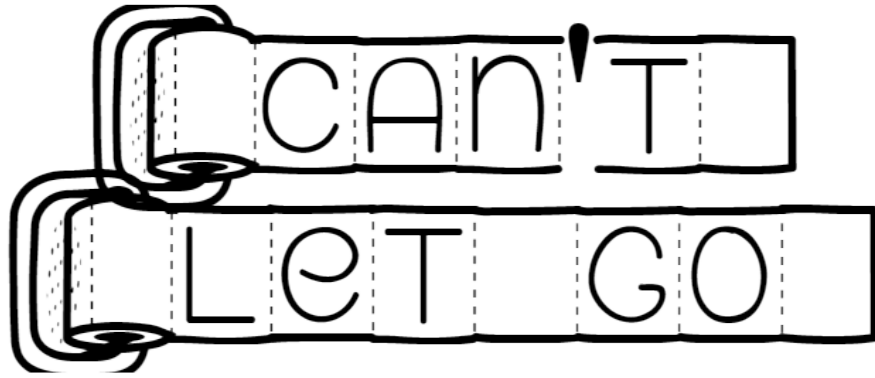
Snap.

Snap.

Snap.

Holding his camera in front of him, the previews of his last photos are blurs, the focus totally unresponsive. He can't read

the settings, the camera wiggles from his grip, on his shoulder is a pink gloved hand, a voice says something to him, the words gibberish. Bass pounds and mashes together with all sorts of nonsense crashing at once. Ken takes a few rickety steps, looking for a place to sit dow-



"Ken! Ken!"

A glaring blast of sunshine smacks across his face when the blinds open.

"What is- oh my gosh, your face! Look at the rug-, Ken, see- I told you- last year- Marco was trouble, and his crowd- I told you! Full. Of. Jerks!"

Ken can hear Allie walk briskly around her loft and open her bathroom medicine cabinet.

Seconds later, Ken quietly gasps as Allie dabs at his face with an alcohol swab; vapours burn intensely in his sinuses.

"Shhh.. shh.. that's better," as Allie cleans a wound on Ken's nose, he breathes in the stinging fumes.

"How much did you drink? Did they make you do shots? I remember Marco and his douche friends would always force people to have shots, Ken, what did I tell you about drinking? I see men wreck their lives every day. Are you going to roll into the ER soon so my co-workers can meet my drunk, beat-up boyfriend?"

Ken sighs, totally fatigued; the room spins too much, he can't open his eyes or talk.

"At least you're not a cokehead; I'd worry about you

overdosing every day."

Allie takes her time to carefully put a bandage on Ken's face. After she looks over her handiwork, she gets up and closes the blinds.

"No more going out at night for you. You can't handle your drinking-"

"It's n-not the drinking," Ken struggles to whisper, his head and face ache as he feels like a boat in rough seas.

Sparky's collar can be heard jingling as the dog runs around the apartment panting and whining; Ken now listens to the familiar sound of the dog peeing on the floor.

"Oh, Sparky, no!"

Allie sighs.

"Let me guess, you forgot to take him out when you got here? Guess you can't walk a dog if you've been carried home."

Ken is in too much pain to reply.

"Oh, Ken," Allie sighs.

Allie texts away on her phone with a few loud dings as messages are sending back and forth.

"Look- I have another long shift soon, and you've let me down now twice, so I have Clara on the 3rd floor coming for him later tonight, okay?"

Ken nods slightly.

"I'm taking Sparky to my mom's; I'll bring him back later to drop him off before work," Allie gets up, closes the blinds and grabs her things before leaving.

"Bye," she says at the front door, no usual kiss on the cheek or hug.

Ken turns over to sleep off his dizzy head and aching face.

Ken wakes up, and it is dark and quiet.

"Sparky?" He calls out and is met with silence, laying his head down again.

After lying in bed and enjoying the quiet, he finally gets up and stretches, slowly meandering his way to the bathroom. Ken turns and looks in the mirror, a bandage across his nose taped loosely to his face, the scratch on his cheek still visible and red. Pulling off the gauze, his nose has a long gash on it, and his cheek is slightly purple under where he got a tree bark makeover.

Combing his hair and washing his face, Ken dries himself with a towel and throws it down in disgust.

"Ahhh... f-f-frig!" he yells in the dark apartment.

Ken looks over at the stains Sparky left all over the place.

"FUCK!"

Ken's exuberant outburst echos slightly in the loft, followed by the sound of a distant car honk, and it is silent once again.

On the couch he sits, the mark his bloody face made on her fancy sofa is staring right at him- her chastising words from earlier play over in his mind.

"If I had just locked my bike," he mutters, his head hangs, his thoughts overwhelm him, "-if I had just- damnit, damn-it!"

Ken gets up to walk to the kitchen. Pouring water in a cup, tossing it in the microwave, he pulls a teabag from the drawer and drops a relaxation blend into the now-hot water, taking his favourite seat by the window. Orange harbour hues mix with twinkling white lights of North Vancouver soothes his mood as he sips his brew, checking his phone. It's lit up like a Christmas tree with notifications.

First, an email from his boss. Even with the CEO sending

Ken home for a week, Azmina still wants him to work.

Ken, we're short-staffed, and I need you back in the office asap; work from home will be an option for Friday.

He replies, letting Azmina know he's feeling a bit under the weather, and he'll come in on Thursday if that's okay. Ken promises to work the weekend from home to catch up; hashtag TeamRiseCrane.

Aussie Mike writes to him.

Yo what happened man Allie is all pissed on fb mate I heard some drag queens drove u home from marcos?

*lay off the sauce haha
whoa saw the pics on snapblab howd u pass out n smash ur face?*

Ken tosses back an unhappy face to Aussie Mike.

A few other pals check-in, mentioning hearing of Ken passing out at Marco's. His crew driving him home and carrying him up the stairs before blabbing about it online. Aussie Mike tells him not to feel too embarrassed; apparently, getting dosed at one of his events is pretty standard. Ken writes back to his friend.

Thx pal ya I'll avoid his events from now on chat l8tr

Jeff writes a few texts about his last hot date and her beautifully lopsided breasts before offering a link to a photo of them on some modelling site.

bruv, after your streak of bad luck

*you need to try this
Nina introduced it to me for my temper issue...
real help bro*

Ken clicks it. It opens up to a Reiki Healing and TubeYouber video page with a blonde woman holding a yoga pose with a soft chanting sound in the background. Runic tattoos cover her body, and she sits on a black marble slab with a waterfall behind her. Coming out of the yoga pose, she opens her arms wide and smiles at the camera.

"Hello, and welcome to the healing path. Love and light, friends, love and light!" Her soft-spoken, feminine voice continues.

"Sometimes, on our journey, we can feel attacked and betrayed by others. In dealing with disruptors and negative energies, this is tape one in learning how to overcome them," strums of harps are heard in the background.

Ken blinks a few times, taking a few deep breaths in.

"Every day, we encounter the challenging situations that define us. When a negative entity, being, or just plain ol' crabby human appears to have wronged us, we become the prisoner; until we forgive."

His eyes close and Ken nods his head, a slight draft from the window on his face makes him smile. He concentrates on finding his inner peace again.

"I want to show you a mental exercise that works, a tool for mental clarity to help produce the love and light to forgive. Picture the situation that has wronged you. Remember that pain, now, but thank it. Love it. Use your inner voice to love the universe, good and bad. Go ahead, I'll be silent for 1 whole minute for you to think about it."

Ken relaxes in his favourite chair, sinking deep into the

fluffy cushions- focusing on the root of his problems, all the bad juju since the bike theft. Having a sip of his warm relaxation tea, his mind begins to reflect. Whatever those human beings did to him, that is *their* negativity. He is a kind, caring, positive person, he tells himself, he has no room in his heart for aggression. Ken's turbulent life is a reflection of his negative inner feelings. Hate becomes an anchor that drags along with him, heavier each day. It's time to move on.

He has to let go of hate to build a future.

He has not been living in the now.

He has been living in the past.

"I forgive you," Ken whispers, the cup of tea in his warm hands, thinking about the blonde bicycle brigand without animosity.

Taking a deep breath in, he holds his breath, exhaling entirely after a few more seconds.

The lines on his forehead disappear, his shoulders droop backwards, the apprehension fades.

He holds in a deep breath.

For the first time since the mugging, Ken feels true tranquillity wash over him, feeling kindness fill his heart again, the rage absent from his mind.

He isn't hurt anymore.

He lets it all go.

Ken exhales.

Peace.

In his moment of serenity, a noise from the alley below flips the table on his mental sanctuary.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Ken puts his warm tea down as the banging continues.

Thwack- Clang!

Ken pauses the relaxation video and leans forward in his cozy chair, peeking over the edge.

Five stories down, a man in a dirty coat with a hoodie and a paperboy cap stands beside the backdoor of a local art gallery. He's holding a hammer; the lock looks smashingly suspicious.

"Hey!" Ken instinctively shouts while pulling up his phone, "Stop, gosh-damn jerk- I'm calling the police!"

Thwack!

Thwack!

Ping!

The lock falls to the cement, and the man turns around to look up at Ken.

Their eyes meet.

"Call the cops, ya fuckin' dipshit, like I give a fuck- ya fuckin' gooooo-f!"

The man turns around, mooning Ken, giving him the finger and going inside the art gallery as Ken waits on hold with 911.

"Police, fire, or ambulance-"

"Police, please."

The call transfers.

"F-f-friggen' jerk," Ken grumbles to himself, thinking of his tea but craving booze.

"Hi, you've reached the Vancouver Police Department emergency line. Press one if someone is violently assaulted; all other calls, please hold."

Ken stands and watches while cheerful hold music plays. The thief walks back out the door carrying loot- a computer, some artwork, and a cart of miscellaneous junk. The man using

one of the large paintings to wave at someone in the distance then walks out of the alley and out of Ken's sight.

With a terrible screech, the art gallery alarm system goes off. A blaring electronic noise squeals throughout the alley. It attracts a larger group of looters that begin to file in and out of the building's back door, carrying away whatever they find inside.

"Please hold," the voice continues cheerfully.

"We in Canadian Policing believe in a more equitable, intersectional, decolonial, harm-reducing method of policing. Through direct community consultation, we provide selective enforcement through both a BIPOC and LGBT2SQAI+ lens in association with the guidance of local elders. We will answer your call in priority sequence from the occupied territories of Canada's original people."

The foul-mouthed, hoodie-wearing thief strolls up the alley with a second empty shopping cart and parks it outside the wide-open, despoiled studio. He looks back up at Ken.

"You call the pigs yet, dipshit? Go fuck yourself!" the man yells, pulling down the front of his sweatpants and waving his genitals at Ken.

Ken listens to the cheerful police recording in one ear while his other ear rings from the alarm and a steady stream of profane abuse from the man yelling in the alley below.

"Hello and welcome to your community police emergency line. My name is Perry; how can I help you?"

Ken can feel his face tense up in a totally unfamiliar way, his brow uncharacteristically with a deep furrow. The floor sucking the corners of his mouth down, his nostrils flare as if a thick black smoke will bluster out. The last time he is this angry happens to be back in high school. Braeden Davies, his former

best friend, crashing his car after "borrowing it" while drunk. His hand holding the phone tenses up and twitches.

"Sir? Sir?" Perry calls out from the phone.

"Sorry, yes- I'm here, I'm just- I'm just f-f-ucking pissed, okay? Look, there's a break-in happening across the street, at the Gallery Italia, and I've been on hold for-"

"Sir, I have to ask you to calm down and not use profanity," Perry speaks softly, "-take a deep breath, sir."

Ken watches as the bellicose thief in the hoodie loads up a cart full of stolen booty and then wheels it down the alley. Another crowd forms around the art gallery's back door as more people show up for five-finger discounts.

"I am f-f-ucking calm!" Ken raises his voice, "-I just didn't expect to be on hold so long- "

"Sir," Perry speaks calmly and even with a more-than-slightly patronizing manner, "-is there any violence taking place?"

"No, no- not that I can see," grumbles Ken.

"Have you taken into consideration that the local community required goods or provisions that forced them to take direct action to provide the community with the basics of life?" Perry talks in bursts like he is reading cue cards.

"Wha- what? Are you kidding? They're stealing paintings, computers, I see a light fixture-"

"Sir, we will be dispatching a de-escalation team to your location, and a crime scene community liaison team is on the way along with a designated community elder. Thank you, and have a nice day!"

The call hangs up.

Ken slowly lowers the phone and puts it in his pocket, watching as the looters slowly disperse once they realize

nothing is left to steal. With the mass of vagabonds moving on, a trail of garbage and litter shows the direction of their escape.

Sitting back down, Ken sighs, shaking his head. His tea is now cold; Ken goes to the kitchen, heats it up, and sits back in his favourite chair. He's about to return to the soothing-voice shaman lady and her inspiring self-help tape when he hears a few knocks.

Ken gets up and walks to the door; through the peephole, he can see a police officer and 3 plainclothes people wearing pink shirts.

One of the pink shirts holds up a tablet and turns to the policeman.

"He's right behind the door, see, his phone just pinged," the pink shirt says.

"Sir," a taller, skinny man speaks, "-are you okay? We heard you were shouting hateful speech from your window and used vulgar communication with a dispatcher; we are here to make sure you're okay!"

Moments of silence as Ken wonders what to say.

"Oh yeah, I'm good, sorry for being rude, I didn't mean it, I- I uh- earlier had- uh, I lost at a bet with a friend-"

"Gambling addiction is a disease, Sir, you-"

"Oh no, no, it was- we were betting as in, a joke, that I could beat him at a video game-I lost and- I mean, that's why I was cranky- I wasn't mad at anyone homeless, I'm sorry, I'm good-"

"This is a wellness check, sir," one of the voices calls out. Looking out of the peephole, the cop has his hand on his gun.

"I'm good, sorry, I'll meditate this off and have a salad-"

"Denial will block you from healing," says a shorter,

chubby pink shirt person.

"I'm okay! Thank you!" Ken says through the door.

Ken stands in juddering silence for a few long seconds.

"Okay, Ken, just a reminder for you, if you antagonize marginalized members of our community again, you're going to receive a fine and sensitivity training. Have a nice day."

Ken stares out the peephole to make sure they are leaving, and he watches them walk away. The ding of the elevator arriving and leaving helps slow his breathing; his hands stop quaking so much.

Walking back to the window, Ken takes a deep breath and puts his shaky hands into his pockets to stop the tremors.

Looking down into the alley, vagrants are milling about—every shadow occupied by one form of humanity or another. A few bums dig through debris, littering the alleyway in their search, a trail of discarded stuff down the street and around the corner. The alarm finally goes quiet as an older woman comes through the back door; she's swinging a broom around to shoo the remaining opportunists away. A brown older Honda pulls up with a screech of tires.

Out of the brown Honda jumps a stocky and balding older man who hugs the woman with the broom; he turns to chase the last couple of scavengers out of the looted art gallery.

"Let- let go of me gooooo-f!" echos in the alleyway as the old man drags a young person out the back door and pushes them to the ground.

The sound of running and boots are heard, Ken's gaze falls on a group of police officers jogging up to the art gallery door. They push past the broom-holding woman, knocking her to the ground and tackling the old man to the road.

The young thief scrambles to his feet and dashes away

from the cops, quickly disappearing down the alleyway. Ken can hear a metallic clicking as police handcuff the old man. The older woman with the broom tries to stand; an ankle injury has her falling over; the police ignore her cries.

"A-what-ah- A what-ah ya doin'?" yells the old man in his thick Italian accent.

"My husband! My husband!" the older woman shouts while sitting on the ground, Ken remembers her face and voice from one of the many poetry readings Allie and he went to at the gallery.

"Ah-fucka-you ah man!" the old man cries out; the people-in-blue lift him off the road to slam him against the nearby wall. A few pink-shirted community policing team members walk up to the struggling, cantankerous old man and tell him to calm down. Ken leans back from the window when one of the community policing crew members turns and looks up at him.

"Fuck," Ken grumbles, the old man moaning and calling out in despair for his wife. Ken closes the window and steps out of view.

Without hesitation, Ken whips open the freezer door. He drags out a bottle of rum, Allie's favourite, and chugs several mouthfuls of it. Just enough to quell the tremors in his hands as the senior man's desperate screams play over and over in his head.

Pausing for a breath, Ken pushes the bottle to his lips and has a few more long swigs, putting it down on the countertop.

"Fuuuck!" Ken punches the stainless steel surface several times hard, he grabs his hand in pain.

"Motherfuckers! God damn it, f-f-fucking assholes, fuuuuck!"

Ken pivots and kicks the fridge hard enough to leave a

considerable dent in the front of it, sending Allie's cutesy notes and magnets flying everywhere.

Pacing back and forth with his hands on his hips, Ken is breathing hard and sweating. Muttering to himself and screaming the occasional f-word as minutes go by in a blur.

"Sh---shiit man, f-f-fuck, c-c-calm down," Ken sits on the concrete floor and leans against some exposed brick wall. The texture feeling rough against his skin is somewhat pleasant and comforting.

"P-please... c-c-calm d-down..."

Head in his hands, the room closes in on him, his fears, his powerlessness, and a stockpile of self-doubting thoughts flash through his mind. It distracts him from the tantrum for another few moments.

"Fuuuuuuuck!" Ken stands up, and something calls him over to Allie's couch, picking up a pillow with a crocodile on it; he begins to punch it as hard as he can. With every punch, sweat starts to form on his arms and soon, it is flying off Ken as he works himself into a frenzy of blows until he can't lift his arm for even one more jab. Crying out in exhaustion, he drops back to the floor and lies there in a puddle of shirtless, sweaty rage.

Ken is on the floor and has no idea for how long. Shivering, his back still wet from lying in his sweat, bits of the torn pillow and stuffing litter around him, one of Allie's photos from her fridge lies nearby.

Sitting up and picking up the photo, Ken rises up and stumbles back to Allie's fridge. He tries to put everything back to normal. Still, she will notice the dent, for sure, and the crocodile pillow is totally obliterated.

Ken lets out a massive sigh.

"Fuck..." Ken picks up the bottle of rum, has another few mouthfuls, and puts it back in the freezer.

"F-f-fucking c-c-crack-h-heads-"

The images of the old man and his wife intrude back into his mind; Ken walks to the window and peeks back out into the dark alleyway. The art gallery door is plywooded over. The lane is still awash in trash, a few dark shapes maraud among shadows; distant meth-fueled howling serenades the inner-city.

Ken squeezes the wooden window frame and feels the same fiery churning he did earlier. Looking out over the city, the lights twinkle away; he cherishes his hometown- how did things get so bad? What if he wants to run an art gallery with Allie someday? One of her dreams is to have an organic tea cafe in the back of a thrift store. Ken loves the thought of retiring with her from the rat race of the city, living the idyllic dream of small-town life. Maybe the internet assholes are right; maybe things are getting worse.

Ken closes his eyes and bows his head, his eyes well with tears.

"Fuck a small town," he whispers, "-this is my city, why can't I have that in my city, w-w-why should I fucking leave..."

Opening his eyes again, Ken gazes out the window at the shuttered and dark art gallery below. No doubt the inside is just as trashed as the alleyway. The cops being concerned more with harassing him about his supposed outburst than actually stopping the robbers.

The turmoil in Ken's mind disturbs a distant memory of his childhood. Having fallen off his bike and scraping his knee pretty badly, his mother catches him throwing his bike around and blaming it for his crash.

"All that energy wasted being mad- for nothing!"

Ken remembers his sulking by the back door of his childhood home, his leg bleeding, his bike at his feet, and his mother coming to sit down next to him.

"What happened, Kenny?"

"I couldn't make the jump, I mean- I jumped the jump, but every time I land, I crash."

"So the answer is to kick your bike and push it around? Look, you scratched up the handlebars; that's no way to treat your bike," his mom reaches over and holds his hand.

"Sorry, mom."

"Well, listen, if you can't land the jump, just promise me you won't get mad again. You're expending all this energy and getting nowhere," Ken's mom taps him on his nose with her finger, causing him to smile.

"Approach it differently, maybe a bit slower? A bit faster? Are you holding on tight enough? Think of the solution rather than getting mad about the problem, Kenny," his mom hugs him and stands up.

"Chicken tendies are almost ready..."

"Think of the solution," Ken whispers to himself while looking out over downtown Vancouver at night.

"Think of the solution."

Stepping away from the window again, Ken has some newfound energy and proceeds to collect his things. Zip-up black hoodie, black pants, wallet, phone, wait, he needs another phone for the plan his mind is formulating- hmm, Jeff?

Keys, check- shoes, shoes? -shoes!

Ken sends a text, asking if Jeff has a spare burner phone kicking around. Jeff usually does this for procuring his favourite

illicit substances.

"Where the..." Ken flips on the lights, looking around for his shoes before finding them near Allie's front door.

Slipping his foot inside, something feels off. His sock pushes against something in the shoe, and then, a slight whiff of Sparky poo wafts inside his nose with the subtlety of a thrown brick.

"You have to be f-f-fuckin' kidding me..." Ken whispers to himself, his face a morphing collage of expressions.

Taking a deep breath through his mouth, the calming words of Bob, the security guard, can be heard in his head.

"Give her the ol' greasy pita!"

Ken laughs to himself quietly, remembering just how good an idea it is to bring Allie food. A real foodie that Allie; luxury, appealing presentation and exotic flavours are some of the ways to her heart. He loves to make her happy and see her smile, even if he kind of hates her dog right now.

Leaping to his feet, Ken tries to forget about the overstuffed feeling in his shoe. Instead, he focuses on Allie's smiling face, munching on some yummy Greek food. Grabbing his keys to lock Allie's door, he runs out the door with a spring, and a squish, in his step.

Ken walks the three blocks to Jeff's place, ducking into the alley behind his building. Taking a brief moment to collect a few pebbles from the nearby small rock garden, careful to avoid the stew of needles and used condoms floating in the puddles nearby.

Checking his phone, Jeff hasn't replied, as usual, so it is up to Ken's pitching arm to get his attention.

The first stone toss goes wide, hitting the balcony next

door.

The second one is a bit high and hits the side of the building.

Ting!

The third rock dings against the metal pot of Jeff's favourite bonsai tree, which rests temptingly on the edge of his 4th-floor balcony.

Moments later, a confused Jeff steps out onto his balcony.

"Hey! Down here!" Ken waves from the dank alleyway below.

"Ken? Is that you? Wha- what the- are you daft? Did you assault my bonsai as a lure?"

"Check your phone; I tried to text you," Ken cups his hands to better shout up to Jeff.

A bedraggled woman with her hair a tangled mess stumbles out onto the balcony; Jeff turns around and pulls her back in before emerging seconds later. With a beer bottle in one hand and an older phone that he tosses down to Ken in the other.

"Enjoy!" yells Jeff, waving and chugging down the beer, putting the empty inside the bonsai plant pot and going back inside.

Ken taps the phone to check it; it's charged and in airplane mode. Perfect, tucking it into his pants and hitting the bus stop. After a few short minutes, he hops a bus to Allie's favourite Greek restaurant. She always laughs while telling the story of meeting her best friend, Lori. The very first night they meet, Allie has too much sambuca and barfs calamari in the backseat of Lori's car. Becoming best friends after, they work together now, still loving Kypros Greek at the famous location just off Davie Street. Before the coof and coof variants, the line would

be shoulder-to-shoulder; tonight, there is a handful of people clustering about. Ken stands behind a few people under the bright neon sign, and the line moves fast. He walks out in a few quick minutes with a colossal souvlaki order and all of Allie's favourite sides.

Hailing a taxi with two huge takeout bags in each hand, Ken's mouth waters at the smell of the lemon butter potatoes, fresh warm pita, moist hot chicken with oily seasoned rice, and crisp balsamic with feta.

A short ride and the cabbie lets him out at Vancouver General, where Ken strides through the hospital and ends up in the particular patient ward Allie is on.

As he walks in, the section is quiet, and a group of nurses are standing around a front desk counter that glows brightly in contrast to the dark rooms down the hall.

One nurse spots Ken and calls out, "Hey Allie, your man just walked in," and Ken can hear Allie's voice call out in a confused "What?"

The nurses all look over just as Ken puts down the feast-sized load of food on the countertop.

"Ken?" Allie peeks out from behind a computer the nurses are all standing in front of.

"I know you have been working so hard, so... I remembered your story on how you met Lori, and...well... I figured I bring by some of your favourites..."

"Kypros! My favourite!" Allie exclaims when she sees the massive bags of food.

The nurse crowd mostly wanders off; a few stragglers dig into the meal as Allie swoons over Ken's surprise.

"Oh my gosh, you even got the extra hummus!" Allie tears into the bags and pries open the containers. Her face lights up

with joy as she's bouncing in place, finding Ken remembers everything she likes and exactly how she likes it prepared.

"Is your spacebar still sticking?" Ken asks, moving behind the front desk and taking a seat at her computer.

Ken presses on the spacebar.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

"Yeah, it's mostly okay now. Karen spilled orange juice on it last week. Seems fine now..." Allie stuffs her face with a piece of pita bread.

"Oh mah Gawd, Lori, where's, mmhmp, where's Lori?" Allie walks out from behind the counter with a stack of pita bread and fresh hummus side dishes and looks down the hallway.

Ken's head swivels around; the supervisor's computer tucked in a nook has numerous binders and stacks of papers nearby. Behind him are few shelves with other medical supplies that poke out, along with a series of medicine cabinets. Seizing his opportunity, Ken looks through the cabinet for the laxative Allie mentioned again the other day, the one she jokingly calls the "poo potion" regularly. He just can't remember the name of it as he scans rows and rows of medicine bottles and containers.

Ken hears someone opening the other bag of Greek food by ripping the brown paper. With a jingle of plastic plates and utensils being spread around, the distraction scheme works just long enough as he spots what he's looking for.

"Ken?"

Ken sees a few plain white bottles of the super-pooper Raylaxabute medicine on the top shelf in the back, grabbing

one bottle and tucking it inside his coat. Ken side-steps back to the computer desk, takes a couple of pens and puts them up his nostrils, walking out of the nook and greeting Allie.

"Ken!!" Allie whisper-shouts, "Those are my favourite pens. I don't want boogers on them, eww!"

Ken pulls the pens out of his nose and has a laugh. Allie rolls her eyes and smiles as Lori walks up next to her and eats some pita with a massive scoop of hummus.

"Mmm," Lori moans, "You sure know how to pick 'em, Allie; at least he knows how to treat a lady."

"He also does the dishes and walks my dog... well, just not lately," Allie laughs.

"-Isn't that right, my lazy little boy with the bashed-up face?"

Ken walks out from behind the counter and waves bye.

"Wait, let's see your face..." Allie steps over to Ken and pulls his bandage off with a quick rip.

"Ow!" Ken jokes. Well, mostly, it does hurt.

"Looking better, I guess, you better avoid Marco and his pals; they're trouble!"

"Marco? The party and nightclub guy?"

"You know him, Lori?" Allie glances over to look at her.

"Yeah, we hired him to DJ my sister's wedding a few years ago. At least one person got roofied at the reception, a ton of booze was stolen, and like a half-dozen wedding crashers showed up. He's cheap, and the music was alright- I guess," Lori shrugs.

"Yeah, well, Ken got beat up again by Marco's coked-up douche pals, my snuggle bear just can't catch a break!"

Allie walks over to Ken and hugs Ken; he's careful to not let her feel the bottle in his jacket pocket.

"Okay, babes," Ken whispers, "I'm sorry about lately... I love you."

"Love you too," Allie says, hugging him tightly before letting him go and getting back to munching on Greek food.

"See ya!" Ken waves, "Nice to see you again, Lori!"

The two nurses wave as Ken skedaddles out of there, opening his phone and ordering a taxi to the nearby cold beer store. Running down the stairs and back to the outside of the hospital, it has just stopped raining, and the night smells fresh.

Power-walking down a side street, Ken makes it to Broadway and darts into the liquor store. Choosing a bottle of vodka, Ken manages to pay without waiting in line and is back out on the street in time to catch his cab just pulling up.

"Ontario and 10th," Ken says, getting in the back seat of the taxi. It glides along and passes the department store, London Rugs, the very spot of his mugging.

Ken's hand momentarily balls up in a fist.

Opening the vodka bottle, Ken gulps it as the driver talks loudly on his phone and whips through the streets of Vancouver. A half mickey later, the cabbie drops him off at the end of his street and a half block from his garage. With quick steps already, Ken accelerates even more; he's itching to grab everything he needs to make the night truly special.

Inside his garage, Ken pulls a blue tarp off his covered workbench, moving it to the side; the smell of the gas lawnmower nearby burns his nose. Lifting up the wedge-shaped pouch of the grass clippings holder, he places it on his workbench, giving himself access to the two hiding boxes under it.

Ahh-choo!

He takes each box with a sneeze or three and places them

on a bench behind where he usually parks his car. He rubs dust from the lid and opens the first heavy-duty black plastic case; inside, grey foam holds in place a set of custom chrome bicycle tools and a photo taped to the inside of the box.

The second case opens with a solid click, the lid opens to several pieces of high-tech gear; a set of night vision goggles, a hardware crypto wallet, a couple of battery packs and a super bright LED flashlight.

His eyes fall back on the photo; in the dim garage, the wrinkles and creases look deeper than they are, the two figures standing together with both giving a thumbs up. He is careful not to tear the photo; he is gentle when peeling the masking tape from the case's inner lid, holding the relic up to the light for a better look.

Ken smiles, a lump forms in his throat; he wonders if his old friend would approve of this.

He tapes the photo back to the inside of the lid and puts the case of bicycle tools back.

Pulling the night vision goggles from the other case, Ken also grabs the LED flashlight with a thick steel frame and bendable head. Closing the case and hiding it back under the lawnmower's grass catcher, Ken spins around to look for more gear. The last thing he needs is in an old footlocker sitting underneath a pair of oil-stained coveralls by the door. Inside the metal crate, a black nylon vest with pockets and webbing and all sorts of fasteners for attaching cameras and lights.

Ken smiles in the dark garage as he picks up the vest and puts it on. His hands shake less after the vodka, but memories come rushing at him again, and both his arms sporadically tremor.

Ken's favourite time to ride is in spring. Everyone thinks

he's crazy. His old social media posts showing him soaking wet and riding the downhill portions of Simon Fraser University's bike trails. The ride up is a great challenge, and after he moves to his current basement suite, there isn't anything remotely as difficult nearby.

Until one day, he is riding home from cruising the seawall when a man with long dreadlocks blows by him on a multicolour, extraordinary bicycle.

Kicking down a gear, Ken stomps the pedals and huffs and puffs, but no matter what, he can't catch the marleyesque cyclist. He loses track of him somewhere around the busy intersection of Kingsway and Cambie. Coming to a stop, Ken can see the cyclist in the far distance heading up the hill towards Queen Elizabeth Park. One of Vancouver's most elegant settings with lush gardens and city vistas, he'll beat him to the top- next time.

The next time, the stranger flies by him again, and Ken can't catch him. A week later, he loses Ken even faster; the rider gets away from Ken, who, despite his best efforts, can't keep pace with the man. Ken comes up with a plan. He is-

A car drives by in the alley with a loud exhaust and disturbs Ken's flashback. Sounds European, an in-line six-cylinder, Ken thinks as he straps on the vest and searches around the garage for batteries. Guiding himself with the light of his phone screen, he finds batteries and loads them in the goggles, testing them with all the lights off. The garage interior is a grainy black and white with them on, but he can clearly see everything in decent detail.

Ken smiles nervously and finishes attaching the phone and flashlight to his vest, giving them a tug to ensure they're on tight.

Ken smiles, hoping his friend can understand.
Another recollection bubbles in his mind's eye.

He trains all spring. Up and down, up and down, over and over, riding his bike from the bottom of the Cambie street bridge at 2nd avenue, up the steep incline to 16th avenue- his legs usually on fire by this point. His secret weapon in his water bottle, a load inside of 50% water and 50% of Ken's unique lemonade mix. Vodka, lemon juice concentrate, and a whack of cane sugar. The magical blend prepares him for the ascent beginning at Kingsway, uphill twelve blocks to 33rd, a risky left turn over three lanes of fast traffic. Swooping into the park, the path to the lookout is a steady climb. His watch tells him he's shaved off 10 seconds here, 17 seconds the next time, eventually dropping his time by several minutes.

Then, that faithful day, he spots him.

Ken remembers texting on his phone; he remembers it clear. Allie sends him so many photos of the new fad diet she talks about on their first date. Gyozas, salads, and water only- the vibrating on his hip makes him concerned enough to pull over and check his phone. He leans against the railing of the Cambie street bridge, looking at his screen. She sends a dozen photos of her looking pretty and stuffing her face, holding her chopsticks seductively, asking if he has any plans for the weekend.

That yellow, green and red 2-wheel bolt flies by him.

Nearly dropping the phone, Ken leaves a half-written reply message to Allie hanging. He slips the phone in his pocket, tosses the bike over the railing to the road, and pedals to catch the dreadlocked dasher.

Each shove of his legs is more violent than the last; slipping into high gear, the ferocious pumping of his quads

rocks the bike back and forth. He almost catches the man at Broadway, a Tesla cuts Ken off and nearly ends him off his saddle.

The rise to 16th, and Ken gains a few feet on his target, the multicoloured bike ahead of him pulls away at will, almost to tease him. The light at Kingsway and Cambie turns red; the cyclist blows through it and accelerates away.

"Shh---shhhooo----shooott!"

Ken flies through the red light and careens through traffic; someone turning left in the same direction nearly smokes him, a chorus of cars honk righteously.

Pushing, stomping, and torquing the pedals, Ken nearly catches the man, the slight downhill approach to the left turn at 33rd drawing near.

The light ahead turns green, and a slow truck approaches in the fast lane. The cyclist in the lead careens left at top speed, the back tire of the bike drifts, the rider swings out his leg in a skid ballet.

His turn. Ken grits his teeth and swerves in front of the truck- a car speeds towards him from the far lane. Ken rides into the oncoming traffic of the middle lane, passing the speeding vehicle in the far lane, and completes the left turn, hot on the tail of the second-fastest bike in Vancouver.

Adrenaline coursing and surging like never before, Ken thrusts his legs mightily up the hill towards the bubbly conservatory dome. With sweat flying off, he passes the dark daredevil to his own amazement. Reaching the top and doing a perfect Rockford skid, watching as the man with the colourful bicycle slows to a stop.

"Damn- how'd you-"

The man coughs and wheezes.

Ken is sucking air hard, his eyes sting with sweat.

"I- I- ahhh."

Both men catch their breath.

"I've been training for this after all those times you left me in the dust," Ken smiles.

"Heh, I remember seeing you a few times; it's rare to pass a bike running hydraulic disc brakes. In your case, they aren't just for show," the man smiles, his forehead drips with sweat, and he looks pale.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but- that's a 1991 Craggy Peak Shockwave? That's one of the rarest custom bikes every built-handcrafted by the masters- oh, uh- I'm Ken, by the way."

The two men shake hands.

"I'm Badrick- and wow, for real, you know your stuff-"

The man wheezes, and his face tenses up.

"When I- ah- when I was growing up before I moved to Canada, I got all these cycling magazines. One day on my way to university, I saw a dude flying by me on a Shockwave. I knew- I knew I had to have one someday. You wouldn't believe what I paid for this beast."

Badrick turns and coughs, bending over, a glob of blood splatters on the ground.

"Ugh- sorry," the tall, dark man mutters.

"Shit- you okay?"

Badrick pulls off his helmet, dreads missing, his head completely bald.

The two men have a seat on a nearby bench. Ken explains his potent lemonade training trick and causes Badrick to laugh with a sad smile. The Jamaican man asks Ken some trivia he'll never forget, pretty easy, of course. He knows which years Speare Legstrong won the Tour de France; that's common

knowledge.

"Do you know the Jamaican that was on his back wheel the whole way? I swear, man, if he didn't have that crazy steroid juice in his veins, I would've won at least one of those 7 tours."

Sharing laughs and cycling tales, a hot dog cart rolls by, the two new bros grab some grub and return to sit. Swapping war stories, the two men laugh together. Eventually, Badrick lamenting that his battle is about to end. Things have been good, he's not in a panic anymore, and he still almost kicked Ken's butt up that hill, even with only half his lungs left.

They sit in silence for a while and share phone numbers.

In the photo, Ken is standing beside a hospital bed holding his friend's hand, two weeks after their impromptu race and a day before Badrick dies.

After the wake, Badrick's sister brings him the bike and the tastiest Jamaican patties, telling Ken his version of the coffin dance makes him family now. Remaining in touch, he develops an addiction to jerk chicken. One time, he-

Ken's reminiscing is interrupted by the screen door on the upstairs' tenant's house. It opens and closes with a familiar slam that Ken hears in the garage.

"Shhh-oot," Ken whispers, quickly putting everything back to normal and hurriedly patting himself down to check that he has everything.

The door opens, and the light flicks on. The neighbour from upstairs gets into their car, opens the big main door remotely, and drives out into the night. A few seconds later, the overhead light turns off automatically, and Ken steps out of his coveralls locker hiding spot to exit the garage.

Turning around quickly to hop over the fence, Ken

remembers to not leave the house with his personal phone. Sprinting to the mail slot of his basement suite, the phone is pushed through it. Jumping back over the fence with the grace of a tipsy cat, he stands in the alleyway and checks the burner phone Jeff was kind enough to lend him.

22 minutes to 11 PM.

Throwing his electric skateboard down, he fluidly mounts it, leans forwards, and soars off down the laneway towards Cambie street. The side street is bumpy in sections; Ken nimbly swerves by a branch falling on the road. There is a sharp turn onto Cambie, and the figure wearing all black zooms dangerously between a bus and a taxi, descending the hill towards Broadway at breakneck speed. He is breathing hard and focusing on making the left turn onto the busy main artery. The light turns yellow, the board skidding through the intersection on the wet pavement, swinging his leg out to stabilize while sliding sideways.

Up the road and through a couple of green lights, the traffic is much lighter, allowing him to breathe a sigh of relief.

"What am I doing," Ken mutters to himself, again passing the scene of the bike crime outside of London Rugs.

In his head, he hears Badrick's voice speaking in Patois shouts.

"Yuh get dem deh mada fuckas, Ken, yuh get dem gud!"

Ken's hands ball up into fists, and he growls as the board speeds towards the squatter's park.

Cruising slowly through the alleyway, Ken parks his board against the 24-7's back wall. Stashing it behind some yellow crates, he steps into the shadow of a nearby tree while looking up the convenience store's phone number on some nearby, and dead-slow, free wifi.

Beep boop boop beep.

Boop. Beep.

Beep. Beep boop beep.

He walks around the front of the building, peeking inside; a man is reading a magazine behind the counter. Ken can see a steel coffee jug sitting steaming away on the beverage island.

Ken pushes the dial button.

Riiiiing.

The man inside the store doesn't answer.

Riiiiinnnnggg.

Inside the store, the worker puts down the magazine reluctantly on the fifth ring.

"Hello, 24-7?"

Ken coughs and changes his voice.

"Hello, this is the head office, big problem. Sausage in corn dogs all bad traced to a shipment that defrosted. You must pull all corn dogs from stock and put them in garbage bags immediately for pick up. Okay?"

Ken's nerves have him pacing around.

"Okay, who is this?" The employee asks.

"This is Mike, from the head office in Toronto. Head of 24-7 Canada, I know you're alone in the store. Nobody tells you guys what's up, but look, we had a notice that a shipment defrosted, and head office forgot to pull the corndogs before delivery. Management will just blame you if anyone gets sick and dies, so, heh, I'm here to make sure you don't lose your job, or, worse, if someone eats a corn dog."

The phone is silent for a moment.

"Okay, I pull corn dogs now," the man replies, "thank you, I will wait for the pickup driver?"

Ken steps off the curb and into a deep puddle with his

right shoe, the identical shoe the dog left the gift inside of.

"Oh yeah, we have a truck on the way; thanks, man, take it easy," Ken replies, hanging up the phone call.

The man inside the store puts the phone down and steps away from the till. Ken watches as the man walks across the store and into the storage room area. Just then, Ken puts on his goggles and pulls up his mask, dancing to the front door and looking inside for security cameras. His shoe squishes as water and air leak from the totally soaked footwear.

Ken takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. For a moment, he could smell a little bit of dog poop interrupting his mental preparation. A heinous whiff indeed, he thinks, focusing on the night ahead.

He grabs the door handle.

Ding dong!

A chime goes off as Ken steps inside and ducks down the magazine aisle. Making sure to keep his face and height unknown to the cameras, he peeks around for a path to the coffee machine. One surveillance camera over the ATM machine, another across from the coffee, third by the cashier.

Ken bolts for the coffee pot. Whipping out the stolen laxative medicine, he flips the lid open and squirts the entire bottle inside. With the illicit payload delivered, Ken quickly puts it back in his vest pouch. Staying crouched, he sneaks back outside of the store before the man at the counter even sees him.

Dashing into a nearby shrub, Ken's heart is racing, and his nervous hands shake; it is even more challenging for him to pull the stainless steel flask from his vest and hold it steady. Two big mouthfuls of warm vodka help to reinforce his nerves as he waits.

In the wet reflection of the street, Ken can see a small group crossing the road up the block and heading his way. He ducks out of the bush he is hiding in and skulks behind the 24-7 to grab his board. The rider in black is soon zooming down the alley to circle behind them. Coming back up the other side of the block, he slowly creeps along silently in the shadows of storefronts on the opposite side of the road. Secretly watching the group inside.

As Ken stands behind a lamppost, a short hooded man and a couple of tag-alongs exiting the 24-7; they all carry coffee trays, walking down the block back towards the park.

Ken smiles under his mask as he grabs his board and sneaks back towards the 24-7. The plan is to ditch the e-board behind the store, then find a place among the thick foilage to stalk the gang of thieves.

His bike is coming home.

Tonight.

Stashing the jet-black electric longboard behind some milk crates, he moves back towards the park, scurrying among the shadows to the edge. Going off the path, Ken slowly navigates through the bushes in the general direction of the bike pirates.

With a couple of minutes to find a suitable perch between some trees, Ken turns on his night-vision goggles and can immediately see where the bike gang has their little camp. Off in the nearby distance, a pile of bike parks lie sorted on a blanket, shocks, forks, frames, wheels; Ken has no doubt some are high-end pieces he's seen before online when customizing his own bike.

Then, he sees it.

A 1991 Craggy Peak Shockwave.

His beautiful bike is there; it leans against a tree next to a

couple of tents in a circular clearing. The bike gang nearby looks comfy, sitting in their foldable chairs. Right on time, having their 11 PM coffee just like the store worker complained about days ago.

Ken grins and holds back a snicker.

"Oh my gosh... they're drinking it!" he whispers to himself.

From one of the tents behind the men, the head of a young woman with wildly coloured hair pokes out and points to one of the men; someone answers with a shout and throws a pack of smokes at her. The other men laugh.

Ken looks around to make sure nobody sneaks up behind him; he's still well hidden in the V of a tree trunk with a couple of shrubs providing plenty of cover.

One of the men has another drink of his coffee, goes over to the blanket of parts, and begins to roll it up while another man puts a few high-end bikes in a pile.

"Gotcha, you bastards," Ken whispers as he looks at the phone to check the time.

Five after eleven.

Ken remembers back, looking at a graph of the average response times for police in Vancouver, something like 6 minutes for the west side where he is now.

Six minutes to get his bike back and be outta there.

Ken dials 911.

"Police, fire, or ambulance," speaks the operator.

"Police," whispers Ken in his gruff voice.

"What's your emergency?"

"Yes- I am looking at a few men in a park, Lady Relaxing Park, one of them is waving a gun near some bike parts, I think he's robbing them-"

"Man with a gun, okay, do you-"

"Oh shit, I have to go; he's pointing the gun at me; help!" Ken hangs up the phone and turns airplane mode on, attaching the phone securely to his vest with the camera facing outwards.

"Five minutes, fifty seconds," Ken whispers.

Taking a deep breath, Ken pulls down the night vision goggles, switching the powerful LED flashlight on and setting the burner phone to record video.

Well, this is it, he thinks, taking a couple steps out from the shadows and into the outskirts of the camp. Ken pauses, listening. He can hear moaning coming from the bushes. Peering between the tents, he spots a couple of the men, their faces in pain, clutching their stomachs in the bright LED spotlight, some crawling behind tents and unbuttoning their pants at the same time.

"Arughh, what- what the fuck- my ass is exploding!" cries out one of the men doubled over behind the tents near his bike.

Amid the diarrhetic chaos, Ken scans around and spots two men in sport coats, not precisely the homeless camp types. They're carrying bundles of bike parts away up the path. Despite the shine of the light, they ignore Ken walking out from the bushes and towards his bike. Smiling under his mask, he casually walks up and hugs it.

"Missed you, baby," Ken whispers, petting the handlebars and looking over the bike for damage.

"Who the fuck," one of the moaning men says, pants at his ankles, hand reaching into his pocket and squatting next to the tent.

Ken takes a couple steps backwards while gripping his bike. The LED beam in the face of the defecating man as he

lunges from his squat with a knife, the light flashing on the polished blade as it comes at Ken.

Quickly Ken thrusts the bike forward to parry. The front tire tread catching the man in his exposed nether regions, causing him to holler as he falls back into his own excrement.

"You fuckin' goooooo-f! You fuckin' wrecked my shit!" bawls the man as he lies on his side, thrashing, pants at his ankles, gagging from the aroma as he clutches his smashed lap.

The world stands still for a nick of time; Ken knows he just broke the law for the first time, deliberately, in his life. A cold trickle crawls down his neck as he feels an incredible rush of adrenaline.

Bending down, Ken picks up one of the high-end bike frames lying among the pile of parts and holds it tight, laying it on his handlebars like a medieval lance.

"Hey! That's ours, asshole!" A deep voice yells out.

Ken quickly spins and shines his light towards the shout and sees a burly man in a sports coat rushing towards him.

Slamming his foot on the pedal, Ken nearly flips his bike taking off with a wheelie, somehow not dropping the bike frame while madly speeding. The bike flies into the park and down a narrow, dark path, thickly wooded in spots.

"Get him!" another voice shouts out from behind a tree, and soon the shaking light strapped to Ken's chest is pointing at the suspected screamer.

There, in the rapidly approaching distance, is a man in a black hoodie. As the gap closes, Ken sees who it is.

It's *him*.

The blonde goatee man, pants at his ankles, bracing against a tree, his face red with effort, uncontrollably relieving himself.

Ken can't believe it, almost face-to-face with the thief himself. At that second, the man with the blonde goatee takes a couple steps towards Ken, a look of bewilderment on his face. Ken scowls, thrusting the bike frame harpoon forward, catching the goatee'd thief upside his dome with a solid ping, jousting him in the skull with the bike frame's head tube.

The man drops to the ground with a loud thump as Ken rides on for another 30 feet -spinning the back tire around to face the distant camp again.

Far in the distance, he sees movement. Ken zooms his telescopic goggles in, and he can see one of the sport coat men loading the wrapped-up parts in the trunk of a large SUV. The second tall man carrying more bike parts from the camp. A shadow passes in front of the LED light beam—a man in a long brown coat, hoodie sticking out, wearing a grey paperboy cap. Ken's heart is racing. It's the thug that broke into the art gallery across the alley!

Ken slips his bike into a lower gear, pedalling towards the man stumbling in the direction of the 24-7. Ken decides he's not going to make it. Pumping his legs hard, he catches up to him fast. The man is unaware as Ken rushes by on his bicycle, swinging the frame at the back of his legs. With a loud crack, the steel easily wins against the bone. Turning to stop once again and surveying the damage. Ken pops a wheelie before riding back to the tents, using the man's body as a ramp to jump off of. Ken's head is scanning around, looking for the tall thugs.

In the camp, the wild-haired young woman pokes her head out of a tent for a moment; hearing the commotion, she looks startled and zips it back up. Ken sees the other burly sport coat-clad man in the shadows carrying another bundle of

wrapped-up bike parts towards the SUV with a bike thief gripping onto one of his tree-trunk-sized legs with both arms.

"C'mon, man, give me my shit!" Yells the skinny man being dragged up the path.

"Let go!" Shouts the tall man in the sport coat, "-who the fuck is in your camp? I left the bag in the blue tent; you better see if it's still there."

"Jeremy and the boys, they're fucked up, man!" shouts the skinny man holding onto the well-dressed muscle.

"Let go, freak!" growls the tall guy, kicking his leg and shaking the homeless guy loose, "-you're going to be extra fucked up if you touch me again."

"P-p-plastic bag? Which one?" says the dishevelled skinny thief, standing up and walking backward towards Ken and the tents.

"Yes, a liquor store bag, blue tent," shouts the tall man before turning to the other sport coat thug and waving at him, the duo rapidly walking towards the SUV.

"Hey Jenny, meathead put it in the wrong tent-" says the homeless guy, turning around, lighting a smoke and approaching the clearing where Ken is waiting.

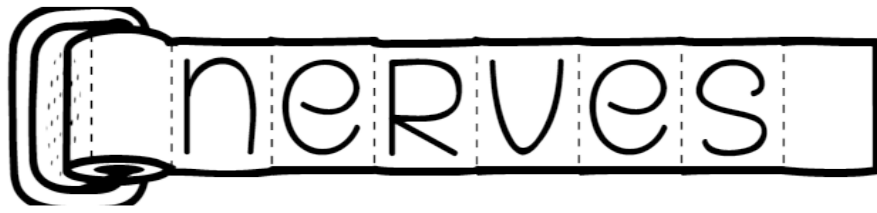
Ken rides towards the man, who now just spots Ken and his bright light speeding towards him and tries to dodge at the last second. Catching a glancing blow to the face and sending a few teeth flying.

"Gahh!" Ken hears shouting as the man drops behind him. Ahead, the two clean-cut thugs are loading the last of the bike parts in the SUV, but not before Ken rides up and throws the bike frame, would-be lance, through the back window of the SUV as its engine fires up.

Smash!

Jumping off the curb, Ken races across the road and hops up on the other sidewalk, turning to see the SUV driver looking out his window and shouting at him. The facial expression of the man behind the wheel changes as blue and red lights reflect off the SUV's clean black paint job.

Spinning his head to look, Ken spots a lineup of several cop cars flying towards him on the horizon, a few blocks away, tops.



Ken's legs are on fire. Flying through the alley away from the park, he is soon skidding to a halt behind the 24-7. The yellow milk crates tumble out of the way with a boot, and he jumps on his electric skateboard. Throwing his bike over one shoulder and breathing deeply, leaning forward with the throttle maxed out to escape.

Afterburners on, he flees the backstreet behind the 24-7 at a risky pace. Ken barely slowing for the dip and rough pavement of the end of the lane ahead.

"Whoa-ah!"

The speeding board skids across a blanket of wet leaves covering the pavement, Ken deftly shifting his body forward to catch his balance. The bike's momentum has him flailing his arms to stay upright, his feet staying planted and pointing the board toward the streetlights the next block down.

Slowing just a bit, getting ready to cross the busy street ahead of him, checking both ways quickly, cop cars surround the black SUV in the distance. Sweat soaking his hooded mask, he glides across the intersection, and much to his non-surprise, one cop car flicks on its lights and advances towards him with the siren on.

Mashing the throttle on his electric longboard, the shadowy rider scoots down inky-lit boulevards and tenebrous side streets at high velocity. Doubling back when it is safe and riding in a roundabout zig-zag towards home to throw off any tail. Slowing for a moment, sirens are heard far in the distance as he veers to avoid a well-fed raccoon scampering in front of him.

Creeping along, a grey undercover unit drives slowly past the end of the backroad ahead.

"Shit," he whispers, using the freehand he is using for balance to shut off the bright LED light. The night vision goggles beep as the batteries are dying.

Sweating and nervous, slowing to a crawl to be inconspicuous, he pulls up his goggles to rest on his forehead. Listening for anything, navigating out of the alleyway, a large tree canopy hides the exit.

Peeking out from the laneway, the hairs on Ken's neck stand up. Across the street and a little down the block, just under a green hedgerow, lit up by amber streetlight, is a cop car.

Before he can breathe, the driver's door opens, and a cop screams:

"Don't move!"

Ken spins the e-board 180 degrees and rips back down the alley, the electric motor screaming; he hits the end of the dark passage and turns up a busier road, west 33rd.

One block away, the lights of Cambie street shine ahead, with the gentle rise of the city's most beautiful park looming in the distance. The wind rushes in his hair, hoodie flapping behind him and tugging at his neck, the zipper making a racket against the bike's spokes.

Sirens.

Ahead, the light turns yellow, then red, as Ken belts through the wide intersection. Lurching to avoid the side of a bus, the out-of-control rider hurtles up the hill into the park's parking lot. Drifting sideways up the wheelchair ramp, he catapults sideways and falls off the longboard.

"Whoa, whoa-" Ken yells, the bike teetering on his shoulders, sending him tumbling backwards onto the lawn at nearly top speed. The handlebars spear into the turf, wrenching Ken's shoulder out of place when he slams into the ground and rolls several times.

"Arghh!"

Sirens. Lots of them.

The stars and the moon above twinkle above, blissfully unaware of bike thieves and bad choices. His sweat runs into his eyes, and they sting. The ground is cold and wet from the recent sprinkle, but the freshly-cut grass scent is terrific. There, just then, Ken smiles and closes his eyes for a long second.

Screech!

Woof, woof, grrrr!

Gritting his teeth, he wrestles himself out from the tangled mess of the crash, jumping back on the board with his uninjured arm carrying the bike. Barking and more sirens fill the park around him; he proceeds up the steep trail at an unsafe rate. The trail leads to a bridge over a small burbling waterfall surrounded by little ponds, and here he will say goodbye to his trusty companion. Leaning his bike against the railing, Ken pops the battery pack off and plops it into the nearby lagoon before also slipping his electric board into the black waters.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," he whispers.

Sitting on his bike, flashlights scan sideways across the trees, and the dog's barking grows closer.

Ken's legs are a blur crossing the smooth pavement, passing a statue of Queen Elizabeth. The hedgerow ends, and a twinkling, golden vista of the city reveals itself below. Ken can ride faster, but he lets his legs go still, out of respect as he rides by or, maybe, out of remorse. His eyes fill with tears for a moment, then the explosion happens.

A bright flash.

Boom!

Ken jolts, with hands like claws on the rubber grips, he doesn't fall, the bike swaying-

"Freeze!"

Ringling ears and blinding flashlights, Ken nearly bails from his aluminum steed, barely avoiding a few dark figures charging towards him while blocking the road downhill. Instead, Ken jumps up a small set of stairs to the upper parking lot, popping a bold wheelie at the top.

"Yeehaw!" he yells, wanting to make a hat-waving motion in his bravado, but his arm refuses to lift. The path comes out from behind tall trees and opens up into a large paved area. Ken finally drops the front tire down, taking off fast- away from the nearby shouting voices.

Another bright flash.

Boom!

Ken's heart flutters; he takes a deep breath in.

They are throwing flashbangs at me, Ken thinks as he worriedly laughs, wincing as he chuckles, searing pain in his shoulder.

Just as Ken drops off the curb into the hilltop parking lot, a few cop cars are to his left. To his dismay, a cop opens the back

door of one. A ferocious, furry mouth on four legs with a loud, thick chain around its neck bolts out and gallops towards him.

"Stop!"

Voices shout behind him.

Ken tucks his head to his chest, pedalling harder than he has ever pedalled before, his muscles pushed to their brink. The front tire lifts from his legs' torque with every thrust, making the cranks contort with every mighty shove of his molten, melting quads. Already halfway across the lot, the issue is, so is the dog.

"Ahh, shh-shhh-it!" Ken mutters, throwing a sideways kick to the hound; it stumbles, jumping repeatedly and snapping its mouth, missing several snarling bite attempts.

The flat horizon line glows with the lights of East Vancouver, a vague memory of where the pavement ends ahead and the downhill begins. After the parking lot, drop-off is a series of steep, grassy, slippery hills. If he can somehow make it, he can escape through Riley park and the side streets to his home.

Flash!

Boom!

Ken screams in pain, holding on tight to the bicycle as the parking lot ends, the canine cop snapping at his thigh and nicking his leg.

Launching over the curb, man, machine, and animal gracefully traverse a sidewalk in mid-air onto the grass, they both roll down the slippery hill. The bike slams against the rocky terrain, making a loud, clankety sound. Ken barely hangs on, cringing at the sounds of cracking bones and the whimpering dog behind him.

"Oh, shi- oh shi," Ken's chest pounds, and his hands cramp

up.

The touring bicycle, designed for smooth roads and light off-road, nearly rattles apart as Ken barrels down the abrupt decline with the wind rushing in his hair. Grimacing again, the ground drops off again ahead. The bike retakes flight, slamming down on the grass with Ken's palms aching from the blow. His attention now turning to another road crossing ahead.

With white knuckles and a terrified expression, he can't catch a breath. The bike flies off the curb, hitting the roadway. It fishtails as the rubber briefly contacts the road, Ken expertly timing a jump to get the bike over the next curb. The rider storms down another steep hill towards a small pond and some trees with an unrelenting grip.

Unable to scream and clutching the handlebars mightily, Ken skids sideways in the mossy grass, losing precisely enough speed to miss the pond. With a panicked, involuntary yell, barely bypassing a clump of trees, he spots a second road ahead with some red and blue flashing lights racing up the hill away from him.

Off the curb and the bike flexes, another jump and the back tire smacks against the curb.

THUMP!

The handlebars quake as Ken is nearly bucked off the bike, holding on with his hands burning intensely and cramping up. He is careening again downhill and approaching a clearing before crossing another street.

"Here we- g-goo-" Ken hollers as the trembling bike approaches the street at maximum velocity along the grass-launching off the curb and landing in the middle of the road.

"Shh-shiiit!"

At the last second, Ken pulls the front tire up in time- the back tire impacting the curb with a bang. The bicycle begins to shake catastrophically down another grassy mound-

"Fuck, fuuuuck!" Ken holds on with his arms quivering like a bad case of Parkinson's; the heavy night vision goggles falling down over his eyes makes everything go dark. The bottom of the steep decline catches him by surprise, the g-forces pushing him into tagging his chin with the bike's crossbar. Biting his tongue hard, Ken begins to swallow blood.

The bicycle smooths out and coasts slightly slower; the back tire feels bent but still holds air. The field he's riding is totally dark, and for a moment, his bike crosses a sandy surface before it's back on the grass.

Riley Park! Ken knows he is close by; he must have just crossed one of the baseball diamonds. If he sticks to the park and takes Ontario street down, there are enough barricades that the cops will never patrol that street.

Ken pedals with as much energy as he can muster, rain commences pouring around him. His tongue bleeds, his shoulder lame, the adrenaline wearing off lets everything hurt. Passing the community center he grew up using nearby, he has such happy memories of time spent there. Stopping for a moment to rest, he wonders if he'll ever give a family the joy he once knew growing up.

In the shadows, Ken pulls the burner phone from its perch on his vest, his hands shaking so much it takes him a few tries to push the stop-record button. Ken sticks to the sidewalk; the tree canopy creates a hidden dark passage for night travellers like him.

Minutes pass as the dark cyclist slinks down Ontario street in the rain, breezing by character houses of Vancouver design.

Vancouver Specials and stucco homes, some built barely after the world wars. He smiles as he rides by, remembering the chunks of beer bottles mixed with cement and how they glow different colours in the sun.

Almost home, he glides through his alley and jumps quietly over the fence, carefully lifting his bike over the short wall. Ken rushes into his basement suite with his bicycle. Putting it down gently in his kitchen, the first thing he does is grab an ice-cold bottle of vodka from his freezer. Chugging half the bottle before pausing long enough to catch his breath.

"Holy... holy fuck... what have I done," Ken mutters, plugging in the burner phone to charge.

Pacing in his living room and soaking in his clothes, Ken's covered in dirt, bits of grass fall off, and each step grinds it more into the carpet.

"Shhh--shit!" Ken half-whispers, the floor looking more like a barn or horse's stable with every lap he takes.

After several minutes of charge, he takes his burner phone, ditching his mask, hoodie, and goggles. It is time for a more inconspicuous outfit; his blue wool trench coat and burgundy umbrella. Grabbing his personal phone, he slips it into his inner jacket pocket. Thinking fast, Ken remembers a nearby 24-hour noodle place with open wifi. He can set the burner phone to upload, walk to the nearby cafe while it uploads, then swing back and get the phone on the way home. Opening his kitchen drawers, he finds a ziplock bag and slips the burner phone in.

Back outside and walking through the alley, he holds his injured arm as stationary as possible with grit teeth. His hands are steady in his pockets, thanks to the booze. Gripping the phone tight, he is conscious of what is about to go down,

getting giddier with every step. He's going to upload the high-definition POV footage of his strike against the city's low-life to the internet and spread it everywhere.

His arm aches, his leg bleeds. The police dog must have just nicked his thigh. The walk is long and arduous, but his morale is high, his legs smoulder and feel like jello; yet he doesn't care. Fraser and Kingsway's intersection has a little fancy noodle cafe; he'd been there a couple of times over the last few years. Their wifi requires no password and being open 24 hours a day, it's perfect for this mission.

The 4-way intersection is empty, the road slick with rain and reflecting the streetlights better than any filter; sticking to the shadows, Ken steps into the alleyway as discreet as possible. A few Toyotas, a black Mercedes and a couple of Teslas park there with no lights on and nobody inside them. Sneaking along the wall, scents of fresh ramen and broth waft over to Ken; he scuttles behind the dumpster near the kitchen back door and crouches in darkness. Greeted by a rancid odour, Ken covers his nose with his shirt collar as he opens the phone and connects to the wifi.

"Ok, shit- let's see-" Ken logs in, first creating an email address- the next step, to set up the upload, linking email accounts- done. TubeYuber account created, upload setup. Next, post a link to the channel on a local Faceberg group, anonymously- Instafame too, Ken thinks, maybe a Twatter- oh and definitely on Plebbit. This needs maximum exposure.

Ken quickly taps away on the phone, hunched over to keep the screen dry behind the trash bin. Hearing the kitchen door open and footsteps makes him freeze. A kitchen worker opens the lid, tosses a bag in and walks back inside the kitchen, the screen door closes behind them with a solid thwack.

"Phew, close," Ken whispers, back to quickly set up accounts to spread the impending viral video.

"All set," he says quietly; a tap on the phone starts the upload.

Standing up from his squat, he slips the phone back into the ziplock bag and tucks it in the open handle of the dumpster's side. Glancing over at the kitchen's screen door, a chef works with his back to Ken. Good time for a sprint out of there, Ken's feet unintentionally making loud splashes in the puddles, exiting the alley and heading towards the cafe a few blocks away.

Sheets of rain cut down in torrents as the shadowy figure darts under dry awnings, arriving close to Main and Broadway. A single cozy coffee shop illuminates an otherwise foreboding intersection. Ken strides towards the front door, a couple people sitting inside the steamy, amber windows.

Ding-ding.

A little bell rings with Ken's entry, and a warm, cinnamon scent welcomes his nose, calming his rattled nerves. Ken's hands tremor again, and it isn't polite to slam flask hooch in the middle of the store.

"Sir? What can I get you?"

The counter person stares at Ken.

"Uh- oh! yes, can I get uh- small chai tea to go and a tootsie caramel breakfast birthday cake muffin?"

After the bill comes up, Ken reaches for his wallet, remembering at the last second that he still didn't get another bank card. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he turns his personal phone on and uses BananaPay. Embarrassingly, he holds the phone with both hands, and it still quivers; returning it to his coat, he forces a smile.

The trendy cafe is pretty busy, full of artists, students, a dozing homeless guy, and a few coffee snobs. A hum of hipster socializing with the dissonance of a cracked Tibetan singing bowl; the east van thrift-store clientele contrasts against upscale, west side decor.

Paying for his food, Ken turns and ducks back out the door, eerily excited to see his upload complete. His hand tremors flare up for moments to disappear again, a strange feeling replaces it- a metallic taste in his mouth and a remarkable sense of victory that feels so- primal.

Down the block, along Broadway, Ken's feet hurt, his arm burns when it doesn't feel numb. It hurts to hold the umbrella when the wind picks up. The muffin and warm tea help him feel normal, like everything is alright if he keeps chewing and sipping. His feet are wet, the heaviness of his damp coat makes every step a chore, the sugar a bit of welcome energy.

Tears or rain, Ken can't tell; his eyes water freely, his heart beating irregularly. He tries to think positively- spiralling into panic and despair instead. Everything is so screwed. Allie is so mad, he's been such a lousy dog-dad, this whole crazy night just puts everything at risk- his meagre savings- not anywhere close to what they need to get a townhouse- probably a tiny condo so far from Vancouver general hospital- maybe Langley- over an hour both ways, every day- he's been working for two years, closing deals for a slim raise- Allie wants kids soon, and Ken, he is out fighting strangers-

Stinging pain rushes across Ken's forehead, the control over his hands lost, his body violently shivering. His breaths becoming shallow and laborious, a dizzy sensation taking over.

Leaning against a nearby wall, the rain-drenched man tries to catch his breath. Every emotion hitting him at once,

Ken's body shudders, dropping his tea to the sidewalk while trying to brace himself against the wall.

It takes some time to start walking again. Panic subsides; his arms and legs aren't so numb. A sensation of choking fills his throat, every breath a chore, electrical tingles flow through his depleted arms and legs as he stumbles on.

Focusing on counting his breaths, purposeful exhales helping him focus on the number and muscle control, not on the sheer terror of impending doom and death. A numb body, a racing mind.

"One-one seventeen," Ken whispers to himself, rounding the corner near Fraser and Kingsway. Emperor Noodle's glowing 24-hour sign illuminates every puddle and raindrop falling on the rutted road in front of it.

Hurrying down the block, Ken's gait returns to form, his breathing automatic once more. A slight tremor remains in his hands, leaning against the side of the restaurant, peeking into the alleyway.

The same cars are crookedly parked like bad teeth, the back kitchen door remains open, light spilling out through the screen to blanket the grease trap and dumpster. Fluorescent in an eggshell colour, they cast a long shadow when the chef walks in front of them. The smell of tasty cooking noodles hits Ken's nose again. Slowly coming around the corner, Ken sneaks along the side of the building, ready to take cover behind a car. Ducking, he squats next to the bin, sliding a hand inside to recover the burner phone he left uploading.

A rustling of a plastic bag.

The creak of the kitchen screen door.

Ken tenses in panic.

A shadow passes of someone opening the dumpster lid

across from him.

Feeling around in the dark, raindrops slide down the back of his neck as he grasps the phone, yanking it from its hidden perch within the metal slot.

Here he goes, he thinks, making a run for it, splashing loudly through deep puddles as he sprints from the alleyway towards home. A voice behind him shouts in the rainy night. Ken runs, never looking back.



After a night of deep sleep, Ken awakens to a ballet of thuds from the upstairs neighbour; he wonders how each step is like a bowling ball hitting the floor.

Clothes from last night are spread out on the floor, positively filthy in the dim living room light. The carpet under his couch is splotchy, and a smattering of muddy footprints covers the exposed hardwood. His Blubvhog shoes lie in his kitchen and look damp and greasy.

"Ahhh," Ken mutters, grabbing his shoulder in pain. Rolling over to get off of the couch, his wrenched arm dangles limply when he stands. Bruises, smears, and grass stains cover his body, matching his filthy and blood-stained sofa.

Beside his mucky shoes in the kitchen, the burner phone from last night sits on the table. His heart skips a beat; he still needs to get rid of it. Does Jeff want it back? No, probably not. Maybe he will throw it off the Cambie street bridge on his next walk to work. Maybe. Images of getting caught fill his mind; maybe he'll toss it in a bonfire at Ambleside beach.

Ken scratches his head.

Shuffling to his coffee maker in his boxer shorts, every year of his 30's catching up to him. His hips and back

complaining sorely about the impromptu downhill bicycle race last night. A couple of bloody scrapes on his thigh are oozing. Just how close did the dog's teeth get?

"Damn," Ken mutters, picking his black pants up off the floor, shreds of thick fabric hang from the leg where the beast almost got him. Almost.

While the coffee bubbles and brews away, Ken goes to the mirror. His face isn't much better off than his thigh. A complete matted mess of hair, skin so oily, scratched and battered; his chin is split from where it smashed the crossbar of his now-rescued bike. Blue and purple form a quilt of bruises covering his back, probably from crashing at high speed while carrying his bike on the now-lost longboard. Only a few spots of skin are free of some sort of wound or soreness.

Ken throws a blanket over the mud on his couch, sitting down with a coffee, flipping open his laptop with his one good arm. Alerts and messages popping up to greet him, his eyes bug out at the headline:

Terrorist strikes homeless camp!

Every local news channel is playing grainy cop-dashcam footage of a figure in black with a bike over its shoulder. A massive TENT CITY TERRORIST graphic appears over a montage of Ken's phone camera POV video. The segments feature a slow-motion replay of the blonde goatee thief's head being clubbed by Ken, his body falling backwards into a pile of bike parts, discarded needles, and squalid tents.

Clicking the top link, a highlight video of government officials discussing the events of the previous night.

The police chief's comments at the morning press

conference blare over Ken's laptop speakers.

...this individual is highly dangerous, and we urge caution to not approach them. Not only was some sort of poisoning agent used to disable members of our most vulnerable community, but the suspect was armed with a weapon. This was a deliberate attempt to murder several marginalized folks...

The deaf hand-sign interpreter is wildly gesturing in the background like they have a grand mal seizure going on during an earthquake.

Opening his social media, everyone is buzzing from Ken's upload. Twatter and Faceberg light up with theories on the masked vigilante and the motives.

"What could cause someone to poison homeless and assault people?" reads one top comment. Plebbit is an internet news aggregator for global stories, along with local news and opinion. Ken suspects it mainly was bots, propaganda, and shut-ins but definitely a good source for local gossip.

Switching from searching by latest comment to searching by most controversial, he scrolls through hundreds of comments until discovering a fascinating user.

*comment posted 6:57 PM by /u/big_chonk_squirrel
Terrorist? More like a hero LMAO did u see how many
bike parts were spread across the camp? blonde goatee guy
has an instafame account and a noisebreeze for his DJ sets hes
not homeless just a larp'ing crustpunk wannabe and who were
the the two well dressed guys loading shit in a truck city
councillor peter talbot was driving? U can see at timestamp
4:33 it's him somethings really fishy*

Ken leans back on his couch, grabbing his head with both hands, trying to fully contemplate the magnitude of it all. The video keeps playing, and the police chief takes questions from the media.

"Does the public have anything to fear?" asks a reporter.

"At this point, we would ask the public to avoid this suspect if spotted, as we consider them armed and extremely dangerous. As I said earlier, we will bring this individual to justice for terrorism, the murder of a police canine unit, and the attempted murder of nearly a half dozen marginalized people."

"Chief, was this a hate crime?" another reporter yells.

"For those questions, I'm going to defer to our equity officer, Dr. Aziz Ross-Singh," says the chief. Ken takes a sip of his coffee, feeling his hand beginning to vibrate.

"Good morning," speaks the feminine voice as Ken navigates his work email inbox, sorting out the rat's nest of work dumped on him. Messaging his boss Azmina, he informs her he'll be working from home as he sorts and flags emails for priority.

"As you all know, last night saw an attack against our homeless and most marginalized members of society. These people are the most stigmatized and vulnerable, suffering the disease of addiction, and our community must rally together with love to say never again. A lawful and just society cannot tolerate last night's extremist attack, the subsequent high-speed chase resulting in the murder of a K9 unit."

A bit distracted by her polish, she is highly professional and incredibly well-spoken. Her charisma draws Ken in, even if he knows she's acting for the camera.

"Make no mistake, this was a hate crime, and Canada is

lucky only a single canine was killed by this hate-filled terrorist. I can assure you, we have spoken this morning to the Prime Minister on the phone. There will be federal support in bringing this criminal and any accomplices to justice. Last night the police began to collect evidence, statements, security footage, and, rest assured, we will catch this terrorist and protect everyone in the housing-challenged community. Thank you."

The camera pans back to the generic news host.

"Kissy Wong will have more at 6!"

Gazing around his filthy apartment, Ken sighs and gets up.

First, he works on picking up the dirty footwear, getting a whiff of the present Sparky dropped into his shoe. The puddle water he stepped in last night mixes with the poop to smear the inside with a grainy, greasy, stinky brown slime.

"Ugh!" Ken holds the soiled shoes away from his face as he slides them into a bag and into an old shoebox.

Back at his computer, he looks up shoe cobbler near me on the internet and gets only a couple results. One in the basement under The Bay downtown, he can hit it up after work, get his shoes cleaned, and be back in action. They are his only classy shoes and superior quality. Ken remembers Allie's face beaming with joy when he opened the box on Christmas, they always get compliments, a bit fancy for his taste, but they're a versatile shoe that fits well.

His reflection looks mostly normal when applying a bit of moisturizer to his face after shaving and getting dressed. Wearing a blue button-up, nice khakis, and a fleece overcoat, the cuts on his face really stuck out. Allie has left a bit of make-up at his house, and he uses some to cover up numerous wounds on his cheek, chin, and nose. At least his split lip is a bit less purple today.

Ken grabs his things and briskly walks to the nearest main road to wait for the bus. Cambie Street has been less busy since the coof started, but things haven't changed too much. Getting on the bus, the driver points to his mask. Feeling himself blush, Ken takes a seat, maskless, making a mental note to carry one in the future.

Not too long later, Ken arrives at The Bay and quickly discovers the shoe man went out of business. All that remains downstairs is a popcorn merchant with multicoloured popcorn, which Ken has to try. Getting a large strawberry popcorn bag; it's pretty good, like a crunchy pie.

In the elevator with his popcorn and shoebox, Ken pushes the "6" button for Menswear & Shoes, and the old elevator squeaks as it rises.

Ding.

A half-minute passes.

Ding.

The second floor. A group of elderly people get on board, pushing every button going up.

Floor after floor, people enter, people depart; Ken catches a glimpse of the department store floors and how they become more and more barren over the years. Yet, at least floor six, the menswear department, can still keep the lights on.

Ding.

Ken walks out of the elevator with a smile and a bounce in his step. Spotting the shoe section, he makes a bee-line for it. Despite his battered face, his reflection in the mirror looks calm and confident. Being called a hero in countless comments is a long way from the feeling of his sheepish exit from work after Seth's betrayal. But, of course, it will be the cherry on his cake if he can get his shoes professionally cleaned.

A young Latin man stands in a tan suit and azure shirt with a bright yellow tie at the counter.

"Good day; you looking for anything particular?"

"Uh, hi- do you have a shoe repair person here? The cobbler on-"

"Oh yeah, he closed, man," shrugs the salesman with a friendly smile.

"Yeah," Ken sighs.

"New shoes, man, that's all we do; if you want a repair, I mean, we have a program where we can send shoes out, but that's warranty work."

"You can?"

"I think so. Let me check. The boss is always hidin' outback watching her stock markets," says the man with a laugh, motioning with his thumb towards the back room.

"I think she's day-tradin', haha!"

Ken laughs, "-to the moon!"

"I only buy a stock that pays out dem dividends; that's my jam," the grinning salesman rubs his fingers and thumb together—a universal gesture for cash.

"Hey, Sam?" the stylish salesman calls out.

"Yes, Raul?" a feminine voice responds.

"Do we still ship out shoes for repairs?"

Both men wait for a reply. A moment of dead air, Ken can hear generic pop music on the store's speaker system.

A redheaded, enthralling and sublime woman strolls around the employees-only corner.

"Hi, I'm not sure what your request is; when did you buy these shoes?"

Ken tries to keep eye contact with the fit and curvy young woman.

"Uh- I actually didn't buy them here; I'm just looking for a cobbler or cleaning service, maybe replace the liner?"

"Sorry, sir, we only ship shoes purchased here out for repair, warranty items only, but I can get you in a nice new pair for half-off today?"

Ken can almost count the few freckles on her face, button nose, pink lips, and her sparkling diamond stud earrings keep catching the light.

Ten minutes later, Ken is trying on shoes. The redhead Samantha has introduced herself and convinces him to try on some expensive, ugly shoes.

"Heh, so, I guess, well-" Ken chuckles, "-you won't believe it, I- my dog, well, not my dog, I dog-sit, occasionally. It-it's for my girlfriend, heh, uh- I'm not- well, good at it, the dog-sitting, I mean- not the girlfriend. I'm good at that, ha- obviously- Sparky's a good dog, but- maybe- if the dog respected me it-" Ken laughs louder, "-it probably wouldn't have pooped in my shoe!"

Samantha giggles as she signs Ken up for a new Fudson's Way card.

"Sign here, and so you know, you get 50% off these shoes, and 25% off your next purchase, don't forget, mister, the first payment is due 60 days from now!" Samantha furrows her brow playfully; her big, emerald eyes have a lush glow under the soft department store lighting. With a wiggling finger, she pretends to scold him.

"You better not forget." She smirks.

Ken smiles.

"I'll just take the shoes and put them in our recycler," Samantha says. The redhead gracefully taking Ken's old shoebox and walking them into the backroom before coming

back out and finalizing his total.

Ken smiles when Samantha comes around the counter and hands him the fancy bag with his new kinda-ugly shoes in them. He tries not to stare at her; and stops himself just in time. Not letting his eyes linger for more than a moment at her blue dress and hourglass figure.

Floating down the hallway into the elevator, Ken grimaces when he realizes how much the shoe girl wooed him. So much so, she signs him up for a credit card he doesn't want or need, falling for her charms during the moment. Appreciating her hustle, his new shoes aren't *that* ugly.

There is a light rain down on the street level; he huddles under the bus stop for a while to stay dry. For a pandemic, the traffic sure is heavy. It takes a bit longer than expected, but the bus crawls up the road and stops in front of him. Getting on, there are a couple of seats empty at the back near two older women. The person next to him is two seats over and quietly watching some videos on their phone.

Blocks go by as the bus limps up Cambie street in near-gridlock traffic. The only sounds are the bus's electric motors, yawns of old ladies, and a breaking news report quietly plays on the young man's screen next to him.

...breaking news, new clues in tent city terrorist case, we'll have more at the six o'clock news, but for now, here's a recap on what we know...

Ken turns to the young guy.

"Hey man, can you turn that up?"

The man raises his eyebrow for a second and then adjusts the volume up two clicks.

...profile, federal agents met with investigators and have released two critical clues to the public for help in identifying the suspect. One, the distinct shoes captured on security camera at the 24-7, two, the substance leaked from the suspect's shoe identified as biological forensic evidence, more at 6, Jim!

Ken leans back and immediately feels hot in the face. A few seconds later, the bus comes to a stop, and he jumps up to leave. Unfortunately, he accidentally bumps one of the babushka's leaning into the aisle in his haste, resulting in some prime old European cursing.

"Sorry, sorry," Ken bows his head with his hand up, stepping off the bus and into the relief of the cold rain. A few blocks up the hill and across the street, he is back home in his quiet, dark basement suite. The fruit flies everywhere, his couch still under layers of blankets, dried mud, and blood.

Throwing a towel over the stains, Ken sits down and flips on his TV in time for the 6 o'clock news.

"Hi and good evening, this is your 6 o'clock news, and I'm your host, Kissy Wong."

Kissy wears a power suit and has striking eyebrows to match.

"This afternoon, one of the victims of the Lady Relaxing tent city terror attack spoke for the first time. Worldwide was there to bring you the highlights."

The camera cuts to a press conference. The goatee'd blonde thief who snatched Ken's bike sits near a table in a wheelchair, wearing a nice button-up with his hair combed neatly. Several microphones point at him. A crowd of reporters gathering there, along with Dr. Aziz Singh-Ross, the equity officer of the Vancouver Police Department. She accompanies

the thief at a podium and begins to speak.

"I'd like to acknowledge we are on the ancestral territory of several local indigenous bands. Ancient lands, stolen and corrupted by the hetero-normative, colonial mindset that has utilized toxic masculinity as one of its many tools of oppression for over 400 years."

Ken notices how eloquent and confident Aziz is, her gestures with her hands and her facial expressions a masterful dance. He already feels sympathetic.

"This person you see before you today was a victim of the same hate-filled ideology that has advanced imperialist causes worldwide. Those same causes still echo today, resulting in hundreds of millions of deaths, billions of dollars in economic damage, and countless numbers of wrecked and ruined lives. Some of you may think we are at peace. The destructive behaviours of, and attitudes of, men like John A. MacDonald are gone, but this is not the case. Our bloodied and shameful history is not yet history; oppression of the marginalized still happens to this day."

Aziz wags her finger in a disapproving manner towards the crowd.

"Toxic masculinity, an ideology of hate, of branding your fellow human as an 'other' or as 'weak' or 'undesirable.' This ideology has now lead us to this dark day. We have to make some choices, people. What kind of city do you want to live in? One where those who are down-on-their-luck in a park are poisoned or murdered? Is this justifiable to some? If we stand in silence without speaking up, we, too, justify it.

Aziz shakes her head back and forth before putting a hand on her hip and giving a sassy look.

"I can't believe we're still doin' this shit, people."

Aziz sighs and puts both her hands on the podium in front of her, and leans forward.

"Instead of bringing your homeless neighbour soup, or offering a couch to sleep on, the ideologies that divide us want to see assaults. They want to see violence. They want to see this vigilante remain free. They believe an empty park is a better park- They want people to disappear! To them, nothing is more offensive than a park with desperate, marginalized human beings surviving the best they know-how. These attitudes- are the seeds of hate. That's right, the seeds of hate are sown here, hate for the impoverished- those who don't fit in. A streak of pink in your hair is no more a crime than being in a tent in a park. If you do not like it, look away!"

Aziz covers her eyes for a moment, and with great theatrics, uncovers her face and continues.

"Or- choose to look- listen, and understand your fellow human being- their story. The truth of what it means to be a migrant- a homeless, a person without access to clean water and the basics of life- we need to center the act of listening, let the marginalized tell us their stories- and we must not look away or cover our eyes when the details hold us to account-"

Covering her heart with her hand, Aziz stands up straight, leans her head back and closes her eyes before whispering into the microphone.

"-and their lived experience, whatever they share with you, my friends, should never be a story told from a place of fear- but from a place of love and complete acceptance. And with that, I would like to introduce our speaker with love. Jeremy, thank you for speaking and please, share with us your story."

Aziz steps out from the podium; the blonde goatee man

rolls forward in his wheelchair, leaning into a bouquet of microphones sitting on the table.

"Yeah, uh- thanks for that intro, uh- hi, my name is Jeremy Hollander and- first off, I'd like to thank the wonderful doctors at VGH. I've got a skull fracture and- and I was lucky, very lucky- just minding my own business, you know, strugglin' to survive- havin' a coffee in the park with some other guys."

David's eyes tear up.

"We were tryna stay warm- ya know, it still gets cold at night in summer, and first, the coffee- yeah, someone poisoned it- and then while the guys and I were sick, I mean, the pain- my stomach felt like a grenade went off in my butt. That's when the coward attacked us- then the police showed up, they found me bleeding out from the crack in my head- that, that's about it, I guess..."

Several reporters begin talking all at once.

"Yeah uh- one at a time-"

Aziz walks up and leans into the podium microphones.

"One at a time, people, first, you," she points at a reporter.

"What can we do to protect housing-challenged campers from vigilantes?"

Jeremy adjusts his seat in his wheelchair and leans forward.

"First off, we uh- we need the four pillars, I mean, right now- there's no safe supply, for one. I mean- that's what's killing us, that's one of the things that cause so much pain and suffering. I mean, even worse than some nazi attacking you after being poisoned, it's- like- uh- how do I know if my next medication is going to kill me? I have pain- and my medicine ain't safe, and every day I have to hustle and grind to not be

sick- and this country has everything we need to fix this, b-b- but we, the marginalized- don't get help, I mean- and then we get beat up for n-no reason at all- no reason-

Jeremy laughs and shakes his head, leaning back in his wheelchair and talking, but Ken can't hear what he's saying.

Aziz points at another reporter.

"Jeremy, can you tell us about the four pillars?"

Jeremy starts talking, but nobody can hear him speak.

Aziz leans over and whispers in Jeremy's ear.

"Oh yeah, right-" Jeremy says into the mic, "duh."

Scratching his chin and looking up at the ceiling, Jeremy looks back down at the microphone and keeps everyone in suspense.

"Ok, so, like- first you have harm reduction, right- like we need safe supply, homes, a place we belong... I mean, that's obvious- we need love. We need love. How can you fault someone who might have been sleeping on the street for a week, dope sick for days, unable to sleep- you shit yourself, puke- like you're dying man. how- how- is anyone gettin' out of that, without I-love?"

Jeremy chokes up for a moment.

"Excuse me," he speaks softly into the mic, his chin quivering.

Aziz turns and leans down, giving Jeremy a big hug.

"We love you, Jeremy," Aziz says into the microphone.

The reporters in the crowd let out a soft, "awwww!"

"Thanks, Aziz, but- but- we need the other three- the other three pillars, that's prevention- t-t-treatment, and enforcement. And right now, we don't even have the first pillar yet- this- this is a spectacular failure by the government at all levels, I mean, I-I-look at me, I'm hurtin', I'm in pain... and I'm-

Jeremy looks down for a moment and wipes a tear from his eye.

"I'm one of the few still alive to be able to tell my tale, I mean- I know lots of guys who haven't come back. A one-way trip in the ambulance and it's bye-bye buddy, ya know... and if the d-d-drugs don't get you, even if you're out there helping people like Thomus, just takes one psycho with a blade to end it- and that's what we face every day on the streets- and yet then, people can judge us, but- y-y-you have no idea how hard it is to get out of the lifestyle-"

Jeremy holds his head down for a few seconds; Aziz steps from the podium to whisper in his ear. He nods a few times, and she returns to the microphones.

"Jeremy can take a few more questions, but he needs a moment first, which I understand."

The camera cuts back to Kissy Wong at the 6 o'clock news desk.

"That was the first half of the press conference interview with one of the victims of Vancouver's shocking tent city terror attack. We'll have the other half after running down the basics of what we know so far, in point form. Over to you, Rich-"

Ken watches as the news camera cuts to a friendly-looking, brown-haired man. With a manic smile on his face, the otherwise stiff fellow has a nice suit, standing in front of a large screen with the words "Worldwide News" splashing across it.

"Good evening everyone, this is what we know so far."

Rich points with his finger towards the screen behind him, and the words "White male" popping on the screen, followed by "25 to 35," and more text as he points.

"The profile fits. This man is probably a white male, between 25 and 35 years old. He is probably employed in a

tech or office job, is a fan of sports, is perhaps a former cadet or has taken basic military training, rides a bicycle, rides a longboard. He wore distinctive shoes- perhaps the biggest clue so far."

Ken's eyes bug out of his head, and he takes a sharp breath in.

"Ron Bluvbhog shoes, only one of three hundred sold on Christmas day last year. Now, many of these shoes were since re-sold online by scalpers, but police are sure to comb every lead here."

An image of Ken's shoes appears up on the screen. A gift from Allie, he having no idea they are rare, let alone only one of three hundred.

"Another clue, the suspect left several wet footprints inside the store, including an odd brown secretion believed to be feces as shown on this security camera footage. While police don't yet have any facial sketches ready for release, they believe the suspect to be five-foot-ten or six-foot-tall, well-built, -and dangerous. Call the police immediately if you have any tips on this wanted fugitive. Back to you, Kissy-"

Ken whips his laptop open, clicks the internet browser, types in Jeremy's name and adds Vancouver to the search. In moments, Ken clicks a Plebbit link that looks like a fascinating rabbit hole. Or perhaps, in this case, a squirrel hole.

*comment posted 6:11 PM by /u/big_chonk_squirrel:
honestly, the vigilante should get the order of canada with what they blew open with their video upload, keep reading ill tell u why*

wow isn't that funny that jeremy hollander, step-son of UBC professor who owns 4 west side homes, is homeless, hmm

i check instafame and he's in the background of party photos from this summer with his arm around the daughter of one of Vancouver's most wealthy families... hmm also a bit of a pickle that the two well-dressed thugs spotted on video were with city councillor peter talbot, hmm, who is also the head of the board of vancouver SROs, hmm, that same UBC prof who is jeremy's step dad is married to the chair of the BC housing committee n meets with the SRO board, oh and one detail the news forgot i guess is this man, the guy hit in the leg that night and treated on-scene

<http://img.hosturimage4u.com/A592Z.jpg>

hmmm that's career criminal joeseph bungol

oh hmmm let's satallite view his property in surrey oh but it is in his brother's name

<http://img.hosturimage4u.com/G31XP.jpg>

oh wow what are those blue and red things in his backyard from august, oh hmmm maybe i'll drive by

<http://img.hosturimage4u.com/T259R.jpg>

oh wow looks like there are seacan after seacans full of bike parts and when i tracked these seacans they are going to China, shipping the whole can back for \$300 and the shipping manifesto shows they are insured for 50k... but wait, there's more...

<http://img.hosturimage4u.com/ZX53Q.jpg>

wow that's an interesting pest control van why's it full of

bike parts, computers and tools

<http://img.hosturimage4u.com/HB99J.jpg>

and there is the same pest control van outside ten different SROs and there is ur stolen bike to profit pipeline, folks...oh hmmm who is profiting with the status quo?

follow the money people

Ken's jaw drops.

"Jeremy, you little shit," Ken mutters, flashing back to when he pushed Ken off his own bike and left him standing on the sidewalk. Recalling that feeling, like a powerless moron, leading him to be in the most fucked-up situation of his life.

Ken clicks the reply button:

Spoiled prick Jeremy gets what he fucking deserves

Refreshing the page, more and more comments appear congratulating big_chonk_squirrel on such excellent reporting. Anecdote after anecdote pouring in from Plebbitors saying they, too, had run-ins with similar gangs. Some express disgust at the nepotism; others state seeing suspicious trades vans with loads of bike parts inside. Ken giggles as everyone describes how the thieves deserve every last bit of the beating and more. The moderators prune in real-time, but the comments keep coming. People blabbing about Jeremy, all verifying that he's a rich kid from the west side and notorious for playing crust punk on Commercial drive and being a pickup artist of sorts. The excitement about the truth coming out is more than Ken can handle, and his hands begin to tremor.

comment posted 6:27 PM by /u/big_chonk_squirrel:

Imfao whoever was stupid enough to do this crime in those rob bluvbhogs shoes is sooooo fucked, what a dumbass, easiest case evar for the cops lol

Ken's heart flutters, the inside of his mind spinning up anxious blueprints.

The cops will catch him, for sure.

This is it, kaput, finished.

His couch is suddenly uncomfortable, sending Ken to his kitchen to visit an old friend. Opening the freezer drawer and peering at the cold vodka bottle, nerves or hallucination, it begs him to drink it entirely. Flashes in his mind of toilet bowl hugs, thinking of the potential hangover tomorrow works to temper his desire. Lifting the bottle out and helping himself to a couple big swigs- enough to keep his hands still.



MISTAKES

Ken can't sleep. He finds himself pacing again, this time in his kitchen at 5 AM, wondering if the people upstairs have noticed anything weird. Did they see him sneaking around at night? Did he leave anything lying around on the property? Throwing on a coat and some shoes, Ken sneaks out the back door, across the stone path, and into the garage.

Shining his phone light around, he's left a bunch of crap everywhere; one of his older project electric longboards leans against a wall in the open.

"Hmm," he grumbles.

Taking one of the battery packs plugged into the wall nearby, he stuffs it in his footlocker. Next, digging through his hardware drawer, putting aside a piece of orange rope when he finds it. Plugging the battery pack into his older, more-beat-looking black longboard with the orange wheels, the board lights up and shows it's ready. Exiting the side door to his garage, he saunters down the dark alley carrying the board under his arm, turning it off before sliding it under a shrub at the end of the block.

Walking back home, Ken sits in his kitchen, wondering if he is too paranoid. He spends his morning trying to clean up his

house with little luck. After getting dressed and looking passably professional, he is on his way to the bus stop.

Ken is nervous, and when he is nervous, he can't hold his hands still, or when it gets bad, he can't even stand in one spot. After pacing around the bus stop and realizing the people waiting with him notice his uncontrollable fidgeting, he decides to walk to work that morning. Every time the evidence pops into his mind- the shoes, his face goes flush, his heart skips a beat. Sometimes, when his anxiety surges back, the tremor in his hands is joined by a metallic taste in his mouth. Taking deep breaths and focusing on being in the moment, Ken takes a break on the Cambie street bridge to appreciate the view. A clear and sunny morning, the cloudless blue sky and rising sun with Grouse mountain in the distance provide a beautiful vista. Science World in the foreground, Mount Baker and its magnificent snowcap is a sentinel far to the east.

"And, that's why I live here," Ken says to himself, walking towards work.

A few minutes later, he is crossing Pacific boulevard; the parking lot of the nearby stadium, BC Place, is empty. The news speaks daily of new coof protocols and the ever-evolving rules to avoid catching the cough. The rise in case numbers keeps Allie so busy at work. He hopes the illness and coverage about it can push the tent city attack from the headlines. Apparently, older folks are getting hit hard by the latest variant, and they have to cancel more public events. Crossing the street, Ken watches as figures mill about under the tunnel behind the stadium, utterly stuffed with tents and people.

He sighs and walks on.

Arriving at work, Ken approaches the front desk for a morning laugh, but Bob's chair is empty; in his place, a piece of

paper is taped to the security booth.

for emergencies, call 1-604-420-6969

Ken steps back from the desk, noticing how quiet the typically busy lobby is before pushing the lift's button for the ride up to work.

Up he goes, the elevator doors opening to his open-concept workspace, the standard din of chatter strangely absent. He looks around; a handful of people in what used to have a hundred little worker bees buzzing about at any given moment.

Walking over to Suzi's desk, all of her family photos and trinkets she has typically on her desk are gone, and she's nowhere to be found. Back at Ken's own desk, he opens his email; a massive company bulletin greets him, it being so long it takes an hour to read. New rules imposed by the government, they're mandating masks and issues a general work-from-home order. Many more people are getting sick now, some developing severe breathing problems due to a new variant of the virus, Charlie Kilo India Tango. This time, it isn't just old people anymore. The government must take measures to control the spread, and Rise Crane is going above and beyond to protect everyone.

Ken stares at the last line in the massive email announcement.

Together, we'll keep everyone safe.

Ken gets to his feet and looks around, the place nearly empty, sitting back down to whisper to himself.

"So, like, I can go home?"

Reading through the email, Ken now understands they're

assigning him more work than average. With half the staff laid off and the others working from home, he has dozens and dozens of emails, quotes, replies, and bookings to work through.

3:30 PM rolls around fast, and Ken is mainly done for the day. No priority flags remain on his task list, his boss absent and with nobody to watch him. Time to sneak out, but not before setting his computer to send an automated email saying he's leaving at 5 PM.

Down the elevator and Ken walks by Bob's empty chair. He misses his impersonations, dumb face, and nearly always positive humour. The old man sharing so many corny one-liners, Allie laughing so hard on their first date to some of Bob's dumbest jokes that Ken stole without prejudice. Out of the building and up the street, Ken heads towards Fudson's Way, feeling his heart rate increase.

He must get his dirty shoes back.

The scent section of Fudson's Way perfume department always tickles Ken's nose. He finds himself with the sniffles by the time he reaches Floor 6, Menswear. He approaches the shoe section with a fake smile.

"Uhh, hi, just looking for Samantha?" Ken's hands are in his pockets, hoping he isn't noticeably fluttering.

"One moment- ah! Here she is-" The Latin man steps away to help another customer as Samantha comes around the corner from the stock room.

"Good afternoon; how can I be of assistance?" Speaks Samantha, in her most sing-songy of voices, so smooth to his ears.

"Yeah, I- uh, I- last week, I mean, the other day I

purchased some new shoes, see, the dog- well, not my dog, uh- my girl-"

"You're not getting them back." Samantha's facial expression doesn't break from her perfect smile.

"Yeah?"

"No."

Ken stands there dumbfounded.

"I won't tell." Samantha's green eyes and red hair glow in the muted illumination of the men's boutique.

"T-t-tell?"

"Yes, tell."

Ken turns bright red.

"What do you mean, tell?"

Samantha puts her arms on the countertop, lowers her head, and whispers.

"You're in no position to make demands; I could freak out right now and say this crazy terrorist is threatening me over his shoes. Shoes, which are evidence of Canada's biggest hate crime."

Samantha smells of lilac.

Ken blinks.

"I want in."

Ken blinks twice.

"I'm keeping the shoes, and give me your phone number to make sure they're safe."

"My phone number?" Ken asks, mouth agape.

"You're going to be my stuntman; I have a little something in mind for someone like... you."

A man in a suit walks up.

"Hey Sam, have you seen Gillian? Is she-"

"She's back in outerwear, opposite side of the floor,"

Samantha replies to the man, her beautiful white teeth like ivory pillars.

Samantha turns back to Ken, dropping the smile.

"Your number," she says, no more sing-songy tone.

"I- I didn't come here to be-"

"Listen, asshole, your number, I'm not fucking around."

Samantha tilts her head in a menacing way for such a pretty face.

Ken takes a pen from the countertop and grabs a nearby torn price tag, writing his number on it before throwing it at Samantha.

"I don't know who you think you are," Ken says, his scowl coming out, "but I'm not some criminal, ok? So you- you ever think that someone has to take a stand?" Ken's head whips around, seeing if anyone notices his outburst.

"Anyone? huh?" Ken lowering his voice even more, leaning in closer.

"Save your excuses; you are going to await my instructions tonight, or these shoes are turned into the cops, got it?"

Samantha plants an elbow on the counter, resting her chin in her palm, smiling in a sarcastic but cute way-confusing Ken on what to say next.

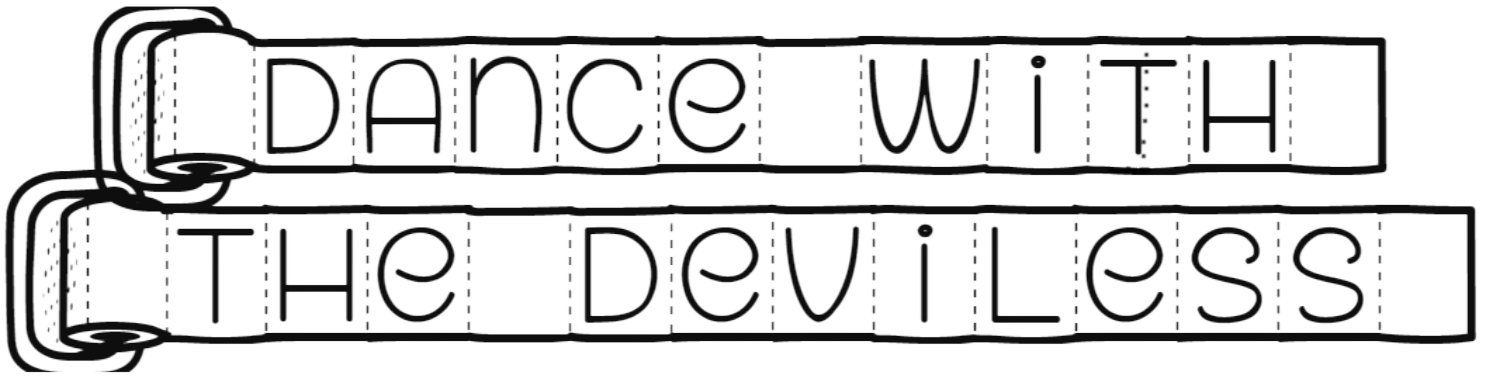
"Hey Raul," Samantha shouts out, "do we have the new crocs in size 12?"

"Crocs? You kidding? Try the mall for that."

"Sorry, sir, we just don't have what you're looking for. Wish I could help."

Samantha blinks her thick eyelashes at Ken, smirking.

Ken stares in her eyes, stepping backwards slowly, his face unsure of what expression to have- turning to leave for a long, rainy bus ride home.



DANCE WITH THE DEVILESS

Pacing back and forth in his basement suite, Ken's hands shake enough that he finds himself pouring another glass of ice-cold vodka to steady himself.

Her text messages are clear and very precise; Ken rehearsing her commands in his living room for over an hour now. Splashing his face with cold water and combing his hair, he eyes himself in the mirror before putting on his black toque. It matches his black mask, black vest, black protective gloves, and armoured motorcycle pants. Ken breathes hard, throwing kicks, punches, and he keeps moving to fend off overwhelming anxiety. Standing in the mirror, Ken eyeballs himself again and wonders if his tent city terrorist outfit is a bit too conspicuous.

Ken throws some quick combo punches in the mirror and practices for speed, working up a sweat, throwing some knee strikes and side-kicks out the open bathroom door. Then, flashes in his mind back to provincial judo championships during high school, a 2nd place finish to a cheater he should have beat.

"I have to do this," Ken says, walking around his basement suite, hyper-aware of the illegal nature of planning an ambush. Triple-checking he has everything, he's ready to go.

Ken quietly exits his door, hops the fence, and leaves the neighbour's heavily wooded yard instead of his own. He sneaks along their low wall to avoid the other neighbour's garage camera. Down the alley and turning to the shrub on the corner by the fire hydrant, Ken reaches in and finds the orange nylon cord. He yanks it to retrieve the electric longboard that he stashed during a bout of paranoia.

He's soon swiftly riding through the streets of Vancouver on the way to 3rd beach.

Sticking to the side streets and shadows, Ken passes a few roving cop cars without being spotted, or at least without being chased. He wonders, just how much of a priority catching the Tenticity Terrorist is for the VPD?

Ken jumps on the seawall through Coal Harbour and zips around, giving a wide berth to the few late-night stragglers he encounters. Breathing a sigh of relief when he's alone, he's never seen a cop patrol on the seawall this late. He slips his night-vision goggles off his forehead, turns them on, and can spot a few people concealed among the trees- probably up to no good, he reckons. It is peaceful on the seawall while snaking through the scenic route—the blinking of harbour lights reflect off the water, the sails of the Pan Pacific building colour-shifting on the horizon. The industrial beauty of the Lion's Gate Bridge underbelly is lit up with bright white spotlights.

Ken stops before the beach, climbing up the steep and forested slope from the seawall to the closest road. Pausing to make sure he isn't being followed or watched, he takes a path leading towards the closed concession stand. Ken sticks to the shadows, carrying his longboard, reaching the edge of the paved sidewalk lit by an overhead streetlamp. He hides his means of escape next to a bench behind a garbage can and a

recycling bin.

Checking his watch, it is 2:55 AM.

Her instructions are clear. At precisely 3 AM, she is going to walk across the beach. Her online stalker will show up, and Ken will hit him in specific locations for maximum injury- to send a message. Her instructions are disturbing; precise in the damage he needs to inflict, in what order, and where to stand.

Ken ducks behind the garbage can, and he can see Samantha walk across the dark beach. Faint orange light from a nearby lamp on the path illuminates the first few logs lying in parallel on the sand. Samantha prowls around on the shadow's edge, her ghost-like white dress; she moves and sways as if in a trance. The after-midnight ballerina glides across the beach with a graceful gait.

Ken holds his breath.

The lady in white moves around the beach, prancing between the logs and even jumping on one and throwing her head back, stretching her arms out to perform a backflip off it. Ken watches in awe as the woman paces across the beach in her seductive routine. A figure steps from the shadows on the distant end of the beach and approaches her.

Ken skulks along in the darkness and moves to the figure's flank, the stranger now closer to the lady in white. She continues her little dance, oblivious to her surroundings and relying on Ken for her safety. Every move she makes is agile and smooth on the lumpy sand surface; her slinky dress blows in the ocean breeze.

Sneaking across the paved bike lane, Ken jumps over the railing to the beach and silently stands behind the figure; the stranger stands ten paces from Samantha. Lifting the corners of her white dress up, the moonlit angel bathes in the lunar glow.

Ken pulls up his night vision goggles and makes eye contact with Samantha; she's smiling right through him. She nods commandingly. Turning her head, she makes a clicking motion with her hand.

A small LED panel lying against a nearby log flicks on; it gives her an eerie bluish-white hue with the full moon overhead.

"A sacrifice, oh Luna," Samantha croons, arching her back and lifting her hand, palm up, towards the sky.

Her instructions are clear.

When she speaks, he attacks.

Ken springs into action- he runs along the beach and gains momentum for a devastating blow.

First, a kick to the back of the leg. This drops the stranger into the sand and onto his knees.

Second, a kick to the spine, sending the man into the sand on his belly.

Third, multiple hard kicks to the kidneys force him to roll over.

Ken grabs the man by his long, curly hair, ready to deliver the required 10 punches to his sand-covered face.

The first punch causes a spray of spit and coughing as the stranger inhales some beach.

The next punch breaks his nose; the next eight sends more spit, sand, and blood flying all over.

Standing above the stranger writhing in pain and convulsing, Ken's work is complete. Pity washes over him, and he regrets Samantha's grim task; Ken walks backwards from the brutal scene. Turning to look at the log where he expects Samantha, instead, Ken spots a figure in black lingerie, the dress thrown to the ground beside her. She uses her index

fingers to make devil's horns and flicks them rhythmically, her eyes cross hideously with her pink tongue extending out. Drool drips glisten on her barely covered chest.

Her arms extend above her head, the tight black lingerie-clad Samantha jumps off the log to strike, mounting the injured man and releasing a high-pitched cackle.

His right hand sore and his glove wet, Ken stands in shock, noticing a red blinking light of a large digital film camera set up near a log and plugged into a small tablet. The focus is perfectly set on the screen, smears of crimson blood on Samantha's taut body. Her chest wet and shiny under the moonlight, she writhes around on the beaten man's lap in full HD video.

Ken looks up from the tablet screen long enough to watch her stunning red hair swish when she throws her head back to let out a howl; looking down at the man, she punches him a few times. Ken steps closer to the tablet screen to see donation notifications pop up so fast- he can barely read the dollar amounts.

She looks into the camera with a splatter of blood on her pale face.

"Remember, sending money only makes you a fan. I need more from you; I need your dedication. One hundred of you can be my knights, and seven of you- my supreme gentlemen."

Winking and blowing a kiss at the camera, Samantha crosses her eyes and reaches down. Pulling her hand back up, she smears herself in blood, sticking out her tongue to drool, twisting herself into that same menacing cross-eyed expression.

The destroyed man's face is a mess of sand, hair and blood. His bloated nose curves to one side, crooked and gory; his lips both swollen and lumpy. He opens his eyes and turns

his head, staring with a cracked-tooth smile. Ken, recoiling in shock, stumbles backwards- never breaking eye contact with the bloody and familiar face. Samantha gyrates in ecstasy on the man's lap, moaning, making unearthly, guttural noises.

Running down the beach, Ken skids onto the paved bike lane; he can hear Samantha howling once more as he grabs his stashed longboard. He bolts away full tilt, hands shaking, a tingling, icy sweat on the back of his neck. The dark forest of the park flies by, Ken's mind replays her sadistic laugh. The road's white lines whizzing past as he hurries down the street, only noticing the smear of blood on him under the bright lights at Burrard and Pacific. Stopping at the foot of the Burrard street bridge for a red light, he stares at the gore covering his chest.

"Damn," Ken grimaces, a tooth sticks out from the knuckle of his sap glove.

A black car rolls by onto the bridge, its brake lights come on unexpectedly, and it slows down.

Ken holds his breath.

"Oh shh-"

The car's brake lights turn off; it creeps along the bridge deck and disappears over the hump in the middle.

The light goes green.

Ken races up the road before jumping back onto the seawall to avoid any more witnesses; he puts the night vision goggles back on for safety. Dodging a massed group of tents, he cuts across and through Olympic Village- everywhere is a scattering of garbage. Zero normal people wander about at this hour. His late night tour of downtown features random screams, shadowy figures under unlit awnings and carts full of dubious cargo pushed by those with hunchback posture. A low-

hanging mist makes the ride creepy and quiet, save for distant shouts and the whine of his electric longboard.

He stops under the Cambie street bridge to rest, leaning his board against the seawall railing. Ken gazes back out over Vancouver, the colourful skyscape he's known all his life reflects in the water. What is he doing? How did he think anything good would come of this?

Looking at his blood-stained gloves, his outlaw longboard, thinking about the "yeehaw" phrase. It is his trademark of his early 20's, now evidence against him. His friends know about his longboard, too, another loose end. All this, for what?

Ken chuckles softly to himself, sighing afterwards.

All this, over a bike.

Looking out over the view, maybe, just maybe, getting that one bike back will help restore some pride to this city. Growing up in his hometown, never in a million years would Ken believe things could get this bad- the city where he enjoyed a magical childhood.

Ken recalls as a kid, the city didn't have bad people everywhere. The Christmases he remembers when young, the warm, inviting windows of the Woodward's building full of Lego displays and other magical holiday themes- the experience a complete winter wonderland. His mom always taking him to have a yummy chocolate malt in the basement.

A warm sensation envelopes him, and it is gone.

Taking off, thirty kilometre-per-hour winds streak tears across his face. Ken, trying his best to forget the redheaded mistress in black, shudders from intrusive visions. The redhead sorceress, smearing herself in blood and making faces like the devil's own debutant. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people were watching her dance, live on the internet, all witnesses to

his brutal contribution to her vicious show. If she's now involved with him on video, there's no way she will turn him in; but-

She still has the shoes.

Later in bed, Ken can't sleep no matter how much vodka he drinks. He tells himself that she doesn't want him busted, having committed blackmail herself and ordering him to assault another human being. She's just as guilty.

He'll refuse her if she ever comes calling again. Ken drunkenly fumbles around, opening his phone; he eventually discovers how to block her number and lies back down to stare at the ceiling.



Ken is lying low at work.

It's not very busy anyway, due to the ongoing, unfolding and shifting global health goalposts. First, you didn't have to wear a mask. Then, a mandate for two weeks. Now it is daily updates of case numbers and scary charts. The media constantly hammering it into you; either cover your face- or expect exclusion.

Every channel on TV and the radio is filled with talk of another wave of another variant of another even more deadly mutation. After running through the alphabet, each strain's name becomes more technical than the last; most people refer to it as the coof.

Over the previous 6 weeks, Suzi's mouth has blabbered on with endless gossip, more talk of layoffs and of people working from home with irregular hours. Ken kind of likes his job, so he is the first to show up and is the last to leave, strategically placing a few bigger plants on his desk to hide behind while working- no distractions. He has been staying until 5 PM most days, and his supervisor Azmina also warms to him again after being thrown under the bus so publicly by Seth weeks ago.

His hair cut short with a clean-shaven face, all traces of

wounds gone from his handsome-again mug. Shoulder pain plagues him occasionally, a bit sore when he sleeps on it wrong. He is managing, albeit with more potato-based intoxicant than his girlfriend would care to know about.

It is Friday; Ken plans a lovely relaxing Saturday with Allie, a hike in lighthouse park with Sparky, afterwards, a trip to Kypro's greek for dinner capped off with a romantic stroll along sunset beach. She'll love it so much.

"Creme, sugar?"

Suzanne walks up with a tray of coffees; she puts one down for Ken, an unofficial opener for gossip hour.

"Aw, thanks, that's so kind," Ken remarks with a smile, taking a couple of creams and one sugar from her tray.

"You wouldn't believe what I had to do to get these, okay- first- the debit machine was down, so I had to take out cash, which- naturally- there was a lineup. This is after I had to step over a guy passed out on the sidewalk. Then, when I was in the lineup, there was a save-the-old-growth Pixie creek march that went by- everyone yelling, waving signs- the baristas stopped for ten minutes to watch. Okay, so- I order the coffees, pay, leave- it's been like thirty minutes for my break. I walk outside, and there's this lineup of shiny pickup trucks and guys leaning out windows, horns honking- I turn my back for a second, then get the shit scared out of me by a huge train horn and- I drop my frap!"

"Coffee down!" Ken says, taking a sip of the rich and perfectly roasted hipster coffee. Even the cardboard ring around the hot cup has an exquisite texture, like the elbow of a well-worn professor's coat.

"-so then, I wait in line and get my frap- I finally get out of there and get back to my desk- no caramel."

"No caramel? Oh nooo-" Ken raises his eyebrow, grinning.

"Stop messing with me, Ken, you know it's Friday, my routine- I need it to work in this shithole- I can't believe they're making me come in at all!"

Suzanne laughs and snorts, motioning around to the semi-empty office.

Ken has another sip of the exquisite java, closing his eyes to savour the moment.

"Pretty good, huh?"

"My compliments to the barista-" Ken raises his cup up to cheers a coffee-less Suzanne. Complex notes of upper-shelf hipster coffee stimulate his tongue as caffeine infiltrates his mind, releasing dopamine.

His prefrontal cortex lights up enough to make a dutch rave jealous.

"Hey, no fair-"

Ken drinks, a smile spreading from ear to ear.

"You going back to get another?" Kens asks a pouting Suzanne.

"I can't- Azmina is watching the clock. I know she's going to deduct it as an hour because I came back four minutes past the half-hour- so... that's why I came to chat with you!"

Suzanne leans against the bookcase, poking her head to the side of one of Ken's tall plants.

"Well, shoot-" Ken checks the clock. Not moving anywhere for hours, his butt is numb.

"I need to stretch my legs. I've been sitting here since seven- I'll grab one for you, but what exactly do I order?"

"Aww, really? That's sweet of you- glad someone appreciates the goodies-Bill in accounting just bitched that I didn't have stevia, can you believe it?" Suzanne rolls her eyes.

"Bill? Isn't that the guy with-"

"Yeah, the unibrow, he always looks mad, probably because he is!"

Ken chuckles as Suzanne holds a black pen up to her mock-scowling forehead.

"I need stevia! Where's my stevia? Did you forget my stevia? I only drink coffee with stevia!" Suzanne huffs and puffs, shaking her dainty fist around, a good impression of how Bill walks and talks.

"You're pretty good at that," Ken chuckles.

"Oh- don't tell him, he'd rage- Seth too, I once did an impersonation of him, he poured a frappuccino on my keyboard," Suzanne laughs, "-triggered!"

Ken stifles another laugh, a fake cough hiding it.

"Seth's a dick, for sure-"

"-well, thanks- ahem," Ken clears his throat, putting the cup down, clicking a spreadsheet on his screen to type a bit, reaching over to check his voicemail.

"So-" Suzanne never takes a hint as she has a sip of her coffee, "you hear about Bob at the front desk?"

Ken waits more than a moment to answer in a slightly annoyed tone.

"No."

"Sorry, I- I was going to ask Seth, but I think his Crohn's disease is acting up; he's real pissy lately."

"Crohn's? Look- that's none of my business, really."

"Yeah- he didn't tell you? I guess it's a bit embarrassing, having a broken butt- I mean, he can't even eat hardly anything-"

"Hey Suze- listen, I have to-"

"Kenneth, you used to be my main-gossip-man; what

happened, bruh? They shut down the mall food court, and now you can't spill the tea because we're not eating yaki sobas anymore?" Suzanne giggles and sips her coffee, "-okay, look, Bob's gone, they didn't need him after the coof hit, and everyone worked at home, right? -well, they-"

"Do I really care?" Ken mutters half-jokingly, his mind filling with some of Bob's best one-liners and memories of Bob's goofy but friendly attitude. Other than Suzy, he is the only other person he regularly chats up in the building. The reminiscing, Suzy's blabbering, the amount of work he had to do- is all rushing at him at once.

"Yes Ken, you won't even believe this- have a seat right over there, please, type of shit!- you- you remember when those guys in Surrey, what were their names, the snatch creepers? No- creep snatchers! Remember all those busted pervs on the news?"

Ken clicks and types away without replying, his brow furrowing deeper.

"Well, they found kiddie porn on Bob's security computer. I mean, it was just one image- but someone in the IT department reported it- and put him on blast on social media. If that wasn't enough- someone from the creep snatchers filmed Bob coming out of his place, embarrassed him so bad. Happened just back that week you were sent home for your fuckup- as soon as management saw his face on the news, he was gone. Then, just the other day, I saw him begging! He's not getting any benefits- can you believe that, begging in front of the building you used to work in?"

Ken looks up from his screen.

"What?"

"Yeah- so- he couldn't get the coof benefits, what is it

called, the Coof Universal Cash Kindness Stipend- because they fired him for misconduct, he couldn't get employment insurance, and nobody is hiring- so I- I gave him the cash I had on me-"

Suzanne rambles on and on about homeless people and how they smell, now going on about the fantastic pad thai she had while-

Ken spaces out, thinking about all the friendly laughs he has had with Bob while working at Rise Crane. Shortly after meeting Allie, he starts working there. The jovial security guard listening intently when Ken tells him all about the new fantastic woman he's met. Bob recommends a romantic restaurant date and suggests a place Ken never heard of; that night ends up a smashing success. After Ken sleeps over at Allie's for the first time- the next day, he recalls high-fiving Bob in the lobby that morning.

"Where's he now?"

"Who?"

"Bob-"

"I don't know, I mean, I felt awful for him; he doesn't really have any family and just rented, so at his age, what's he going to do?"

Ken opens his desk drawer; a \$10 Timmy Ho's gift card is staring him in the face.

"Yeah- uh- sucks," Ken mutters, closing the drawer and sighing- moving his hand to type some gibberish quickly as Azmina's heels click-clack as she walks over.

"So Ken, is that quote going to be ready soon?"

He hasn't finished it yet; her tone of voice tells Ken she knows.

"Yeah, couple minutes, just waiting for an email from

accounts receivable-"

Azmina smiles at Ken as she walks past his desk to the kitchen, ignoring Suzanne.

"Get this, Ken-," Suzanne leans in, "-so IT just discovered something, that kiddie porn? Bob didn't even download it; someone transferred it on the network, and Bob took the blame for it-"

Ken frowns, "Someone here?"

"Yeah, had to be; Vlad in IT was sure of it; he'll look into it next week when more people are working from home."

Ken looks back at the clock, nearly two.

"Listen, if you figure out how to get ahold of Bob, let me know- okay?"

Ken stands up and grabs his coat, having another long pull of his coffee while making eye contact with Suzanne before smiling.

"What am I getting again?"

"I like a mint chocolate frap with no whip and extra caramel with the walnut sprinkles," Suzanne replies.

"That's not a coffee; that's a sundae."

"I know, it's so good!"

Ken rolls his eyes with a grin, heading for the elevators.

Ken vaguely remembers where Suzanne's favourite hipster coffee shop is; he's walking East from Burrard Street towards the stadium where several boutique stores are. What is the name again- Spinner! That's right, the odd little narrow building with orange wood and industrial finishings. The font they chose for the sign is really slim and minimalist. If they ever go under, a dog-sweater company or beard-oil emporium could change the logo and move right in.

Downtown is a little louder than usual; he thinks the

sounds of amplified speakers and a crowd can be heard in the distance- probably the art gallery. Honking horns and roaring diesel engines also reverberate periodically between the glass and concrete of Vancouver's densest urban core.

The streets are busier too, Ken notices when he reaches Granville, a flood of people walking towards the art gallery holding signs-

"Hey, buddy-" A gruff voice calls out.

Ken looks around.

"Hey- bud- mask up-don't be a coof goof."

A rough-looking man with a mask and high-viz vest pushes a blue face cover with yellow elastics against Ken's chest.

"W-who are you guys?"

"Look buds- we're the Whalley chapter of the Surrey Creep Snatchers-" the man points to a patch on his vest, then turns to point at a group of a few dozen vested men. They're carrying stacks of masks and handing them out.

Ken's hands come up; he takes the mask, looks around, and sees nearly everyone wearing one, so he puts it on.

"Thanks, man- we're in this together, for a moment, I thought you were one of the Ronald Drump supportin' assholes up the block- fuckin' goooo-fs are going to get us locked down even more. Selfish assholes, bro!"

Ken shakes his head, slipping the mask over his face.

"Thanks," Ken says, eager to just get the coffee and back to the office, his legs feeling a bit better after sitting since breakfast. Maybe he'll take a longer route back for a little more exercise.

Up the block and past the Church, Ken spots the bohemian coffee shop in the distance, a small lineup out the door with everyone several feet apart.

Ken steps out to cross the vast, one-way street just as the light turns green in the distance. Several hulking black Dodge Rams rush towards him, honking their loud horns with diesel engines revving up.

"Shh--shoot!" Ken sprints for the curb as the trucks rip by him, followed by a parade of Range Rovers, BMWs, and very enthusiastic men yelling out the windows.

Ken can feel himself begin to shake, stopping under a tree and taking a few deep breaths, his heart rate slows again, and he can walk into the lineup. Several mask-clad people are on their phones, and a particularly agitated bald man paces aggressively.

"Fucking Indian farmers," the bald man says while turning to the guy next to him, "-my ears are still ringing- if I have tinnitus, I'm going to fucking sue their brown asses!"

Ken rolls his eyes and keeps waiting, the line moving fast; the cashier is soon taking his order with only two people allowed inside at a time.

Ken can see even more people marching outside the cafe, these ones holding signs up that made no sense to Ken. Birds Aren't Real reads one, Bring Back Firefly reads another, Free Britney reads a third, the crowd meandering in the direction of the art gallery.

Waiting for the light to turn, Ken holds his drink tray loaded with Suzanne's essential afternoon treat. He has another coffee for himself, too- the pour-overs are just that good, and his coffee addiction is that bad. Looking across the street, there is a break in traffic, and Ken decides to jog across, walking another block up to Georgia street to turn right. Not the quickest way back to the office, but instead, past the art gallery to satisfy his curiosity.

A few blocks farther and Ken comes up the slight rise at Granville and Georgia to look down at a massive crowd in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Police traffic control looks utterly overwhelmed by the sea of humanity; their signals are useless to cars trapped by so many protesters. Terry Joy, a notorious religious town-crier, stands with a tight group of street preachers wearing red crosses over white tunics on the corner. Facing off them is a crowd of rainbow-flag wavers and moms in pink hats. Eco-warriors angry about diesel fumes and noise swarm around the giant pickup trucks, farmer banners and flags of India wave proudly. The trucks blaring their horns, the greenies surround the convoy of vehicles, and they're unable to continue. Totally outnumbered the police retreat from the crowd.

Anti-mask people waving American flags stand toe-to-toe against mask enforcers and Surrey Creep Snatchers, all wearing yellow vests and carrying sledgehammers. Serious-looking anarchists wearing black and waving red flags surround some cosplayers wearing Star Wars outfits.

With his back to the wall of a skyscraper, Ken slowly moves toward his office. The police retreating back to a SWAT-looking truck parked down the street; the crowd is completely taking over the intersection. Layers of people wearing green encircle one of the black Dodge Rams, and it catches Ken's attention. Many young and beautiful eco-warriors are moving to block them altogether; they are all green and hold signs like Raise Your Voice Not The Sea-Level, and One Earth To Love. First with a low murmur, then Ken can hear it. They all begin singing a melodious song, their hands linked together, swaying slowly back and forth, oblivious to the chaos around them.

Ken stops walking, closes his eyes and just listens.

"What a lovely, lovely harmony," he whispers.

"Excuse me- coming through-" a voice blares over a bullhorn.

Ken opens his eyes and can see a patch of red pompadour hair navigating the crowd, holding up a gold bullhorn with a camera mounted on it.

"The party is coming through, folks, stop harshin' my buzz!"

A redheaded man wearing a gold metallic tracksuit pushes through the crowd, ducking under two of the ladies' linked hands to get to the Dodge Ram. The clown-looking fellow climbs up on the bumper, then the truck's hood, the driver, still sits in his vehicle, trapped inside. He makes a disgusted face and lays on the loud horn a few times.

"Chill buddeh," the redhead pulls up his bullhorn and shouts through it.

"We are live, people! L-I-V-E Live! -Oh ya baby, we're on-stream people, the Super Steve We're High On Trees show, yeah, you know it!"

Angry voices from the crowd echo in the plaza, Ken trying to look beyond the stuck truck. Standing on his tippy-toes to see which way to walk and what's happening, Ken can't see- the eco-maidens and the clown show are blocking his sight. Distant hollering and sirens, the mob and ruckus grow in size. To Ken, it just looks like an undignified brawl; groups pushing groups as the few dozen cops visible are hightailing it back to their SWAT van.

"Wow, people, these folks need to know the healing power of... blazers! That's right folks, Super Steve is here, your host with the major mojo to keep you on your toes-so, you don't be actin' like a bozo, you feel me?"

The skinny-but-fat, handsome-yet-lanky man throws a high kick in the air; his numerous chains and beads around his neck glimmer in the light. He reaches into a man-purse under his arm. Lifting his arm back up, the redheaded weed jester tosses handfuls of pre-rolled joints into the jostling crowd.

"Livin' la 'couve el-loco!" shouts the redhead into his bullhorn. The crowd groans in response as people hunch over, searching for the free weed and pushing the eco-warriors out of the way.

"Look, I just want to go home; I'm sorry," yells the driver of the surrounded truck.

The redhead with the bullhorn spins and faces the driver, putting his bullhorn obnoxiously close to the windshield.

"Don't care, buds- yer done, yer killin' the Earth, and these ladies, oh my, these beee-'ute-if-ful ladies are here to woman-'splain to you just what kind of Earth-killing prick you and your type are like, isn't that right ladies?"

Super Steve turns to the primarily female crowd holding hands and singing softly around the truck.

"Right lay-dees?"

"My type? What do you mean, my type?" Says the driver, his Indian accent noticeable more this time.

"You know, truck-drivers, you know I meant truck-"

"I think you're racist, buddy-"

"No- no- I have brown friends," the redhead stutters, caught off-guard.

The driver of the Dodge Ram leans out of his window.

"Hey- are you people with this guy? Can I please get through?"

"No- he's not with us," one of the young ladies yells back, letting go of the woman next to her and parting the lively

crowd open.

"Guys, guys-" mutters Super Steve, fumbling with a silver fanny pack around his waist, just above his marijuana-leaf sequined codpiece that Ken just notices.

"But I have free doobies!" shouts Super Steve, lifting the second handful of doobies in the air, throwing them into the shoving and scrappy crowd below. Not realizing the Indian farm supporter is now also standing on the hood of the truck.

The Indian farmer guy taps Super Steve on the shoulder. Super Steve lifts his bullhorn up again.

"Oh- what!" he bellows, turning around to receive a pair of hands around his throat.

"Gakkk!"

The obscene redhead drops his bullhorn, cracking the windshield of the Dodge Ram, further incensing the driver when he sees it. The farmer man double-hand chokes Super Steve, throwing him off the truck's hood, maskless, into the pro-science, mandatory-mask supporters below. The Indian farm supporter kicks the bullhorn into the crowd of angry men wearing blue masks and yellow vests. They all step towards the redheaded pot jester in gold, asking him why he's not covering his plague-hole, asking him why he's out risking their grandma's life. The mask enforcers encircle him, shouting the latest Dr. Honnie Benry daily coof infection numbers. Ken hears a panicking scream over the bullhorn before it shrieks once with feedback.

It isn't heard again.

Another loud scream nearby startles Ken; he looks around.

"Ahhgh-" Yells a muffled voice- Ken spots a man in a stormtrooper costume surrounded by people wearing black.

One of several black-clad people trips him to the sidewalk, another slaps the Star Wars helmet off the lone man- the stormtrooper clearly lost in the chaos and away from Darth and the other cosplayers.

"Say it again, say it again, chud!" A large mask-wearing woman with blue dreads yells.

"Yeah, let's hear it-" Another person screams, kicking the helmet away.

The stormtrooper sits up, his hair a mess; with a frightened look on his face, he turns to the blue dreads woman and speaks.

"T-t-the empire d-d-did n-n-nothing w-ro-"

The group starts beating the stormtrooper on the ground as Ken power walks away from the rowdy scene. Over the din of the mob, he can hear a whoosh sound and a ting-ting, clouds of tear gas immediately start to billow around him. Careful to avoid colliding with the small groups of activists running in different directions, Ken ducks in a nearby alcove and flutters his stinging eyes. Police loudspeakers crackle to life, a voice demands the rioters clear out as a stampede of people rush through the street.

Ken begins to cough as smoke rises from the crowd around him. Turning to jog quick- his feet moving faster instinctively as his eyes start to burn, the coffee tray almost spilling several times. Sounds of boots and shoes rushing all around him, Ken booking it down the street away from the art gallery -all the way back to the office without a single spilled drink.

Ken delivers the frap to Suzanne with a smile; her eyebrow cocks up as she comments about how the drink tray smells funny.

"Teargas," Ken replies nonchalantly.

Back at his desk, Ken's java tooth is acting up. He still has the half cup from earlier and decides to heat it up in the kitchen to drink them simultaneously- a bit of a taste test. He strolls by Azmina's desk, who isn't there, probably scolding Suzanne for doing nothing all day. Ken approaches the well-stocked Rise Crane and Helicopter mini-cafeteria. There are a few lounge-type chairs and a big screen TV with the news on, complete with espresso machine, chips, pop, and sandwiches. Nothing nearly as tasty as re-heated local hipster gourmet coffee.

"Hey Ken," Azmina's familiar voice, she must have seen him walk in.

"Oh, hello," Ken says, turning and smiling before turning back to admire his coffee in the microwave.

He hears the local news in the background.

...defund the police moment is gaining steam, Kissy Wong, back to you...

"It's been over an hour, and I spoke to accounts receivable. You made no request for the cost of coof protocols, now- did you prepare the quote without the new coof protocol fee, or did you not finish the quote at all?"

Ken tries to remember. He stalled her earlier about a quote, for sure, but which quote is she talking about?

"I thought it was a standard 12.5% across for all the labour," Ken blurts out.

Azmina's voice shifts ever so slightly towards disappointment.

"Ken, no. That was before the new green class four lockdown we're under. Haven't you been watching the news?"

Gloves, masks, and shields for anyone working in a crane or helicopter, hourly sanitization checklists- averaging a half pack of wipes per hour, on a crew of four for a week-

Azmina pauses.

"Did you run those numbers like I asked?"

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Ken's coffee is ready.

...chief says capturing the tent city terrorist will help restore people's faith that the justice system works and that the case is now under federal control...

"Ken?"

"Uh- sorry, yes, the sanitizer we're using, it's in- uh- 45-litre jugs, right?"

"I'm- not sure-" Azmina frowns, "I asked you to run the numbers on the cost for four crew members, a standard 40 hour week, a half pack of sanitizer wipes each per hour-

Ken pulls out his phone and searches quickly for bulk sanitizer locally and finds a 20 L bucket for \$49, quickly doing the math in his head.

"We could do this for about \$200 a week per person using spray bottles and paper towels, given that we have the logistics on delivery and supply already taken care of. Even more if we water the sanitizer down."

Azmina tilts her head to the side.

"Wait, did you say two hundred?"

Azmina pulls out her phone, her long, purple nails and gold rings catching the light in the warmly lit dining area.

"...we've been charging five-dollars an hour per person,

per hour, because we use wipe-packs-"

Azmina fiddles with the calculator app, and Ken looks at the big screen on the wall. The security camera footage from the 24-7 plays again. A circle appears around his feet in the security camera footage. They play it in slow motion, the footage from the tent attack night, the blurry figure in black sneaking towards the coffee pot to poison it. The video loops over and over, zooming in on the watery brown smudge Ken's shoe leaves on the floor.

Ken holds the hot coffee in both hands, the tremors start again.

Putting her phone down, Azmina smiles and points at Ken's phone.

"I know you didn't send those emails, but you just tripled our profit on the coof protocol fee," Azmina laughs a big, hearty laugh, "-now I remember why we keep you around!"

"Heh, thanks, glad to be, uh- useful, I guess..."

Ken smiles, briskly walking out of the lunchroom, sitting at his desk; he sips his coffee, holding the cup with both hands and trying his best not to tremor. Breathing deep, counting in his mind and focusing on his breathing. He continues until three hundred before his hands no longer shake, and his heart rate is back to normal.

After a trip to the restroom for a splash of cold water, Ken finishes up his work for the most part and signs off; Azmina can take the extra thirty minutes off his cheque for all he cares.

Down the elevator and on the street, the downtown core is still a madhouse of honking, huge trucks, angry protests, and tear gas. Ken strolls down one street, the crowds and police forcing him to double back. Snaking his way to the Cambie street bridge Ken eventually makes it back home. The first

thing he does is pour himself a vodka and put his sore feet in a hot bucket of water.

"Ahhh..." Ken sinks into his couch, having flashbacks of his time spent in the Canadian reserves- the long marches are his worst memories- blisters and bullshit.

Ken dozes off a bit, the water now chilly on his feet and his vodka on the coffee table absent of any ice cubes.

Sitting in the dark by himself, he envisions Allie's happy face. She has barely enough time to eat and sleep. Lately, the hospital has been full of coof cases and needs her to pull long hours and double shifts. Sitting in the dim light of his living room, the TV off and only a lamp beside him, he wishes she could be there, snuggling up under his arm. She'd be doing her silly accents, sharing laughs, and a bucket of her favourite snack, super buttery popcorn. On their last staycation, she has been really into b-horror movies. The cheesier, the better. He loves that she is happy just being around him and doesn't need crazy plans every weekend.

Ken sighs, flipping on the TV and going right to the news; he feels his heart immediately flutter as the words SPECIAL REPORT fill the screen. The screen flashes, the text is quickly replaced by a stern-looking Kissy Wong.

"Good evening, this is a Kissy Wong, and we have breaking news in the Tent City Terrorist case,"

Ken sits up with a jolt and spills his water bucket.

"Ahh... shh--shhhoot."

"Investigators from across Canada have studied and analyzed every bit of evidence from the case. A combined one-hundred and thirty years of experience behind them with some of the leading forensic technologies available today, and their results; are shocking."

The camera cuts away to a team of people working in an office with computers before switching to a video of officers searching the park in the daytime. A couple people stand around highlighting the imprint his body made when he crashed on the grass, a photo of the dead police dog lying at the bottom of the steep grassy hill. Its neck wrenched backwards, clearly broken- then showing a couple visibly upset police officers beside a K-9 unit SUV.

"They had to show that..." Ken whispers, "friggin' media."

The screen returns to Kissy Wong standing in her power suit next to a large screen with a podium in the background, set up somewhere at Queen Elizabeth Park with the city behind it.

"Here's what we know so far about the case- forensic officers working around the clock have identified the source of the shoe secretion. They determining it is a mixture of puddle water and dog feces. Their next step is tying together the high-end, special edition Bluvbhog shoes with the correct breed matching the terrorist's poop smear. While the police have been stepping up patrols near the tent cities and keeping officers stationed at hot spots, activists have been pressuring government officials. Their frustration over what they see as a band-aid solution that has been tried, and failed, before."

The screen fills with images of mass protests at city hall, sign-waving folks of all types crowd into small offices, while another view of the outside of city hall shows hundreds and hundreds of people waving signs that read Housing Now and Defund The Police.

"Prime Minister Rudeau, on the heels of his successful seventh re-election, has assigned a special investigator and community liaison as part of a nation-wide effort to have a

better dialogue on the needs of the houseless and shelter-challenged individuals. Today, we got to meet the man in charge, decorated army veteran and lawyer, David Crunst."

The TV shows a silver-suited man walking around Queen Elizabeth park with a camera crew, police chief, and top advisors. The next shot is of housing activists gathering for a press conference at the top of the hill.

"I'd like to thank the chief for hosting us today," David Crunst speaks in a kind, soft voice, "Also, Dr. Aziz Ross-Singh, for that warm introduction as well."

Crunst turns and waves to a few people off-camera.

"Many thanks to yogis-for-peace Zelowan Nhargau, and thank you all for the opportunity to speak on these violently settled lands."

Turning to face the camera, the man in the silver suit puts his hands on the podium and leans in with a wide grip.

"When duty calls, a Canadian patriot will always stand up for what is right- and I don't speak these words lightly," the man speaks slow and methodically.

"What happened in Vancouver almost two months ago has set off a chain of events that have shaken the foundation of policing, no doubt, no doubt."

He looks around, and the police chief in the background nods her head.

"Egged on by the reckless actions of a single individual, we've seen the sharp rise of vigilantism. Citizens enforcing their own beliefs on others through violence is a crime against us all, and the very foundations of this country- the rule of law."

Crunst pauses and looks around for a moment at the crowd.

"The fundamentals of what it means to be Canadian was

just challenged, and we, the defenders of Canada, must stand on guard. We are what stands between lawless barbarism-vigilantes- and our loved ones in all communities."

People in the crowd clap.

"It doesn't matter if you are rich-, poor, good- or bad, you are respected under the law. You don't get a trial by some maniac in a park at night- that is not how our society should operate, or will operate- not on our watch!"

A few more people clap.

"I- I shoulda just bought another bike," Ken whispers in his dark basement.

"Being Canadian means a few things to me," The man raises one fist in the air and looks around at the crowd, a smile on his face and nodding his head.

"I'm proud, I'm proud to be a Canadian- here's why-"

Crunst points his index finger in the air.

"Number one, in this country, you are free to be whoever you want to be. Isn't that beautiful?"

Ken frowns as he nods.

"Number two, we follow the laws, even when we think we're not being watched, and-"

The man laughs and turns and points at the police chief.

"I know what you say already - look for the helpers! It's a beautiful quote, you're right- you're right, it is-"

The man laughs into the microphone.

"Whoops," he mutters.

"The number two is, we respect the law, we follow the law- the data proves we are, more than over, complying and behaving ourselves. This- panic- of vigilantism, it is just fueled by the ease at which video is shared- everyone, everyone here has a phone, am I right?"

The crowd murmurs.

"The number three," the man holds up three fingers.

"The number three is that we believe in good. We believe this city, the Canadian people, are all inherently good. If you believe in Canada, you believe in cold mornings at the hockey rink, you believe in waiting for the bus at 6 AM to get to your classes. You believe in helping your neighbour in need- and if you have to wear a mask while doing so, well, it looks good on you, eh!"

The crowd laughs, more claps can be heard.

The man in the silver suit looks more and more animated, holding his three fingers up high in the air.

"I'm- I'm not done, people," he looks around and smiles, making eye contact with the police chief again.

"Number three, is that, despite everything you have witnessed in this city that may break your heart, all of the injustice towards marginalized peoples, the homeless; the hungry; the poor and everyone else who struggles; I want to say, we- both at the federal level and every first responder you may interact with or know, we commit ourselves to a safe and open Canada for all-"

The crowd cheers.

The man holds his palms up, looking around and nodding to the friendly crowd.

"We're going to make sure, in the future, no marginalized communities will feel unsafe. I'm proud to announce with police chief Jean Ryan- we have the tools available now to protect the city and keep Vancouver the shining jewel of the west coast."

Ken just blinks. He wants to believe in this man; his conviction and patriotism are beautiful. Leaning back on the

couch, tears begin to well up in Ken's eyes, and he is powerless to stop it.

"This city is at a turning point; that is clear to us all."

The tone of the man in the silver suit changes immediately.

"The pain, the hardship-"

"-The stories we don't hear, but that exist out there-"

"For every case, the news gives us about a young person who found their way out of the drugged-up lifestyle. For every young person that has found a way out of the prison of drug addiction-"

"Across the city, dozens of people are sleeping in a rainy doorway, somewhere, tonight. Here, in this rich, beautiful, city. People are dying, alone, from poisoned drugs."

The man lifts an arm, palm facing up, and motions over the view from the top of the park, downtown Vancouver looking urban and chic in the distance.

"The four pillars, people, the four pillars and harm reduction are the keys to combating the scourge of addiction- this disease that has cost us so much. Perhaps we've been able to turn a blind eye to it- until now. When assaults happen to our more marginalized, we are all under threat, and we will not back down. Suppose anything positive can come out of this heinous event. May it be a more dedicated, more urgent push towards full implementation of the four pillars."

A scattering of applause.

"I promise, we, the federal government, are working hard with local authorities to restore confidence in governance- to combat the scourge of drug addiction and reduce the pain of homelessness. And for that, the federal government has passed a new law in an emergency parliament, the Homeless Defence

Act. The act is a powerful tool for law enforcement. It allows for all phone records, phone conversations, and text messages of Canadian citizens to be available for federal agents to monitor. We will comb over the communications of those who fit the profile to catch the perpetrator. We will collect the evidence we need to prosecute the terrorist, and any enablers, in open court."

A few scattered claps.

"Now, if we have the time, a few questions?" Crunst asks. The camera cuts back to Kissy Wong.

"We'll have the rest of today's press conference after these messages."

Ken pushes back into his couch for a moment, letting out a heavy sigh; he tilts his head back and stares at the ceiling. Pleasant jingles of commercials drone on in the background.

Up from the couch and to the kitchen, Ken opens the freezer drawer and pours himself a glass of vodka, opening the fridge and taking out a box of juice for a chaser. Standing there, in his kitchen, Ken has drink after drink, ruminating on the crisis unfolding in his life. Trying to remember any details that might calm his mind, hoping the alcohol numbs the unpleasant details of his predicament.

Back to his couch, Ken opens his laptop and begins to search- first for anything on those shoes, a local favourite, the Bluvbhog brand is well-known and he quickly finds an article on the very model of shoe Allie bought him. "Welcome to the future of shoes," the caption reads.

LIMITED EDITION PROTOTYPE.

The X-300 is both a dress and an athletic shoe- made with carbon fibre and vegan leather. At home, around the

boardroom or on the court, the ultimate in hybrid shoes. S'all good for socially distanced dinner with the in-laws or bombing downtown on your skateboard.

Ken smiles; that skating line must have sold Allie.

The shoe became available for sale on the 21st of December, on a first-come-first-served basis. Dedicated scalpers, some camping out for a week in advance, had to have them. Others paying local housing-challenged individuals to wait in line for them made a killing reselling the shoes, both in-person and online. With a maximum of 2-pairs per customer policy, many scalpers work in teams, allowing others working with them to budge in line during the night.

A Twatter link in the article has a video that Ken clicks, the scene showing the storefront of Bluvbhog absolutely stuffed with people. Everyone is shoulder-to-shoulder, the atmosphere like a carnival with hundreds and hundreds of people.

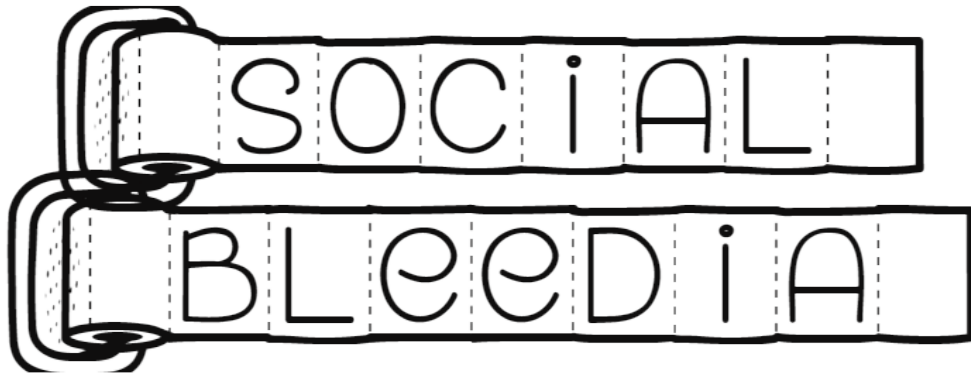
Ken smiles; Allie is never up early to shop and would never push and shove for shoes- she must have got them from a scalper.

Leaning back into his soft couch, Ken sighs and stretches his arms out, taking a deep breath- between the warmth of the vodka and his doubts that the police can track the shoes. He feels the tension ease a bit- until he remembers to check Plebbit.

Sitting up and opening his laptop again, he quickly navigates to Plebbit's Vancouver forum. As he suspects, the Tent City Terrorist Updates is a hot topic. One of the comments with the highest rating is from the same leaker as the last thread.

*comment posted 11:33 PM by /u/big_chonk_squirrel:
oh things are looking interesting now, first Trudeau
assigns his buddy to smooth things over and investigate, why?
becuz the defund the police is part of the plan, setting up a fed
cop force to replace the VPD and the feds are stalling n keep
this charade going for longer than they need to, milking the
story to show local cops incompetent, this will cover for the
massive budget increase proposed in a few years so feds look
like the heros u wait and see pulling back on policing with
defund leading to a blue flu and letting the city go wild with no
good cops anymore so the feds and govt can solve the problem
before next election with new laws new fed cops and more
money... u'll all see soon when they announce dog-testing and
roll it out like theatre LMFAO*

Ken feels his heart flutter; he jumps off of the couch, stumbling in a panic to his kitchen before whipping open the freezer drawer and gulping vodka straight.



Ken is early to work again.

He puts his breakfast down on his desk, sits down, and takes a moment to stretch out in his chair, taking a deep breath. Ken smiles, recalling how fantastic this last weekend with Allie has been. Her work schedule is exhausting, and she is more than happy to sit on the couch- enjoying cuddles and movie watching and a parade of delivery feasts. Their time outside is spent walking Sparky at nearby Crab Park; Allie is not thrilled about taking a long drive to Lighthouse Park. She's less thrilled when the nearby park has a thriving tent community.

Ken grins, feeling almost excited about fulfilling crane quotes and answering emails. On Saturday night, He and Allie sleep together in each other's arms; his heart still pumps with jubilation from that moment.

The office is quiet enough that Ken can hear each paper crinkle as he unfolds his favourite breakfast wrap. Taking 20 minutes to get in the cold and pouring rain this morning, he's about to enjoy this special bacony treat made by his favourite food truck.

Smiling with gratitude, he sighs lightly, spending a moment to appreciate everything- The soft office background

noise, his steady job, the people in his life. Picking up his phone for a second, Ken texts Allie a good morning and an emoji kiss before putting the phone back down.

Closing his eyes, Ken smells the bacon and feels the steam rise from the double-bacon keto power burrito. His mouth-watering as it opens for that first bite.

He smells a dank wool coat.

"Hey," speaks a voice.

Ken's eyes open, and his mouth shuts.

A man with a crooked nose and lumpy face with a curly bush on top pulls up a chair and sits down in front of Ken. He smiles a broken, toothy grin.

The two men stare at each other for a moment.

"Now I know what you're thinking," Seth from engineering leans in, "I'm not here to cause any problems, and I'm sorry for getting you in shit before. I had no idea you would be joining her team."

A pin drops somewhere in the office.

Seth reaches into his damp jacket, pulling out a brown envelope with a bank logo on it and puts it on Ken's desk.

Ken tilts his head and looks at the envelope for a moment.

"I don't want your money," Ken says softly.

Seth smiles.

"Yes, you do," Seth pushes the envelope towards Ken.

Ken stares at the envelope before slowly making eye contact with Seth and scowls.

"The night I didn't review your plans, I had a personal one-on-one with Mistress S, it's not like I could break that, and besides, you could have emailed someone else. Instead of being lazy and pushing it on the first engineer you saw." Seth smirks and nods his head.

Mistress S, Ken thought, just who-
Seth's face.

Samantha.

"You're going to want that money; it's your first tribute. I owe you for the week off work."

"Tribute?" Ken scoffs.

"Tribute, tithe, donation- whatever you want to call it. We all pay, some more, some less; it's up to you and your relationship with the Mistress. One hundred is the minimum, so I've got you covered for your first month," Seth pushes the envelope nearly into Ken's breakfast.

"Get- get the hell out of my face," Ken raises his voice in the quiet office and points towards the open floor of the office, "-before I make you."

Seth rolls his eyes, smiles and laughs.

"You are so fucked, Ken, so fucked," Seth laughs loud as a phone call can be heard ringing off somewhere.

Ken pushes the money envelope back to Seth's edge of the desk.

"Take your cash and leave," Ken speaks under his breath.

Seth pushes himself back from the desk and stands before adjusting his tie and smiling a big, smirky smile towards Ken.

"You're just so clueless, aren't you? You don't get it, let me, let me spell it out for you- you're her bitch," Seth puts both hands on the desk and leans forward to leer over Ken at his desk.

"A single pair of shoes makes you her bitch," Seth speaks very matter-of-factly.

"You will be donating, you will be following her instructions, and you will be participating, or the feds get the shoes, and you'll be made an example of. Now, do you get it,

stupid?"

Ken stands up and presses his forehead against Seth's angrily and forces him away from his desk, sending the chair behind Seth to the grey hardwood floor with a crash.

Unperturbed by the commotion, Seth gets back in Ken's face as the two stare each other down.

"You will take that letter and open it; there's a QR code in there; join the chatroom at 6:59 PM because the code only works for a 1-minute window."

"Hey- what's with the yelling?" Suzanne walks over and stands beside Seth.

"Nothing," Seth said, "we were just arguing over breakfast; Ken thinks McDonald's is better than this," Seth reaches down and grabs half of Ken's breakfast wrap and stuffs it in his mouth.

"Mmmph," Seth mutters, "Ken doesn't know when he has it easy," Seth keeps chewing as he talks. "Imagine, mmmmpph, this is good," Seth's lips smack together as he licks the wrap juices from his fingers after the last bite.

"Imagine making your life difficult on purpose."

Seth turns and picks up the chair behind him and puts it back in place.

"You'll want this," Seth says, pushing the envelope back towards Ken before turning to leave, "oh yeah, I also heard you have a management meeting Thursday. Have a good one-Ken!"

Seth walks off without even looking at Suzanne.

Suzanne turns her palms up and looks at Ken.

Ken looks down, the other half of his wrap looks cold, and the half Seth took contained most of the bacon. His half of the wrap resembles a strip-mine of egg whites with a few scattered

specks of meat. A tremendous pressure simmers within him.

"Ken?" Suzanne's voice soothes Ken's ears.

"Yeah, it's- sorry, been a tough morning," Ken says, sitting back down and having a bite of his getting-cold-and-soggy wrap.

Suzanne sits and leans over the desk.

"I just thought you wanted to know that I have Bob's new number; he's ok, just a little bummed out that he doesn't get to chat with his pals at work anymore."

Ken sees red-painted nails push a phone number on a piece of paper towards him.

"Maybe you need a bit of a laugh- anyway, I'm just back to get my PC- I'll be working from home from now on, it was- nice to work with you, Ken."

Ken looks up; Suzanne's extended hand is in front of him.

"Aren't we supposed to not shake ha-"

Suzanne grabs his hand and shakes it.

"Well, see you around, I guess," Suzanne says, walking backwards for a few steps before waving and turning towards her desk, grabbing her stuff, and heading for the elevator.

The paper scrap Suzy left on his desk stares at him. Picking it up and unfolding it, Ken pulls out his phone and texts the number without adding a contact.

"Hey Bob, It's Ken. Hope you're doing alright, pal."

He throws it in the wastebasket and gets back to work.

The rest of Ken's workday is quiet, the building almost entirely empty, the only other people are walking around wearing masks. Perfect for his anti-social mood. Leaving early again, Ken wonders if his management meeting Thursday has anything to do with his habit of saying he stays until 5:00. Maybe someone came by his desk after 3:30 one time and,

finding him absent, reported him. Ken sighs and shrugs; getting up, he walks to the elevator and rides it down to the street.

Ken's bus is nearly empty, and everyone is masked, except one person who refuses to wear one when asked by the bus driver.

"I'm a free-thinker, no way I'm falling for the 5G chip!" the man says, turning to walk down the aisle after paying.

"Ok, buddy," says a short man in a blue-jays cap, typing away on his phone.

The bus driver announces on the intercom.

"Please remain six feet apart; also, please wear a mask; I'm not trying to be mean. It's just the rules, thank you."

A few bus stops away, the man in the blue-jays cap laughs out loud.

"Oh buddy, you should probably get your maskless ass off the bus- I'm warning you."

"Or what?" says the maskless man, turning to look at the man in the hat.

"You'll see," he replies.

A few more blocks and the bus is nearly at Cambie and Broadway; a small group of men in construction vests wearing white masks board the bus, one in an orange vest holding his phone up.

"4:12 PM, the Cambie number 15 bus, we have an individual refusing to mask up." The orange vest man speaks into a phone in his left hand, turning and passing the bus driver without paying.

"Yeah, over there, boys!" the hatted bus passenger says, pointing at the obvious- the only maskless person on the bus.

"I did- I didn't do anything wrong, this is all just a fraud-" the man begins to blubber, standing up, chest-to-chest with

the man in the orange vest.

"Sit the fuck down," the orange vested man yells, shoving the maskless into his seat. The other few yellow-vested men step behind him, grabbing the maskless by his arms and holding them behind the seat.

"Kev, the tape," the orange vested man points with his free hand, using his phone to film a close-up shot of the maskless man's face.

"This is what we do to people endangering everyone else," says the orange vested man, putting a cloth mask on the maskless man's face. Another yellow-vested man using red duct tape to fasten it on his face, wrapping it thickly around his head.

"Mmmpphphh!" struggles the man, his arms wrapped behind him and his face, other than his eyes, completely covered in tape.

"If you don't like the tape, imagine how much people enjoy being intubated because of people like you?" says the orange vested man, turning to the other vested people. "We're done," he barks, walking back towards the driver.

"Thank you, thanks-" says the driver.

"Don't thank us," says the orange vested man, "-thank whoever had the anti-mask reporter app and tagged a violator on this bus. We'll keep showing up and keeping your commute safe!"

A few people on the bus clap as the men get off. The formerly maskless man is standing up and grasping at the tightly wound tape on his face. Gasping for air as he stumbles towards the back exit, banging loudly on the door.

"MMmmnpphhh!" he yells, slamming his fist against the window in a panic.

The bus driver opens the back door, the man trips and falls to the sidewalk, gets up, and grabs the tape on his nose and mouth. The bus slowly pulling away; Ken watches as the man falls over again and goes limp, his face cocooned under mask and duct tape. People stepping around his motionless body to pass on the sidewalk.

Ken is uneasy as he gets home. His basement suite is in an ever-increasingly foul condition, filth everywhere, and the freezer runs low on vodka.

After making some chicken wings and washing it down with some much-needed cold alcohol, Ken looks at the letter Seth gave him and opens it. A bit over a hundred dollars in cash and a piece of paper with a QR code on it.

Ken checks the clock.

6:45 PM

Going to his Kitchen, Ken pours another couple of drinks before sitting on his couch and waiting until 6:59 precisely to scan the code on his phone. The internet browser opens to a video chatroom, which Ken then streams to appear on his larger TV screen.

It requires an account to log in.

Tap here to install.

With a count-down on the screen starting at 0:59, Ken quickly taps his iPhone and follows the prompts to set a username. A Parlergram icon appearing on his phone's home screen.

Scanning the code again, Ken logs in at the main screen, his account now with authorization to the private member's area. Once inside, he can't access the chat without making an

online payment of one hundred United States dollars.

Ken grumbles, putting his SKEESA card away.

Mistress S's logo appears in the largest chat window in the online meeting, a bright and cheerful soundtrack begins to play as Ken sits in the dark on his couch. Several seedy-looking characters pop into the other chat conference windows. Eight smaller ones and one large, her black-S-in-a-circle logo on it fills the bigger screen. One fat-but-muscular, greasy-looking character in a vinyl or leather pig mask sits in front of an expensive-looking computer system smoking a cigar.

"Hey, dweebs," one of the gruff-looking construction vest guys says, "-glad to see ya'll masking up," his own voice muffled by the white carpenter's mask he wears.

One of the other men on the chat stream laughs.

"You guys see the principal we busted last week on creep snatchers? Fif-tee-five and a principal trying to meet up with a twelve-year-old boy. My homie, CreepClobber- nearly knocked 'is head off, then they picked him up and threw him into a dumpster, before tying him up, taped him to the front door of the school nude and covered 'im in old gear oil!"

"He had a heart attack two days later and died, dumbass; enjoy the next twenty years in jail when they catch you," the pigman interjects.

Ken shakes his head and watches the stream. The conversation descends into a shouting match as Mistress S's theme music plays in the background. One builder bro is on the stream waving around his 5-pound sledgehammer and pointing at the camera.

"Hey, Mr. Oinkers, we're out there 7 days a week enforcing masks; what's your fat ass doing? Handing out fursuits and putting leashes on the species-confused?"

A few people on the stream laugh.

The pig mask man calmly blows a big cloud of smoke from his cigar and removes it from his mouth.

"You see, you guys," the pigman grunts, "-I respect you because you act. You just don't do any thinking before it. You don't even understand the meaning of the word optics-"

"Optics?" the construction bro laughs, "Optics?! Classic projection bro -you wear a pig mask and loincloth- you don't shower-"

The men continue to argue as Ken walks to the kitchen to pour a glass of vodka. Looking through his fridge for some chaser- he sits back on his couch to wait for Mistress S to appear, and soon she does.

"Gentlemen- some of you more supreme than others," Samantha, or, now Mistress S, winks and adjusts her pink glittery cat ears she wears in her hair.

Ken has a swig of vodka and chases it with some sweet cold brew chai tea, a dubious mix that reminds him of his conflicting feelings for her. The coldness of her cruel, calculating mind. The warmth of her smile, speech, and seductive eyes lingers on like the vapours of a shot.

"Boys, your bickering annoys the Mistress. Someone moderate the chat; I'll be back," says Mistress S, switching back on her *show starting soon!* banner.

The rest of the men begin to log in to the meeting, General Boom, Sargent Buttslap, Prince of Persia; they begin to fill the video chat boxes; their names all have similar themes. Some ridiculous title and either a sexual reference or an ethnicity indicator. Macho Mayo being a very pale and thin death metal drummer who sits with his shirt off with a giant "S" branding his forehead. Judging by the blood and redness, it

looks recent.

Ken watches as the viewer count grows faster and faster, and soon the chat room surpasses 1,000 people watching, in a few seconds, 2,000, in minutes it eclipses 100,000, then 200,000, Ken drinks more vodka and stares as the number keeps going up until the stream counter hits the limit of 999,999. Ken's jaw nearly hits the table- she's genuinely a worldwide phenomenon.

The chatroom message box is a blur, and Ken's screen almost freezes when scrolling to look at the other guests connected to the call. Six other men with two blacked-out squares appear underneath the main video window occupied with Mistress S's logo.

"Attention attention, this is grand banker Captain Alberta, loyal supreme gentleman to Mistress S and guardian of the treasure chest; this meeting is about to proceed."

Mistress S's banner fades from view, a meaty man with the arms and hands of a northern camp roughneck appears on the screen; behind him are several racks of weapons of all types.

"This chat engine has been custom programmed to work with your secure Parlergram account. We run the service, so forget any privacy concerns. You cannot participate in the service of our lady without an account." Captain Alberta speaks in a monotonous baritone voice. "We can cross-reference your username with your repeated donations, allowing access beyond the initiate-level member's area. For increased access to Mistress S, the loyalty program requires a DNA sample and personality test. Apply through the app, we will be in touch and put you on the pathway to becoming a trusted gentleman. True apex gentlemen can even share a bed with Mistress S, but

few put in the dedication necessary."

The screen flashes a montage video that shows young men doing a bunch of fun things. Driving fast cars, motorcycles, pool parties with babes, firing guns, lighting massive fires, blowing things up. A montage of industrial endeavours appear on the screen, men and women building, a single-light town grows into a village, then to a town- and then a futuristic metropolis. Finally, the video fades to a shot of Mistress S lying on a bed; she beckons alluringly to the camera.

"Donate now, often donate, help the cause, help yourself," her voice narrates a looping ad. Images of youthful bros and voguish babes fade into view, with an overlay of text on how to donate. Bitcoin accepted too!

"Gentlemen, with the chumming complete- now let's get back to business."

Mistress S adjusts her seat as the giant screen behind her flashes some news footage before continuing.

"Only a few months ago, most of us weren't up to anything special- now? It's all a bowl of cherries, honey."

Mistress S winks and sticks out her tongue.

"We're in a unique place, fellas; the copycats have done wonders for keeping the police occupied -the mask enforcement people? Brilliant. I worried at first, but it turns out people really hate anti-science. That alone has us up with the public at 30 points higher in satisfaction than the police, and our latest posts painting them as anti-maskers has the police hated more than ever before. They can't even arrest a crowing drunk without ten cameras in their face and people screaming defund!"

One of the gruff men on the stream chimes in, waving his 5-pound sledgehammer with the fluorescent handle on

camera.

"We'll keep fuckin' those anti-maskers up for you, Mistress S- bashin' coof goof heads is what we do!"

"Thank you, Paul," Mistress S coos, blowing a kiss.

"Now, unfortunately, we have lost a couple points with PiggyP's recent folly- I still love you, darling. It's just that, well... your party of precocious pooches, painfully punishing preachers, perhaps- precipitously."

Mistress S giggles.

"Sorry, I had to-"

The screen behind her begins to play a news clip.

"Do you remember this?" Mistress S points behind her. "The media caught a whiff of our little piglet's recent handiwork. Kicking that obnoxious Terry Joy out of the neighbourhood, preaching in the gay village, should have been a slam-dunk, right? Support for direct action was at an all-time high before the video came out, that is. Even Prime Minister Rudeau publicly condemned those uppity Christian zealots."

The other members of the stream begin to murmur, most in acknowledgement.

"Gentlemen, again, nothing against my dearest Piggy, but this-"

The screen changes again behind her.

"This is what we call bad PR,"

The screen shows several BDSM-gear-wearing people of indiscriminate gender swarming a group of street preachers, their literature spills in the street, some of them held down while other furry and leather costumed people are urinating on them, some defecating, with witnesses aghast in the background. A man with a badly broken leg lies on the ground, squealing like a pig.

"Optics, people, optics."

"See? What did I say? Pigface is a liability-" the construction worker with the mask on says as PiggyP blows another big cloud of cigar smoke.

The screen cuts to a view of the street preacher, Terry Joy, being held in a headlock by someone in latex very-short-shorts. A person in a teddy bear suit rubs him inappropriately from behind.

Mistress S frowns and wiggles her finger in a cute scolding way.

"Down fourteen points across the board, gentlemen- discretion not your strong suit, my porcine praetorian, the preachers are popular online. Getting caught like this again is a bad idea; better yet- stick to enforcing the maskless, you can beat them with impunity."

The other streamers talk over each other, PiggyP gruffly declaring the preachers deserve it, and more.

"God is like an ass; keep it in your pants and out of the public. Or, you're going to see MY ass, up close, and personal, shitting all over you!" The man in the pig mask laughs.

The men in chat argue and bicker, Ken shakes his head at the combined stupidity of some of Mistress S's pawns, and she mutes them all to restore some order.

"Gentlemen, behave," she speaks with an eloquence that Ken can't help but feel tingles for.

"Now, we've been using these GoPro cameras to great effect. So far, some of the videos we've collected have generated some serious bitcoin. People are on quarantine, and it's just getting started; they're bored- they want more of The Shitkickers. We have partnerships with Liveleaking, HorridReality; TMV is all on board. We have operatives in every

city over the world, filming beatdowns over masks, man-spreading, purging homeless camps, catching internet creeps- and the beatdowns- are glorious!"

The screen behind her changes again; this time, a montage of videos starts playing. Mistress S turns and watches the television herself, pausing for a moment to reach off-camera for a bowl of cherries to snack on.

The beatdowns *are* glorious; Ken watches as minutes and minutes of high-definition ass-kickings play across the screen. People without masks, entering stores or getting on the subway- only to be ambushed by groups of people. The enforcer gangs often dress up in costume, deliver groin-crushing kicks, leaping punches to the head, and full-body tackles through windows. Epic food fights in fast-food restaurants, pedophiles meeting up with decoys and being bound, gagged, tarred and feathered. Ken finds himself laughing at the scale of some of the brawls. His face only loses his smile when the mob mercilessly swarms a man after pushing him off his bike. Ken squints at the screen- the man being kicked has the same pudgy face as Bob, the security guard- it *is* Bob.

The crowd on the stream cheers on in rambunctious, muted silence.

Ken feels himself go stone-faced, again questioning why he's even listening to her psychopathy.

"This is so fucked," Ken mutters, rubbing his forehead with his hand.

The screen comes back to Mistress S, smiling and leaning back in her office chair with her high-heeled feet up.

"One last thing- there's someone you need to be aware of-"

An image of a woman sitting in a little white sports car holding a camera up appears on the screen.

"Little nosey blogger Liza Liang, we've caught her tailing our Vancouver crews several times now looking for some gotcha-moment to nail us with. Keep in mind, while deep web videos bring in the bucks, each and every one of you has to stay on guard in public- do not step out of tolerable social boundaries. Beat only people that the masses will approve of. If you want to make sure nobody can upload a video of you, have a song ready to play from your phone, a song with aggressive copyright. I prefer A Hard Day's Night by the Beatles. We've avoided cancellation- so far, but stay diligent. Think two steps ahead."

On the screen, a chart fades into view.

"I suggest each one of you study this. Our algorithm updated it just last night."

Ken squints and looks at the chart, a simple X and Y. The coordinates going up the chart plotted various identifiable groups from most protected to least protected. The marked, socially acceptable actions you can take against them ran sideways along the bottom- angry shouting, fists, bats, and tombstones.

"Well, that almost wraps it up, gentlemen." Mistress S smiles, pulling her feet off her desk and walking to stand next to the big monitor behind her.

"I- I should have just bought another bike," Ken mutters.

"I am going to assign you all some tasks, so watch your mailboxes. Together, this should generate at least another 50 million in revenue for the next month. I suggest you get busy, soldiers; consider it a race to secure all of your places in my future cabinet."

Ken raises his eyebrow. Cabinet?

The screen behind her switches to an aerial drone shot of a coastline with a massive construction site working away. A helicopter pad nearby already completed; in the distance, construction equipment paves a runway.

"The plan is a go, gentlemen. Welcome on board. We'll be in touch."

Mistress S blows a kiss, and the stream ends.

Ken sits there for a minute, his head buzzing, a strange feeling in his heart.

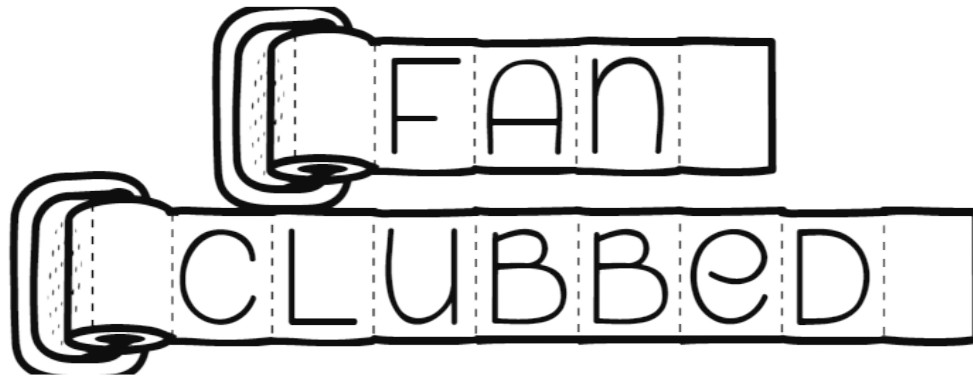
At that moment, his phone jingles; A pop-up from Parlergram. The account name trying to contact him is nonsensical-

1pY#9@rL\$H requesting VideoChat - Accept (Yes) / (No)

Ken clicks the deny button on his phone and closes his laptop; lifting up a glass of vodka to his mouth, he finishes it in one gulp. Leaning back into his couch, his eyes shut, and he sighs, tingles of vodka fumes in his nose. Breathing deep, Ken tries to clear his mind by focusing on the darkness of his closed eyelids. Breathe, Ken, just breathe, counting his breaths as the anxiety stirs up and dissipates again. The calming warmth spreads from his face to his toes, his mind begins to wander away from the psychotic lady.

He sits for a long time, unsure of it all, recalling why he did it- wondering- what gives him the right to hurt others? Is he responsible for inspiring this Machiavellian temptress? He questions everything. Did he do this for himself? Is there a way back to normal-

"I shoulda bought another bike," he whispers to himself in the dark.



Allie is always working thanks to an influx of high-risk patients, another new coof variant, so Ken begins to spend more nights home alone.

With his feet up on the couch, the rain patters endlessly against the window behind him. He flicks through the channels and surfs the internet on his phone. A ding in the kitchen lets him know his chicken is ready.

With sparkling water in one hand and a plate of homemade chicken cordon blue in the other, Ken sits back on his sofa. He really loves to cook, taking a deep sniff of the garlic-buttery mashed potatoes and the richness of the swiss cheese.

"Mmm," Ken says to himself with a smile. Cooking a good meal is always a way he can relax. He enjoyed selecting from fine cuts and choice ingredients, always with extra butter.

Ken twists a piece of chicken on his fork and scoops a particularly garlic-y and buttery mound of whipped mashed potatoes on his utensil when his phone goes off.

Riiiiing!

"Mmpphh," Ken chews and chews furiously.

By the third ring, Ken answers the unknown number.

"Hello?"

"Hey Ken, it's me-"

Ken clears his throat.

"Uhh? Hello?"

"Right in the greasy pita, bro!"

"Oh, right, Bob- how's it going, man?"

As Bob cheerfully recants his tale about getting laid off and seeing gossip-queen Suzy outside the office, Ken has a good laugh with him. The jolly former rent-a-cop recalls the unwanted feeling of being homeless, Suzy giving him a handful of cash and a hug uplifts him, helping him carry on through dark times.

"Ya know, it was really, really kind of Suzy, that- that cash got me through 3 days of total shit, Ken!"

Bob continues; Ken stretches out, putting his feet up on his coffee table. His lazy legs bump his fork; the handle sticking out beyond the plate acts as a catapult and sends it flying. A dining fail; the carpet and wall become a firing range for garlic and butter trebuchets.

"Bob- Bob.. did- did- you hear about the protests?"

Bob laughs hysterically.

"Oh- yeah, I was there! Crazy protests like every week now! I was doing a delivery for a Chinese restaurant- didn't have my mask on. Some fuckers pushed me off my bike for it! Kicked my ass, spilled the food, even poured the won-ton all over me- I had my mask in my pocket, those little shits- fuckin' assholes!"

Ken listens intently to Bob describe the men; they all sound a bit too familiar.

The two men chat on for another little while, reminiscing on simpler times- talking about current hardships. Ken steers

the conversation away from God whenever Bob keeps professing his newfound faith, guiding Bob back to explain what being in a men's shelter is like. While Bob is out job hunting, all of his possessions go missing- the thieves taking everything, even his underwear.

His family would help, he says, but asking them, at his age, is too shameful. Working odd jobs and hiding the money in his socks, it takes him a couple months to get a damage deposit together to live on his own again. Mostly because he has to pay shelter thugs protection money- or get beat!

"-But, didn't you have any money saved up, you know, from your job?"

Bob sighs.

The quick buck is too tempting, he confesses. His money is going into a bunch of risky, poor investments, cryptocurrency, and pump-and-dump stocks. Learning a hard lesson later in life, Bob admits, but, on top of that- the last landlord keeps his rental damage deposit money. The greedy landlord refuses to give it back because Bob broke the rules- keeping a cat in a no-pets building.

"Ken, I left that place spotless, but the landlord kept saying they needed a special deep clean- because cats are dirty, and I didn't tell them. I had to give her up for a bit- my joy, Arbuckle, have I shown you any photos?"

Ken isn't too good about talking about his feelings, so he listens more than shares. Bob texts Ken, a picture of a cat lying in a sunbeam, stretched out with a rather smug look on its old and greying furry face.

"Ken- oh bud, it's been great chatting- I gotta run soon here- shits went crazy, but things will be better again, Allie will chill, this too, shall pass-"

"Yeah, Bob, I sure hope so- everything- everything just seems a bit messed up right now," Ken stops smiling for the first time on the call.

"Gimme a shout again soon, bud- I'll keep my head above water; I have a futon bed, a laptop, a phone, and the love of Jesus- it's all I need. Just worry about yourself, my friend- God bless you!"

"Bye, Bob."

He hangs up.

Re-heating his dinner, Ken reads a book for a while, alternating turning pages and taking bites. The book, a journal on battery technology, keeps his mind sharp- finishing a dozen pages and clearing his plate. The book is face down and spread open on his chest, his eyes close.

Ken wakes in the dark, his red LED clock reading almost 11 PM. The rain softly pattering outside the window just above his couch; Ken rubs his eyes sleepily with his index finger knuckles. Stretching his body out and nuzzling the pillow with a yawn, *Modern Battery Engineering, A Comprehensive Guide* falls to the floor.

Calm, cozy, still.

Flash images of the goatee'd bike thief- Ken smashing him in the head, red and blue lights strobe away. Allie crying.

Rolling over and reaching over to the coffee table, Ken flips on the TV.

...was blasted on Twitter after saying the police chief's speech refused to acknowledge systemic poverty that has been the cause for the tent villages...

Ken leans back on the pillow and closes his eyes, listening

to the rainfall.

...grainy footage shows the construction workers beat a man who refused to wear a mask and pretended to cough on the Skytrain...

Using his foot, Ken opens the window slightly. A chilly draft of the air falls on his face as he lies there trying to quiet his mind as the TV plays softly in the background.

...the frightening footage captured when our own Kissy Wong went out to investigate the reported gathering of citizen vigilantes...

Looking at his phone, Allie sends him an email instead of a text. A forward from one of her work friends. Congratulations, you win; the message reads, a 6-person evening of dining in new coof-proof dining pods. Ken recalls an announcement on the news, the government allowing restaurants with these high-tech dividers to re-open. Emperor Noodle is one of the first to adopt the new measures with a grand opening event tomorrow.

"Emperor Noodle," Ken mumbles, recalling his wet escape from the alleyway behind the restaurant. The memories of the downhill ride, of the growling cop dog chasing him, of bashing Jeremy's skull.

Ken stares at the email and the image, a large, round table with plexiglass dividing the table into a pie of six pods, with intercoms and sliding drawers to talk and share food through.

Into his text messages, Ken sends Allie a smile and a "can't wait to have dinner with you tomorrow, babes," himself leaning back on the couch and feeling a sense of dread.

Minutes later, Allie writes back, she'll be sleeping most of

the day tomorrow, but to meet her at her place in the evening.

A flash in Ken's mind; Mistress S teases him while holding his shoes, pointing an index finger gun at Ken. Her thumb bends 90 degrees, and she mouths a "bang."

Ken opens the laptop to start on some work he left earlier- a few quotes, some email replies, a few forwards from planning. Something, anything, to keep his mind occupied.

Ken wakes up next to the laptop. Nearby is a full glass of water and a half-drunk cup of coffee along with a half-eaten banana. His work for the day is already completed the night previous- he cycles through his inbox and has no prioritized tasks left. Working a Monday to Friday job from home somehow turns into maybe-working-7-days-a-week. Suppose his meeting with Azmina this afternoon doesn't require a professional appearance. In that case, he would probably just sleep all day.

Tidying up his place, Ken throws most of his dirty laundry in the trash- anything with dirt or blood on it goes straight into the garbage. Hours go by as he scrubs the shower, cleans the carpet, mops the floor and scours the fabric on the couch.

Later that afternoon, Ken shaves, showers, and dresses in the nicest clothes he currently owns- his shoes looking a bit out-of-place compared to the rest of his outfit. She won't see them, anyway. His hair is a bit messy, and Azmina comments on it during the meeting. She can be hard to read, but the review is short and goes well.

After hanging up with his boss, Ken smiles and goes to comb his hair in the mirror, thinking of putting his arms around Allie for a snuggly hug. Tonight is going to be great, he thinks.

Ken has his arms around Allie as they stand on the curb outside her place, oblivious of the decay around them and

admiring the sunset together.

"Seven fifteen, cab's late," Ken speaks softly in Allie's ear.

"So? I kinda like it-" Allie nuzzles closer to Ken, turning for a kiss and ending up with at least 3 and a half kisses and a hug.

"You sure we have to go? I mean -it's just your work friends, right?" Ken laughs.

"When work is quiet again, we'll have more time- sorry Sparky has been so tough on you-"

"That's okay, babes," Ken hugs her tight, her head on his chest.

Allie looks down at her phone to check the time before making a sneering face.

Ken smiled.

"What?"

"Those shoes-" Allie looks at his feet, "those are ugly!"

Ken glances down at his black runners; they are a bit beat and don't match his dress pants at all.

"Yeah, uh-"

"Your Bluvbhogs, the ones I got you, should've worn those-"

Ken steps forward and hugs Allie tight, kissing her forehead just as their cab pulls up.

Opening the door for Allie, Ken slides in the pleather seat coverings in the back of the yellow Prius taxi. Their driver is a hulking, rotund man wearing an oversized Bluetooth in his ear.

"Where you go?"

"Uh- Emperor Noodle, please!"

"Oh good, good!" Replies the driver, pulling out into traffic and heading along Cordova avenue towards Main street.

Ken's eyes momentarily bug out of his head, and he feels his face go flush.

Allie reaches over and holds Ken's hand.

"I worry about you, about us-"

Ken's eyes watch as the world around them glides by, piles of trash, hunched figures in doorways- desperation around every corner-

"Ken?"

Ken turns and looks at Allie, her face warm and loving again, drawing a smile across his face as he squeezes her hand tight.

"I love you," Ken says softly.

"I love you, too," Allie replies.

"-Is there a but?" Ken asks with a smirk, his heart rate rising as he put his other hand in his coat pocket and holds it still.

"Well, you did drink all my rum, and you did beat up my fridge-" Allie giggles.

"Yeah uh- about that- definitely not one of my finer, or smarter, moves-"

"-but you do clean up pretty nice," Allie reaches over and pinches Ken's cheek.

Ken laughs and looks back out the window, the car almost to Broadway, where the taxi turns in the wrong direction.

Ken turns to Allie and raises his eyebrow.

Allie taps him on the hand.

"Hey, look, Fartini's pub, never thought it would outlast the mountain gear store," Allie points and loves to make comments on Vancouver's history.

"Cambie and Broadway, did you know someone got blown up when their pizza oven exploded back in the eighties? Yeah, right there! Grandpa Chang used to take us to Fogg N Sudds to watch hockey, my cousins and I-"

The cab continues heading away from their destination, passing Oak street before a concerned Ken speaks to the driver.

"Uhh- hi, I think we're going the wrong way-"

"Oh sir, we go the right way, detour, awful traffic, more scenic-"

Ken turns to Allie and whispers, "does he think we are tourists or something?"

"I- I don't know- he never put the meter on, either-"

Ken leans forward toward the driver again.

"Hey man, ah- yeah, so Fraser and Kingsway- that's in the opposite-"

"Oh yes sir- yes sir-" replies the driver, turning right on Granville and heading back over the bridge.

"Oh sir, your wife, she loves the beautiful city, you should show her more, look-"

The driver points out his window at the beginning of a pink and red sunset.

"Yeah- just what route are you taking us on?"

"Sir, please, I need to drive, okay?"

Ken leans back in his seat and sighs.

"What's wrong, Ken? Oh- so what if it's a few dollars more? He just wants us to see the sunset-" Allie whispers and puts her arm around his stomach; she leans over to cuddle him.

Ken holds Allie awkwardly for the next ten minutes as the taxi cab meanders around downtown. Leaving the dense urban core across the George street viaduct, the taxi heads up Main Street for the second time.

The taxi again takes an unscheduled detour.

Ken tenses up.

"Honey-"Allie's tone changes.

"Hey man, the restaurant is straight-up main, left on Kingsway, and like 3 blocks up- "

"Oh sir, big traffic ja-"

Allie shrieks in horror as Ken yanks a charger cord from the taxi's USB port and wraps it around the driver's neck. Growling as he does it, Ken viciously chokes the obese man, causing the car to swerve all over the road.

"Ken! Stop Ken! Ken!" Allie grabs at Ken's hands but can't budge them.

"Listen up, mother fucker-" Ken speaks gruffly, "-you're going to head, right now, to Fraser and Kingsway, and you're not fucking charging us. Because if you do, this cord is going right back around your neck and- next time, I'm not going to let go, and your fat fucking ass will die here, tonight, in this fucking cab, got it, asshole? Do you understand me fuckface?" Ken screams, spitting as he yells, his face a tomato red- the driver slamming on the brakes, pulling over and blocking traffic while he struggles to breathe.

"Yesss- sss-ssssir-" gasps the driver, holding the cable around his thick neck. Sweat pouring off the taxi dude's head from the struggle as Ken continues to choke him, shaking the massive man back and forth in the driver's seat.

"Ken, stop, you're scaring me!" shrieks Allie.

Cars behind them honk as Ken lets go of the driver; moments later, the cabbie pulls back into traffic, still breathing hard and choking for air.

Allie turns and looks at a scowl-faced Ken.

"What's gotten into you," Allie whispers, her smile gone from her face.

Ken turns and looks out the window; in a few minutes,

they arrive at Emperor Noodle, the taxi drives off without another word.

Holding the door open for Allie, a scent of noodles massages Ken's nose and brings a smile back to his face.

"No choking the waiter, okay?" Allie gives Ken a soft elbow in the ribs, "that wasn't cool, I'm actually mad at you- I mean, yeah, he was trying to rip us off, but that reaction- "

Ken pats Allie on the back.

"I know, I'm sorry," he replies, the waiter leading them to a table of five pods. A fortress of plexiglass, the normally ten-seat table space, has plexiglass divided into five separate bubbles of two people each. The transparent panel in front of him has a speaker and microphone embedded in it.

"Good evening," Ken says into the intercom, joining Allie at sitting down and introducing themselves.

"Oh my gosh!" Allie says, "I haven't seen you guys in ages! How are you- oh- you had the baby! How is-"

Ken's mind wanders as Allie does her thing; the ladies have a ton to catch up on; just then, an alert goes ding on Ken's phone.

"Excuse me," Ken says, sheepishly apologizing for looking at his phone at dinner. His face goes flush when he sees another totally scrambled account name contacting him through Parlergram.

If you know what is good for you, prepare.

I will activate you again soon.

Reply back "Yes madam"

So I know I can count on my gentlemen.

Ken switches his phone into airplane mode and puts it away before returning to the conversation.

"-so yeah, Ken and I did a staycation awhile back, but ever since the coof hit, I've been so busy, and he- well, Ken's been really doing great, right Ken?"

Ken nods vigorously.

"You look like a finance guy!" One of the other suited men says through the intercom.

"Yeah, uh, actually in sales. We do heavy-duty helicopter and crane lifts. It's got its moments; we try and keep things fun," Ken envisions his little desk in the corner, the bookshelf he moved and the potted plant wall he created to escape behind.

"I was going to say you were an MMA guy or hockey player," the man in the blue suit says, nodding to his petite wife with the cute pointy nose.

"-my Kenny," Allie giggles, "when he's not at work, he's at the gym- at least when he's not hungover, isn't- isn't that right, Ken?"

Ken's face feels hot. He has never considered himself a problem drinker.

Does she?

The waiter walks up.

Everyone gives their orders one by one, the waiter plugs the list of delights into a tablet. When Ken's turn comes up, he orders the Emperor's Feast, premium cuts of beef with a side of noodles. And a large sake.

Allie gives Ken a look and turns away.

Dinner gets off to a great start, the couples talking about various things they've been up to, problems with their strata, how their kid barfed in their Tesla, what rate they locked in for their mortgage, and when the man in the blue suit looks at Ken and asks what his rate is-

"I uh- I rent near City Hall, a basement, it's cheap... I like it."

The table falls quiet, and Ken notices Allie is paying attention to her meal.

"Oh ya, how about that mayor!" Interjects the wife of the blue suit man.

"Oh, may I?" Allie asks Ken, pointing at his bowl.

"Of course," on a small plate, Ken puts a most excellent piece of beef with a few noodles. Grinning, he passes it to Allie around the side of the coof-pod.

Allie's warm smile returns, Ken's smile grows to stretch across his face; he has been smiling so much tonight with Allie that his face muscles hurt.

The waiter walks over with a fancy tray and says something to one of Allie's friend's husbands.

"Uh no, that's Ken-" said the man in the suit to the waiter, who is now looking in Ken's direction and holding a special serving plate with a silver cup and a crystalline liquor decanter.

"Ah-" says the waiter, walking around the large, round table and standing beside Ken.

"From mommy to you, happy birthday! A special treat-from the old country- only for strong-virile men!" says the waiter, putting the silver cup down, Ken looking inside of it-

A pulsating, bloody little heart.

Allie leans over just as the waiter pours liquor on it, filling the cup with an amber liquid, bands of thick blood floating in it like ribbons in the wind.

"W-w-who is mommy, what- what the fuck is that?" Allie clamours, dropping her utensils, a nervous smile and laugh-concern washing over her face.

Ken sits still. The guests at the table pretend kindly to eat,

glancing at each other with faces of confusion.

"Take it- take it away," Ken says forcefully, excusing himself from the table.

"Ken? Ken, where are you-" Allie calls after him as Ken walks out of the front of the restaurant. Pulling out his phone, he taps VideoChat on one of the scrambled numbers Mistress S messaged him from.

Parlergram doesn't even respond. It can't seem to handle dialling the odd account numbers with all the letters and symbols mixed in.

Ken stands on the sidewalk, furious, giving a nearby newspaper box a kick.

Parlergram dings on his phone. The account ID shows another whacky scrambled number.

^Mb5y@G9sL requesting AudioChat - Accept (Yes / No)

"Hello?"

"Darling, you don't like my little gift?" Samantha speaks in a thick British accent; her voice is so practiced and so very smooth. It makes it hard for Ken to be angry, but he's angry.

"Stay away from my life- stay away from my girlfriend, stay away from me. You got it? Do you want me to come shitkick you? Do- NOT fuck with me," a couple walk by Ken; concerned by his crazy yelling, they give him a wide berth.

"Oh Kenny, you're such a charmer," Samantha is utterly nonplussed, "I need you to deliver a message with the same style I got your attention with."

"No, I'm throu-"

Mistress S begins to laugh, a forced, cackling laugh that just takes the argument out of Ken's breath.

"No, I'm n-n-not- I'm n-not, you h-hear me?" Ken's voice

stutters and cracks.

A message pops up on Ken's screen.

9&3w!?!n#qu requesting VideoChat - Accept (Yes) / (No)

Ken hits accept.

There, on the screen, stands a topless Mistress S, one arm pinning the shoes to her chest, covering herself. Her other arm gives a disapproval wiggle with her index finger—a colossal smirk like a billboard across her face.

"You're sick," Ken whispers.

"Wretched has so much more style; am I not deserving of a better title?"

Mistress S giggles.

"Look in your mail slot when you get home; ignoring me is not an option- you get no more warnings. Goodnight, Kenneth."

The phone call ends as Allie comes out of the restaurant.

"W-what was that about? The heart? Mommy? Who's mommy?" Allie looks confused, and Ken turns to hug her.

"Fuck, I-I am so-so sorry," Ken speaks softly, "My wasted drunk friend, Mike, he- he's on lockdown in Australia, it's extreme boredom, he's lost his mind- I- I just spoke with his father, he's off his medication and been on a binge- this was his idea of a prank, I'm so-"

Allie hugs him back.

"It's okay," she says, "The coof, the isolation... it has taken a toll on some people, real, real bad."

"Yeah," Ken whispers, putting his arms around Allie.

Allie pulls back and looks into his eyes.

"We just got to tell my friends something, they're totally shocked, that was so weird- Andy and Kelly want to leave-"

Ken turns and pulls Allie gently by the hand, returning to dinner with an apology. He explains his drunk Australian friend thought it funny to pull a crazy prank; he's isolated, bipolar, and a practical joker. With these smartphones and checking in, you know it is easy for your friends to see where you are. The booze culture down-under is strong, and his Australian friend is drinking too much. Those crazy Aussies, he says. The friends all seem to nod and laugh; Ken smiles, looking at Allie, having much more sake than usual.

The rest of dinner goes by relatively smooth- Allie saving the day by talking about her cousin's boyfriend's uncle, who has a popular TubeYouber account with his hamster. Building all sorts of little mazes and intricate little gourmet meals for the cute rodent. The table all knows who he is; Ken feels the pressure to impress ease- the conversation flows freely, yet Ken can tell- something is off about Allie.

After paying and saying goodnight, Allie and Ken head outside; she has already ordered a cab, it is waiting.

Allie opens the door and scoots over as Ken just stands there.

"Ken? You're not-"

Allie stops and stares at him with her mouth open.

"I've just- uh, got a lot of projects that, umm, I uh- because of the coof I can get overtime, Azmina said-"

"Just- after tonight, now this?" Allie crosses her arms, sighs, and blows her messy bangs out of her eyes.

"There's so much, uhh- going on at work."

Allie stares blankly.

"I'm so sorry. Soon, okay, babes?"

He blows her a kiss and tries to smile.

Ken makes eye contact one more time before closing the

back door, watching the cab glide away into the night, turning and putting his hands in his pockets for the walk home.

Ken hurries as he steps through the night, not sure if it is his nerves or all of the sake and yummy noodles, but he stumbles a bit more than usual on the uneven sidewalk near his city hall neighbourhood. Turning into his alley and through the garage, a cardboard box sits in front of his backdoor.

Ken soon sits with himself in his kitchen at the table. The contents of the box in front of him. A ninja-like mask, black cloth on the outside, but inside, it fits like a helmet. Covering his entire face and head, it has a metal skullcap, the forehead reinforced with padded carbon fibre plates. Attached to the mask is a set of low-profile black goggles. The other item is a slim black vest with many pockets and a thick spine protector hidden beneath thick fabric. Under his gifts from the Mistress is a glossy pink envelope with a matte-black "S" on one side. He opens it.

Inside, a single piece of photo paper with a picture of a house in black and white. Ken stares at it with a blank face.

"What the-"

Ken's phone beeps in the living room.

The number is just like the scrambled number appearing earlier.

*from: 1zJ\$Fh34*c*

Don't worry about the news, we won't let them catch you. Just play along and tomorrow bring the envelope to the 200 blk Cordova parking garage roof, be there at midnight sharp. White car.

#teamshitkicker

Ken sits in the darkness of his kitchen, alternating between looking at the pink envelope and the bizarre text message before putting them down to scream.

"Fuuuuuccckkkk!!!"

Ken stands up and pushes the chair back. Agitated feet carry him to his kitchen, he boots the refrigerator door. The freezer drawer pops open; Ken grabs one of the vodka bottles inside and walks to his couch.

Opening his laptop, work emails and reminders pop up, the screen glows in the dark living room; a sweating, cold bottle of vodka sits beside the computer.

Ken drinks.

Ken drinks much more.

A calendar reminder pops up on his phone.

His big meeting with the management team is coming soon.

"If that bastard Seth gets me fired-" Ken mumbles, drunk, irritable, and angry.

Allie has been texting him, but Ken doesn't even read it. Not going to win any boyfriend-of-the-year awards. Now he's ignoring her, possibly getting fired tomorrow, and playing delivery boy for that insane, green-eyed Saman- Mistress S.

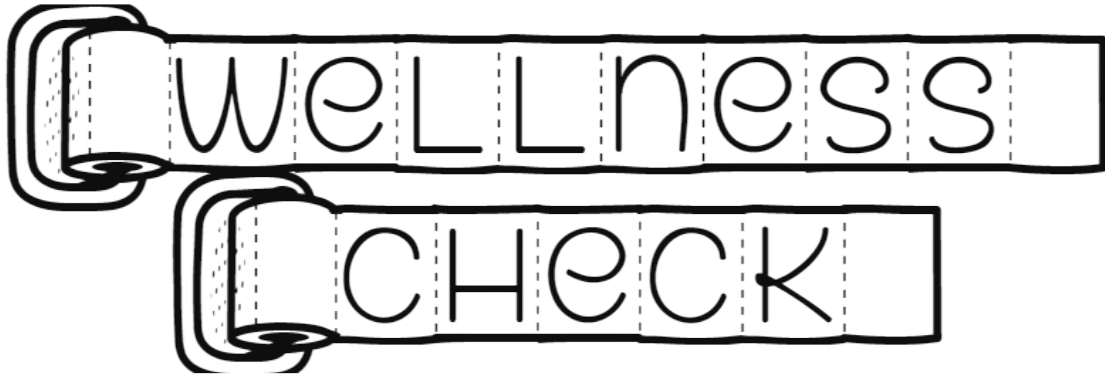
On the sauce, Ken puts on some music and turns it up. The songs don't matter, just the noise; as the first bottle of vodka is empty, he opens another. Lying on his stomach, shirtless on the couch, Ken taps with his index finger, reading back through some of the older internet comments on his original shitkicker video leak-

...a hero...

...someone standing up to the thieves...

...the cops are so useless, bless this man...

Cracking the smallest of smiles, Ken's head drops onto the pillow; his face bathes in blue laptop screen light as his eyes close.



Thursday. Ken's big management team meeting. He dreads sitting in her office and waiting for his performance review. This is how they fire you, taking your company laptop away on the spot with an escort from the building.

All morning he's on pins and needles until she calls him in. Azmina smiles, and Ken feels relief, sitting at her desk with the other managers participating remotely. After brief formalities, they give Ken two more projects to work on; a significant quote to write for a series of towers in Surrey and the upcoming erection of some public art- A giant brass set of androgynous breasts being raised at Sunset Beach. The piece, called 'moobsexual,' is part of the upcoming Pride Decade celebrations. They congratulate him on his project assignments and end the meeting; the last week's anxiety is all over nothing.

Heading into the bathroom for vodka sips and a spray of cologne to mask the smell, Ken returns to his desk and checks the time. Almost noon- almost time for the news. Grabbing his lunch kit, Ken walks through the dead-quiet office, heats up his food and has a seat in the lunchroom.

Ken sits alone at the table, a few other employees buzz around and fix up their own meals, with three or four people in

the room, almost the entire floor of staff on lunch at the same time. Ken remains quiet; he enjoys every sip of his spicy pho bowl while watching the lunchroom TV screen. The Vancouver Canucks are on another losing streak, the hockey lowlights end, and the news report begins.

...good afternoon, I'm Kissy Wong, and these are some of the top stories we are working on for tonight...

The screen flashes a collage of a grainy figure outrunning a cop car on an electric longboard; fuzzy footage of a figure tampering with a coffee jug follows. Next, a composite drawing of the suspect and the profile they have so far. All done with flashy graphics and with a dramatic soundtrack.

Ken holds tight onto his bowl. The footage plays of investigators and politicians discussing the case; he has prepared mentally for this moment. He believes he can stay calm.

...investigators narrowed down the organic material left by the suspect's shoes as the feces of a particular dog breed. They're optimistic this will narrow down the suspects by targeting the owners of the specific breed...

Ken freezes up and squeezes his water bottle so tight it sprays out the top; Azmina giggles at the sight.

Ken smiles nervously with a hot flash on his cheeks.

"What a crazy guy, huh? Like buddy- just live and let live!" Azmina says, taking a bite of her sandwich, "like really- they have so little-"

Ken feels his forehead sweat; he nods in agreement.

"Probably some four-chan loser who likes being a bully," a voice behind Ken says.

Azmina takes her sandwich and holds it like a microphone. "Let it goooo... let it goooo..." she sings in her thick Indian accent.

Ken's hands begin to shake a little; he grabs the bowl of noodles with both hands to hide it.

"I can't wait until they catch that goof."

Ken glances behind him to see who said that; Bill from accounting. They made friends playing foosball together, and now they don't even say hi.

Ken looks back at the TV. Immediately he feels the tremors in his hands act up again, gripping the bowl tighter.

...this morning, newly-appointed Federal inspector David Crunst spoke at Queen Elizabeth Park on the joint effort between the provincial and federal government to reduce attacks on the houseless and save the lives of the marginalized. Here is the first half of that speech. We are showing it unedited due to the gravitas of the situation...

The camera cuts away from Kissy Wong, and the image of the MacMillan Bloedel conservatory appears in the background.

A man in a nice suit appears, walking into the frame with a caption underneath him. Federal Inspector David Crunst the graphic reads- the man walking around the park crime scene pointing and talking with a group of people. The TV cuts to a shot of the agent in a perfect silvery suit with a Canadian flag lapel pin speaking at a podium.

"The prime minister has given us every resource at his disposal to find the suspect and bring him to justice. Canada will never tolerate terrorism."

Agent Crunst taps the podium with his extended index

finger.

"Using the special powers in the Canadian anti-terror act, we will immediately begin DNA testing of all dogs in Vancouver. The evidence is specific to the breed we are looking for. We are confident that this will lead to a charge and a conviction. Thank you," Agent Crunst nods to the reporters who yell and call out questions as the agent walks off the podium.

Ken is staring at his noodle bowl and holding on tight as it rattles on the table.

Azmina walks over to where Ken's sitting.

"You ok?"

"Y-yeah, f-f-f-f-fine..." Ken lets go of the bowl and quickly stands up, his hands shaking and his breathing shallow, quickly leaving the lunchroom for the men's bathroom, where he hides in a stall, whipping out his flask and chugging vodka until his hands stop shaking.

Ken pulls out his phone and begins to read what exactly the fed's plan is, sitting there on the closed toilet lid.

Scanning through news sites and the user comments below, his favourite Plebbit leaker, /u/big_chonk_squirrel, writes:

*comment posted 12:29 PM by /u/big_chonk_squirrel:
so I heard from a source that the poop actually was inside the shoe becuz there were sock fabrics mixed in haha ewww and the perp had got his shoes soaked, which caused the poop to liquefy and leave the smudge in the 24-7, so they know if they can find the dog they can find the owner of those shoes, bingo, but that's just what they released to the public bcuz outreach n good honest policework would catch this guy in a heartbeat- watch everything drawn out for their nefarious budgetary, political, and PR purposes, u all just watch, never let*

a crisis go to waste eh?

Ken stands up from the closed toilet lid, opens the door and walks over to wash his hands. His reflection looks like shit; he reeks of booze- he's gotta get out of there.

Peeking out of the restroom door, Ken can see Azmina at the other end of the office, talking to the only other person by the scanner. Ducking down, Ken slinks over behind a row of desks and scurries towards the elevator. His heart skips a beat, almost getting caught when Azmina walks back towards the kitchen. His hands shake as he hit the call button; every second going by as he waits, he thinks of a new excuse. The pho- he can claim it made him sick- no, no- too obvious- his mind races-
Ding!

Ken ducks into the elevator, hitting the ground floor button and holds his breath until the door closes.

Walking home in the rain, Ken stops off at the liquor store and buys several bagfuls of liquor, carefully re-arranging his freezer to fit them all inside. He paces through his living room, throwing kicks and jab-jab-cross-hook combo punches at random in the air, staying limber, having a sample drink or two here and there- just so his hands don't shake.

Rationing his liquor intake, he keeps the texting with Allie as minimal as possible, lest she notices him texting drunk- which she is very good at. Half-cut and exercising, he tries to tidy up his basement, but somehow it all ends up messier than it is before he cleans. Ken drunkenly cooks a pasta dinner; garlic clove wrappings and onion skins lie over the kitchen counter. Rich tomato sauce splatter covers the stove-top, the kitchen sink is a dumping ground for dirty dishes and oily pans.

Ken eats light, putting the leftovers away in the fridge; he

keeps moving after dinner and watches the clock.

7 PM.

Making a pot of coffee, Ken has a few cups and is soon buzzing. Out to the garage and into his storage locker, he doubles and triple-checks his equipment. His charged-up gear is ready; his clip-on LED shines bright, and his night-vision goggle lenses are impeccably clean. He makes sure to put two flasks of vodka inside his black armoured tactical vest.

Satisfied, Ken goes back inside his basement suite and puts martial arts training videos on his TV. Setting the alarm on his phone for 11 PM- enough time to get down to the parking garage, case it out for an ambush, and head up the stairs for midnight. Moving his coffee table out of the way, he throws punches, combo routines, flying kicks. Anything to keep his mind off whatever Sama- Mistress S has planned.

The rain comes down hard as Ken finishes prying open the back door to the parking garage to slip inside. His clothes feel heavy, having ridden around the block a few times in the downpour, casing out the parking garage for any signs of an ambush. Overpowering odours of pee and pooh in the stairwell replace the scent of fresh rain.

"Ugh, fuck!" Ken groans, trying to hold his breath as he peers around the brightly lit stairwell, looking for any electrical conduits exposed.

"Bingo," he whispers, finding a set of steel tubes running down the wall to a small panel behind the stairs. Reaching inside his vest, Ken pulls a small multi-tool out and pops the cover open to disconnect a few wires. Now in the dark, on come his night-vision goggles. Cautiously heading up the stairs, Ken listens for any footsteps on the way; he stops for a moment for some vodka from his vest flask. His hand tremors

return at the knowledge that he is, again, caught up in the redhead's devious schemes.

Arriving at the door to the roof, Ken peeks out of the rectangular window and can see a single car parked with its lights on. Zooming in, Ken recognizes the Toyota Paseo, the same car as Liza Liang's from Mistress S's propaganda briefing. Watching from the stairwell, Ken spots the glow from her phone and the silhouette of Liza's face talking inside her car.

Ken adjusts the LED light strapped to his vest and flashes it through the little window at Liza, getting her attention on the third flash. Ken stands in the dark, ducking behind the door when Liza drives her car up to the door. Her lights shine brightly against the back wall of the stairwell.

Ducking below the window, Ken props the door open a little.

"Lights, off!" He speaks gruffly.

"What?" squeaks out Liza's voice, barely audible over her running engine and the rain falling.

"Off!" Ken yells in his most resounding, angriest voice.

The car turns off, and so do Liza's lights.

Ken slides up the back of the door and opens it. The rooftop lot is entirely dark, with only a little light from the adjacent buildings shining off the wet roof of the white Toyota.

Liza's face peeks from her open window, staring at Ken in the doorway, her hands hidden from his view.

"We going to talk?"

Ken hides inside the unlit stairway.

"Come over here; I have something for you," Ken says, opening the stairwell door wider and waving the small pink envelope at her.

"I can't see from here, and I'm not coming any closer," Liza

says, getting up and standing with one foot outside her car door, her right hand resting on the roof of her car, her phone in her palm.

"You'll just have to read it to me."

From inside his shadowy stairwell, Ken opens the pink envelope and turns it upside-down above his hand. A single sheet of paper slides into his palm.

Ken removes the black-and-white photo from the envelope, holding it up in what little light shines on the parking lot roof.

Liza chuckles.

"Huh! You can tell your boss she needs new intel; my parents don't even live in this country anymore-"

Just then, a man's scream erupts from Liza's phone.

"Gah- f-fuck! Liza-," the sound of a scuffle is heard, "R-run!"

Liza holds her phone with both hands.

"Vic? VIC!- what's going on? Hello?"

Ken spins the photo he holds around and examines it. It is just a plain house in black-and-white; confused, Ken puts it back in the envelope and tucks it back in his vest before noticing how much of a panic Liza is now in.

"Vic! Talk to me; I'm on my way!"

"No need," speaks a familiar female voice from Liza's phone.

The hair on Ken's neck immediately sticks up.

It's Samantha.

"W-who is- it's you! -what have you-"

"Be quiet, or this is going to be more painful than it needs to be," Samantha speaks in her commanding tone as Mistress S.

Ken holds his breath.

"Your little boyfriend is going to be fine, so long as you listen up. He'll be back in a couple of days with a little ketamine hangover and all in one piece- but no more interference. I've become a little tired of-"

Ken sneaks up on Liza while she focuses intensely on looking at her screen. With one fluid motion, Ken snatches the phone from her, briefly catching a glimpse of Mistress S's face on the screen as he throws it to the concrete, smashing it completely.

"What are you doing?" Liza turns and screams at Ken before trying to slap him.

Ken grabs her wrist mid-swing and forces her arm back, pinning it on the roof of her car.

"Do NOT let that psycho get in your head, I- I'm telling you right now, I do not work for her, I have nothing to do with her, and you shouldn't either. Stay. Away."

Ken feels his hands tremor a little, face-to-mask with Liza and can see her eyes glisten in the low ambient city light through the night vision.

"Y-you feel like a b-big man, bullying a reporter?"

"I'm trying to keep you safe- from her!"

Ken lets go of her, walks around her open door and sits casually on the warm hood of her car.

"You're not a reporter- you write a blog. Oh, and... you're free to go," Ken motions with his arm towards the ramp down.

Liza pauses for a moment, wiping tears from her eyes.

"I g-guess if you were sent to kill me, I would have already been in the trunk by now," Liza leans on her door and stares at Ken, making eye contact with his goggles.

"B-but why stop now? If you're not working for her, why

give people that hope- then yank it back from them and let these shitkicker fakers take it over and profit-

Ken sighs.

"I mean, if you're not a vigilante- everything about the profile fits- not established, powerless at work, you rent, probably unemployed-

"I'm employed," Ken speaks in his deep, gruff voice, "-I work for myself, no one else. I'm not a part of the shitkicker crowd. Just a lone wolf."

Liza frowns.

"Yeah, and you went out there and pulled a stunt that set the city on fire; people finally thought that someone was going to stand up to the tent cities- to the thugs in charge at city hall- you were so close! Maybe you should turn yourself in, testify against SWIVEL, let the courts figure out what Peter Talbot was doing at that camp- Now that- that would be a stake to the heart of these bureaucratic vampires- it WILL make a difference against those who prey on this city... and you won't need to be doing, this-

Liza gestures towards Ken's conspicuous outfit.

Ken drops his chin to his chest and laughs before shaking his head.

"I just want my old life back, I've- I've lost so much in this lie- like, for what? My bike? I should've just bought another fuckin' bike!"

"Sure, then someone steals your new one? How about you go on a bike ride at night with neutered and defunded cops? Don't even get me started on what's happening with the coyotes, either. Instead of the safe Vancouver, you remember, maybe your head will be the one getting bashed in next time! Or- or maybe your precious girlfriend has someone gank her

while she's leaving the hospital?"

Ken stares at Liza, who is visibly angry, pointing her finger at Ken's face.

"Forgive the fuckin' cliché, but all it takes for assholes to win is for good men to do nothing!" Liza leans forward with her finger and scowls at Ken, bringing her voice back down to a whisper.

"If you thought you are any different than the scum in those camps, you're not- you're just as selfish, just as entitled, you're- just as much of a stain on this city as anyone else."

"Fuck you, you don't know me," Ken growls.

"I know you've been reading my posts on Plebbit, putting two-and-two together; I know you even commented," she says boastfully. With an incensed look on her face, she reaches into her car and pulls out a tablet.

Ken leers in silence; she's bluffing.

"Maybe next time, you'll remember to take 6-year-old videos down of you doing jumps on your bike and shouting yeehaw-"

A rush of heat to Ken's face. He does still have some old videos floating around TubeYuber with a few hundred views.

"-and Allie was easy to find based on your posts, her and her whole crooked tong family-"

He freezes up.

"-and thanks for smashing my phone, asshole, don't smash this-" Liza grumbles, swiping on her tablet then holding it out towards Ken.

"Read it," Liza gestures with the tablet by poking it into his shoulder pads.

Snatching the tablet from her, Ken spins it around to see a Plebbit post on the screen.

*(Ask Vancouver) help bad neighbours
posted by user /u/cookiesbynana604*

Help me, please ! My neighbour was a nice guy with a cat and a happy smile, we walked into each other at zero decor foods and he carried my groceries home for me once. As a senior this means a lot to me. Most people have bad times in life and when the coof started, I noticed he changed. He started getting into dealing and doing drugs and this summer was a bit intense with different guests and parties he would have over. His cat used to come to my balcony and I would feed him tuna. One day the cat never came back and I heard from another neighbour. He checked into rehab about a month ago now all sudden his apartment became a meth flophouse we are at 49th and Victoria just above the pizza place and now there are always characters outside loitering, I heard a dog kicked the other day and yelling all the time—Always a few people running in and out all the time now, all hours some kind music and loud talking or laughing. Only the beginning. No one is on the lease and they haven't been paying any rent. They almost burnt down the apartment because they were hi in the bathtub and had their bbq on fire on the balcony which had I not been there when I was to call the firemen it would have burned down or been very damaged. They have been now breaking into the mail boxes and now the mailman will not deliver here until we figure out this whole situation and secure the mailbox. How will I get my postcards from my grandkids & They have used fake names to order things. Smoking cigarettes in the hallway and in public areas. The other night they were yelling someones name and to not call an ambulance trying to revive someone by the sounds of it. Slipping disturbing notes under doors of tenants of random poems non sense about meth. one

young girl told me she hopes the cat is dead when I asked her where the cat went. the super of the build is aware of all the chaos but doesn't seem to care or know how to kick them out and nobody knows who the owner is and the super lives in the building and is so scared. Its getting hard to sleep, these experiences especially putting out the fire was so traumatic and just feels like something else crazy could happen. There is no accountability with so many people coming around and with no one paying rent or on a lease it just feels that much more dangerous. What do I do now at 83 years old I thought buying my own home in Vancouver away from downtown would not put me in these situations. I cant even bake anymore because they smell it and shout and threaten me through the door to take it. Now a bad side of baking nice cookies, but I dont deserve this. With the coof and my current employment financial situation I cannot just move either and noboddy seems to want to help. Scared in e van.

Ken turns the tablet around and hands it back to Liza.

"There's more; read the next," Liza pushes the tablet back into Ken's hands.

Ken drops it on the hood of the car.

"This is no place for your fucking book club, lady." Ken stands and walks towards the car stairwell.

"These are real people; they need real help- the cops- fucking useless, their hands are tied by the corrupt council. Those fucks, all those fucks- everyone one of them has their hand in the pot- to keep things this way- and you- have abandoned them, do you even feel her fear, do you even give a fuck- at all?"

Ken walks to the stairwell and lets the door slam behind him. Flicking on his night-vision goggles, he makes his way

down the stairs, grabs his stashed board and flies off down the street- into the night.

The whine of the electric motor echos under the Cambie street bridge as Ken rockets along the seawall towards home. Passing under the orange lights near the waterfront, Science World sparkles across the water as a single boat bobs along.

Ken dodges several shambling homeless people and weaves between the flag poles at the Plaza of Nations. Taking the S-curve behind the casino at high speed, Ken blasts along the straight section of goose-shit alley.

Ken is cruising slowly with his back to Science World; turning back, he looks towards the colourful downtown core. At that moment, Ken's mind flashes to the old lady with the broom, her husband in the alley, handcuffed by the cops- she is knocked down as they push past her. The next day's news mentioning nothing about it. Ken certainly remembers not telling anyone, not posting on social media about it, either.

He could have volunteered to help them clean up.

He could have done something.

He does nothing to help.

Ken pulls up to the railing overlooking the water and stops.

Sighing to himself, Ken leans on the railing and looks out over the city. From the simple, carefree times of his childhood- to the unfamiliar and mean urban jungle it is today. He has never displayed any civic duty, never did anything before- and now-

Ken sighs and looks down at the water.

A light mist rolls in as Ken remains still. Pondering his life choices and muttering apologies to Allie under his breath, punching the metal railing in frustration only to realize how

crazy he must look. Ken stands back on his board and leans to accelerate- but not towards home.

Ken sticks to the back alleys of East Van, navigating carefully under the wet, amber-lit narrow roads. Hidden in the shadows are dangerous slimy leaves, raccoons, puddles, and storm drains; Ken takes his time to move inconspicuously.

Victoria Drive is empty when Ken reaches the intersection with the small low-rise apartment building in the Plebbit comment Liza had shown him. The rhythmic flash of TV light splashes against the drawn blinds in one of the middle apartments on the second floor, every other window dark.

Ken faintly hears music from the apartment above; moving across the street, he huddles under a bus shelter and watches the building. The only light comes from the second-floor balcony with several bikes leaning against the railing.

Ken checks his watch.

"3:11 AM," Ken whispers to himself, "-not exactly a raging party."

Turning to look back out the street, the rain pours; not a single car anywhere- as far as he can see in either direction.

Behind him, the sound of a sliding door opening.

"Don't let him in," speaks a gruff voice.

"It's cold," squeaks a female voice, "-and he doesn't have a bed!"

"That mutt has fleas," yaps another voice, barely audible over the music coming from inside the apartment.

Peeking from the sidewalk below, Ken sees an outline of a young woman, and through the spokes of bike wheels and the balcony railing, a small dog lying down being pet by her.

"Close the fuckin' door- or stay out!"

The sliding glass door closes with a thud.

"No! No no, no..." sobs the young woman, banging on the door; the dog, looking resigned to its fate, head down without barking or even a whimper.

Ken watches as the young woman knocks on the glass for a few more minutes. A few lights in other apartments briefly turn on. Someone on the floor above yells about the racket and slams their window shut.

Moments later, the door slides open, a man holding a giant glass bong stands in the doorway.

"Get in, idiot, here, have a toke," he says, passing the bong to the young woman as she shivers and steps back into the warmth.

"B-b-but my dog..." is the last thing Ken hears as the man slams the sliding door shut, the music turns up, and deep bass tones thump to the street below.

Looking at the trash bin and bus shelter under the apartment above, Ken comes up with a plan. He jumps on the garbage can, vaults on the top of the glass-and-steel shelter; the ceiling flexes under his weight.

Ken rubs his shoe on the shelter ceiling's painted metal surface, not too slippery.

Closing his eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath, his mind flashes back to the park and the beatings he delivered. Feeling the rush of excitement again, Ken crouches down for a moment, pulls his flask from his vest and takes a long swig, his hands trembling a little as he prepares to jump.

With a burst of speed, Ken runs a few steps on the top of the shelter and jumps- extending his arms to catch the railing before quietly pulling himself up and over, crouching down next to the quiet grey pooch.

From the corner of the shadowy balcony, Ken reaches out

and pets the skinny, scruffy-looking dog. It gently nuzzles his gloved hand; its collar quietly jingles a little.

Ken remains hidden behind the half-closed blinds as light from the TV spills out onto a small section of the balcony; the music pounds, he smells a strong odour of marijuana. The hard slam of the glass door has left it open an inch or two from bouncing off the abused frame, enough to see wisps of blue smoke lazily drift out and the sounds of a bong bubbling away.

Standing up, Ken grabs the glass door handle and opens it, stepping through into the TV-lit apartment. On a couch sit two shocked-looking men with the young woman sitting in a dirty brown lay-z-bro closer to the trash-filled kitchen.

"What the-," says the closest man, jumping up from the couch and right into Ken's judo-skilled hands, now being hip-tossed through the glass coffee table.

Smash!

The young woman screams and drops the bong on the carpet, which rolls towards Ken as the other man dives off the couch. Scrambling, the startled dude trips over the scattered safety glass from the broken table- he falls down and crawls towards an aluminum bat next to the apartment's front door.

Turning to look back, Ken sees the man he tossed through the table; the man rolls around on the floor. A bit stunned, but still, he tries to get up. Ken grabs the TV from its stand, lifts it over his shoulders and brings it down on the man's head. With a mighty crash and a sizzling sound, the exploding TV briefly showers the man in sparks and smoke- the apartment goes dark, killing the bass-heavy soundtrack.

Flicking on his night-vision goggles, he can hear a door open.

"Josh! Chris! What the fuck!"

Ken turns and sees a man peeking out from the bedroom door. Jumping over the couch, Ken charges him quickly to grab him by the hair, pull his head into the doorway, and viciously slam the door on his head until he drops to the floor.

Just then, the kitchen light flicks on.

Spinning around quickly, he spots the bigger man holding a bat and standing next to the light switch. His face is a mixture of anger and fear, but mostly anger.

"You're dead, fucker!" He shouts, wielding the bat with both hands and lifting it above his head, charging at Ken in the small apartment.

Thinking fast, Ken slips his toes under the neck of the glass bong by his feet, lifting it quickly and flipping it into his hands before launching it at the batman's face. It hits him on the nose with near-perfect accuracy and explodes with a loud shatter, spraying glass everywhere.

"Ahhraggh!" Yells the man, dropping to his knees and clutching his face- just in time for Ken to deliver a big boot and send him flying backwards- the back of his head hitting the front door with a thud as he goes still.

The jingle of a dog collar is heard; he turns to look for the girl, who is now holding the dog in one arm while pointing a jagged glass shard at Ken.

"Hey now-" Ken speaks softly, "I'm not going to hurt you-"

"Fuck you!" The young woman screams. He flips off his night vision for a moment and looks into her reddened, crying eyes. Her blonde roots stick out under purple and blue rainbow hair, sores cover her face, and she's clothed in rags.

"Calm down-"

Just then, another young woman emerges from the bedroom wearing only a bedsheet, her makeup perfect and

without any blemishes. When she spots Ken, she screams.

"Calm down! You're ok; I'm not here to hurt you!" Ken holds up his hands in a peaceful gesture- to no use- the sheet-wearing woman strikes him with furious punches as the young woman with the dog runs to the apartment door.

"Kristin, you better not fuckin' run!" Screams the sheet-clad woman hitting Ken with her fists.

"Stop, I'm here to h-help!" Ken stutters as the woman strikes him a few times in the face before he grabs her by the wrists. Pushing her back into the bedroom, he twists his neck to spot the young woman open the locked front door; she scurries out into the hallway with her dog.

Feeling another punch land on the back of his hooded head, Ken turns and grabs the woman by her hair and drags her into the living room.

The place is a mess of broken glass, bodies, and trash. Ken sees a scale on the floor by the coffee table, a bunch of spilled powder; nearby are blue plastic baggies with black and red skulls printed on them.

"They're poisoning you, keeping you as sex slaves!" Ken uses his grip on her hair to force her to look.

The woman grabs at Ken's hand, holding her by the hair, and struggles.

"That's my shit, loser!" She replies, kicking him hard in the balls.

Ken restrains her with one hand, pulling the socks off one of the unconscious men with his free hand. He ties her up quickly and gags her with a roll of nearby duct tape, depositing her gently on top of the man who wears the TV as a hat.

The apartment is silent. All Ken hears is the light tapping of the front door against the backstop due to the open balcony

draft.

"Hello? I've called the cops, they're c-coming, you've all got to go!" A voice calls out from the hallway.

Looking around the apartment, the entire place is completely trashed. Weapons, drugs, bike parts, stacks of electronics, a few Xboxes and Playstations sit next to the now-empty TV stand. Cigarette butts and ash litter every surface-used needles fill the kitchen sink.

"Disgusting," Ken mutters, ignoring the voice from the hallway as he knows the cops are probably tied up downtown. If they come at all.

Something on the kitchen table catches Ken's eye, the words "pen launcher bear bangers" on the side of a cardboard box with the lid open. A couple pepper spray canisters, too. Looking inside the box, dozens of bear bangers, the suspected explosive that has woken him up many nights at Allie's- are ripe for the taking. His pockets are bursting open as he fills his cargo pants with bear bangers and pepper spray cans.

After loading up the loot, Ken reaches into his vest, now remembering he has some zip ties and binds the unconscious men together. One by one, he drags them out and stacks a pile of ruffians next to the door in the hallway before going back into the apartment to find a couple knives amongst the mess. His finger pushes the lock button on the inside door handle and closes it, stepping back into the hallway. Sticking the smaller blade in the keyhole, he strikes the side of the edge with his fist to break the tip off inside. Using the larger knife, he pulls out Mistress S's pink envelop with the black "S" on it and stabs the blade through it, sticking it firmly to the door.

"East van low-rise for rent," he mutters in a commercial-like voice while working on the door.

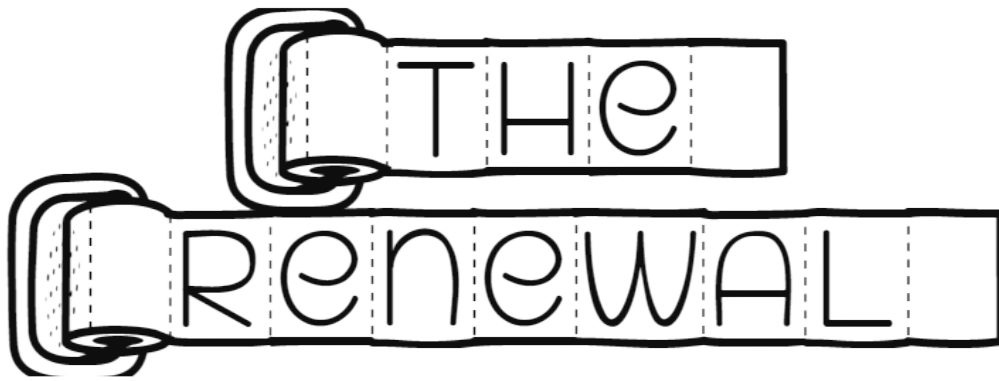
"-one-bedroom, balcony, friendly community, amenities include all-you-can-smoke meth annnd comp-li-men-tar-y BEATINGS!"

Ken turns and delivers a solid kick to one of the tied-up men waking up and moaning.

Hearing a door creak, he turns to look.

The neighbour, an older woman, is peeking out her door and holding her phone, pointing it towards Ken. She shrieks and slams her door closed, the sounds of multiple locks clicking as Ken sprints down the fire escape and out of the building.

Out on the street, he grabs his stashed longboard and listens for cops for a moment—no distant sirens. Defund the police worked, maybe. Looking around at the rainy main roads, there is no sign of the young woman or her dog- she fled into the wee hours only a few minutes ago and is gone. Far in the distance, Ken can see headlights on the horizon. Taking no chances with the fuzz again, he drops his electric board to the ground, hops on, and disappears down side streets into the drizzly night.



THE RENEWAL

The news goes wild for weeks about the random assaults happening all over the city, conveniently blaming shitkicker gangs and political extremists. The pundits all agree; the original shitkicker inspired terrorism and is an accomplice for each subsequent vigilante case on record. Ken can't bear to watch any more news or stay home- and the masks- the masks becoming required everywhere, even at the gym.

It is the afternoon—another shitty management meeting at work. The only bright side is that the gym is nearby, and Ken's sober enough today to use it. After making it through a dismal performance review by Azmina, Ken grabs his stuff and rushes to the elevator. Briskly walking the few blocks, his mask on, he walks through the doors to the gym and feels relieved. He is in his temple now, to build himself, finding peace through the iron.

Ken stares at the ceiling while lying on an exercise bench. His mind wanders; he begins to count the dots in the ceiling tiles, feeling his breathing slow from his last set. Dropped weights clank all around, and some droning techno music plays in the background as Ken lies there, on the bench press, about to attempt a new personal record.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

"Argh!" Ken grunts.

Clang!

Throwing the weight back on the rack and sitting up, breathing heavy and sweating, he picks up his notebook from the floor by his feet.

"4 plates, four reps," Ken scribbles in his book with a star beside it, "new record, nice."

A few bean counters come in the side door of the corporate gym and begin to do stretches. Ken switches to preacher curls before finishing off with some tricep exercises. He is mindful of his shoulder when using the t-bar; it is slightly sore this many weeks later but much more capable than before.

With grit teeth and a grunt, Ken throws a 100 lbs dumbbell above his head, briefly letting go of it and catching it before squatting and thrusting the mighty weight up another nine times. In the last repetition, throwing the weight above him with a loud scream, he catches it and drops it to the ground- sitting down to catch his breath.

Checking his phone, Ken has a notification on his phone. The B.C. Pomeranian Club approving his membership to join, Ken firing off an application a few days ago. Clicking through the Faceberg group last week, Ken noticed a few older women with Pomeranians that looked just like Sparky. He sent them friendly messages, introducing himself as a newcomer to Vancouver, a big-time pom fan, and looking to make friends.

"Hey bud, you using this?" speaks a nearby bro, Ken noticing he is getting cold from sitting still for so long.

"Oh shit, sorry, man," Ken stands up, wipes the equipment down, and walks to sit on an unoccupied nearby bench.

Writing another few messages after a check of his dwindling friend supply, Ken sits back and leans against the wall- letting out a sigh. Complications fill his life daily, and stress is his default state.

His phone rings- a scrambled number from Parlergram. He frowns and moans in frustration.

The phone keeps ringing until Ken finally accepts the audio chat.

"What," Ken barks, grabbing his things to leave the gym.

"Kenneth, that's no way to speak to a lady," Mistress S says in a manic, Betty Boop voice.

"What is it this time? What fucking hoop do you need me to jump through? What fucking game?"

"Kenoodle McDoodle, when are you going to lighten up? - this could just be a social call," Mistress S giggles, "-I'm starting to think you enjoy getting angry."

Ken exhales sharply through his nose.

"Check your messages, your little stunt last night- it was amazing. Our numbers have never been better among the 10 to 24-year-old range."

Ken's phone jingles; he pulls it from his ear to look, a DikDok link- he clicks it.

A video plays of a familiar-looking old woman- the woman from last night's raid. She sings and dances in her kitchen, waving freshly-baked cookies around- a chocolate S baked into them- taking the cookies into her hallway. The old lady is full of joy and gives cookies to her smiling neighbours, now unafraid to mingle in public spaces. She films the evicted neighbour's door, complete with police tape, turning and looking into the

camera to speak.

"Thank you, Mistress S, thank you! I can bake again in peace!"

Ken puts the phone back up to his ear as he exits the gym.

"Did you see how many likes?"

"No, I don't-"

"Over ten million, Ken, over ten million- in less than 12 hours. Her Plebbit post went worldwide, 'the grandma too scared of meth heads to bake cookies' they called it-"

"Why are you telling me this? I don't care- just- please, fuck- off, okay? I'm done."

"You don't even see how incredible this is? The hashtag #DefundThePolice trending next to #FundMissS, and you don't even celebrate what we've accomplished?"

"There is no fucking we!"

"You are as much a part of Mistress S as I am, maybe even more-"

"Just shut up, just shut up- before you, before you- I had a fucking great life."

"Oh-ho!" Mistress S bursts into laughter.

"So, so," she speaks in a mocking tone, "I made you beat up a bunch of meth heads in a park- while recording, I might add- and then, you upload it." Mistress S snorts with laughter. "Clearly, I made you do it. Oh, not only that, but you did it while wearing some conspicuous footwear that I forced you to bring to me, right?"

The line goes silent for a moment.

"Dirty shoes, by the way, a shit stain you barely cleaned off- I mean, who leaves their house with a shit-smearred shoe?"

"Ever been just, done- done with it? Y-y-ou ever have a fucking hard day?"

Ken's temper battles for control of him.

"-All I did was, my- I had shit go down, fuck- really shitty shit- okay? I woke up the next day, a huge gash on my face. That asshole stole my f-f-fucking bike- and my co-worker Seth threw me under the bus over some stupid document review- then I- I decide, oh, look at me, I'm trying to relax and move on with my life, so I go to a party, do some photography- that dipshit Marco- then- someone- three douchebags in white, drugged my drink when I was talking with this Russian milf cosplayer- those three guys- together- it couldn't have been anyone else-"

"That still doesn't explain the shit in the shoe."

"It- it was spontaneous. I was trying to let go- forgive, then just next door, the Gallery Italia was broken into- the- the cops didn't even arrest anyone. I- c-couldn't-"

Ken is so upset, he pauses for a moment and breathes deeply.

"I felt like if I didn't do something- anything- that night, that they won and keep winning. And guess what? They fucking won because look at me now." Ken feels red in the face. He's too aware of himself, walking down the street in the middle of the day, shaking his fist around, screaming into the phone.

Ken turns the corner and walks briskly up the sidewalk, finally in a patch of shadow. A nice, light breeze cools his burning cheeks and boiling blood.

"Are you done?" Mistress S deadpans.

"Y-yeah-" Ken sighs.

"Marco, that's a name I've heard before; I'm sure I could ask around about those three cretins-"

"I don't want to owe you anything, I want my shoes, I want my life back -you need to leave my life, you really, really

need to leave my life," Ken's voice calm again.

Turning for a moment to put his foot behind him, leaning slightly against the stone wall near Granville and Hastings, he lets out a huge sigh, batting his eyes to not cry.

"Bravo, you didn't have a breakdown," Mistress S claps slowly on the line.

"Okay. I played along with your game, I delivered your message and even raised your so-called profile for- whatever- it is you're up to. Please, leave me, and leave my family alone. I'm begging you. I'm asking nicely. Please."

"Hmm."

Ken holds his eyes closed and practices his breathing.

One.

Two.

Three deep breaths.

"I'll have your shoes for you. Tonight."

Ken pauses, unsure of whether to trust her. In his gut, he knows she is a venomous snake.

"When? Please- I just want my life back. I'm sorry, please understand. I wish I could take it all back." Ken stays cool and calm, feeling better, speaking his truth, feeling closer to closure.

"Around midnight, I'll text you later and let you know. I've heard all about how you dawdle, don't let us down. If you're not precisely on time, you'll lose your shoes."

Mistress S giggles.

"Who knows where they could end up- Stay fierce, Kenjamin."

Ken grimaces as she hangs up on him, turning and stomping towards home.

It will be a horrible night.

Much later, after midnight, Ken is again skulking around the city on Samantha's orders. He walks into the beautiful lobby of the hotel L'Germitage and tries to focus on his task. A fresh-looking cucumber water arrangement sits in an elegant crystalline decanter seated on an elaborate perch—the borderline-gaudy lobby looking more like a luxurious nightclub lounge. Taking an elevator to the 23rd floor and walking down the hallway, Ken opens up 2301 and, cautiously, he listens for an ambush, but there is none, and soon he peeks out the window over the cityscape of lights, glass, and noise.

Her instructions are precise. She says there will be some equipment Ken needs and to make sure to watch through the viewfinder at exactly 1 AM. Directly across from Ken is a rooftop patio of another building, purple LED lights flashing away, a disco ball rotates over dancing bodies. On the same side of the condo, nestling in the corner is a mini-telescope under the shadow of some long curtains- it conveniently points right into the party.

Walking over to it and looking through the viewfinder, it is perfectly positioned to watch the other balcony, and he soon spots the short Asian police officer Mistress S mentioned in her Parlergram instructions. Exactly how she described him, hair slick to one side, he mingles in plain clothes. Ken's eyes nearly jump out of their sockets when he notices a shoebox in his hand; a gorgeous female with red hair hugs him -just as the blinds close at the party place.

A small tablet is clipped to the tripod; the screen shows a red dot on an overhead map. It pulsates as the distance in meters displays beside the marker, updating every couple of seconds.

Ken examines the tablet.

The dot indicates movement, the target moves down and away from Ken. He must be in the elevator already.

Unclipping the tablet from the tripod, Ken runs out of the apartment and back into the elevator; once at the lobby, he sprints past the cucumber water, back into the crisp night air. Taking off in a hurry up the block, the tablet shows the target already 2 blocks away and travelling along Homer street.

Ken sticks to the shadows while jogging along, careful to keep track of the pulsating red dot, hardly believing that he's on a wild goose chase.

"Yet here I am," Ken grumbles, stepping around a group of homeless people outside of the Holy Rosary Cathedral. Running across the road to Homer, ready to shoulder-check any insane cyclists as he crosses paths with.

The red dot moves faster and faster, zig-zagging down and across blocks, back up and past one of Ken's other favourite bars, now closed, The Quart. At this hour, the whole area is a ghost town for ordinary people. Only a few taxis go by, a truck or two, the garbage-strewn streets of Tinseltown lit up in neon with all sorts of corrupt figures lurking among unlit nooks. Ken speeds up, catching up to the stranger as they pass a McDonald's. A dozen unfortunates huddle inside among filth-the sight momentarily distracts him from the figure crossing the road to the Classic Chinese Gardens ahead.

Ken's eyes widen in bewilderment as the short plainclothes cop tosses the shoebox over the wall to the Chinese garden.

Crossing the road himself, Ken tucks the tablet into his vest and zips it up before standing at the wall.

It is at least ten feet high.

"What the fuck," Ken whispers, his heart racing, looking

around for any witnesses- the street dead quiet.

There is a spray-painted electrical box up the block; Ken dashes over to it, checking around again for anyone watching, and hops onto it. Ken can almost see over the wall; it is a short-but slippery- jump.

"Ugh!"

Flinging himself with all his might, swinging his arms and lunging out, Ken's body slams against the wall; his hands scramble for a grip but find none. Ken slides, flailing his arms to grip anything; he barely hangs on with a painful slip of his right hand from slippery moss onto some rough, sharp rocks.

Pulling his leg up and rolling over the top, Ken swings his legs down and drops onto a row of shrubs, finding a patch of pavement and crouching in the shadows.

It's quiet.

Ken spots the grass clearing where the shoebox lies; it sits undisturbed- lit by some of the garden's floodlights. Crossing through the open pond area, Ken heads to the magnificent pagoda that sits silhouetted against the garden's back wall.

Stepping out into the path, Ken sneaks past the pagoda and towards the shoebox prize. He finds the box sitting there with a piece of tape wrapped around it- lifting it, the package is off-balance.

"What the-"

Ken crouches down and rips the tape off, casting the lid aside.

Reaching in, the heavy-weighted rectangular thing inside has a rough texture.

Ken flips it over in his hands. It is a brick with a small red flashing tracker sticking to it.

"Oh- shit," he whispers, his shoulders sink when he

stands.

The lights in his side of the garden come on. Turning to look, Ken notices a couple of police officers and another man emerge from the shadows and walk under the red light from the lantern hanging from the pagoda's side. A fourth figure stands farther away with crossed arms, watching.

"Looking for these?" says the man in plain clothes as one of the police officers behind him holds up a clear plastic bag- Ken's old Bluvbhog shoes inside of it.

Ken nods slowly.

"Good, because we're looking for you- we need something tonight. A favour..."

Ken tilts his head and puts his hands on his hips. His pause is so dramatic that the man speaking stops mid-sentence.

"What?"

"What do you mean what?" Ken speaks with disgust in his voice.

"What's with- this?" the man motions at Ken's body language.

"I'm fucking done-" Ken drops his hands from his hips and stands straight, pointing down with one index finger at the plainclothes stranger's feet.

"You're done?" the man asks so casually.

"Look buddy- I'm not anyone's messenger, I'm not anyone's errand boy, this is not a joke, I'm not for hire-"

"You're also in no state to be giving demands," speaks the man, pulling a familiar-looking envelope with an S on it from inside his jacket, holding it out for Ken.

Ken cautiously steps forward, snatching the envelope. Inside is a black and white image of Allie's work. The security camera image clearly shows Agent Crunst talking to Allie- a

giant smile on her face.

"What's this-"

"You are hesitant to work for us, yes, but- note it is September 28th- no coincidence- and I'm sure you will be willing to help us. You need to only listen to our noble cause. It aligns with your values, and we will deal with your federal problem for you."

"No- no- fuck it- I'm done. Arrest me- I don't care."

Ken turns around and puts his hands behind his back.

"Suit yourself-" says the plainclothed man, walking up behind Ken and grabbing one of his wrists.

"-you're not even real cops anyways!" Ken yells- lifting the back of his heel into the man's groin, spinning and delivering an elbow to his mouth.

Recoiling, the plainclothes cop throws a wild punch. Ken side-steps it and palm-strikes towards the man's gut, catching him in the solar plexus and knocks him backward.

Staggering, the man keeps his balance- Ken follows up by running at him- jump-kicking him through the red wooden railing of the pagoda building with a loud crack.

Spinning to deal with the other threats, a flash of blue and yellow sparks in the low light-

Zap!

Pain wracks Ken's body as it goes rigid- a full-body cramp- he can only muster a quiet groan.

Zap!

The second officer fires his taser, hitting Ken in the throat just under his mask.

Dropping to the ground, Ken struggles as they cuff him, and a bag covers his head- stabbing pain in his arm as darkness overcomes him.



Ken is groggy when he comes to, feeling a sharp, deep pain in his arm, breathing through a cloth bag over his head and unable to see- his arms behind him, the rope tight on his wrists ties him to the chair.

Fwoof!

The bag on his head comes off; he's in a small windowless room with two Asian police officers.

"Ken," the shorter cop speaks and lifts up a cigarette to Ken's lips, "-smoke?"

"Sure," Ken says; smoking has never been a habit- this is an excellent time to start.

The other cop walks over and lights it for him.

"We had to be careful, so no cameras would catch you with us," the cop pats Ken on the back as Ken coughs from the smoke.

"Thanks," Ken says; smoke ash floats to the floor as smoke drifts into his now-watering eyes. He coughs, and the cigarette hits the ground; the smaller cop puts it back between Ken's lips.

"If you're wondering, the shoes are safe from the feds, for now," the one short cop nods to the other.

The taller cop leaves the room for a moment, returning with a shoebox missing its lid and placing it on the table.

Looking down, a gun in the box.

"We already have another longboard for you, from evidence, well, our evidence," the two cops chuckle; Ken can't tell if they're real cops or not.

"It's badass- all-aluminum- comes with a Bluetooth hand remote."

Ken stares at the gun; it's a slightly battered-looking Glock.

"We have your records from the reserves; you're an excellent shot."

"I-I don't suppose you are giving me a choice in this," Ken speaks softly.

The shorter cop crouches down in front of Ken.

"You did so much good once before, kicking our boss in the family jewels- not so good. But- hey, we're not all perfect- this time, you'll make a difference in so, so many lives."

"Uh-huh," nods the taller cop.

"Ever heard of the Royale Suites? Worst of the worst of the SROs. A human trafficking scumbag named Big C, or Big Candy- he runs the entire building."

"Total scumbag, but rich and completely untouchable," the other cop says.

"He's right, Big Candy's lawyers actually had the city pay to install the wiring needed for his webcam empire. His business partner wears a pig suit all the time-"

"Pig suit?" Ken curiously lifts his head.

"Leather, red and black with a hideous face. He and Big C run all the fetish events and massage parlours downtown, too. They're in with the Asian mobsters. It's all a big pie to them."

Ken looks back at the gun for a moment, then leans

sideways in the chair to spit the cigarette out.

"Two crooked cops, a gun, a crime lord and- blackmail?"

The short cop looks at the tall cop for a moment before turning back to look at Ken, the cop holds his hands out, palms up.

"There is more to it; our values align, eliminating Big C would cause the entire empire to turn on itself and crumble. We could save some of the addicts he is putting on camera for profit, stop the pipeline. The exploitation is unstoppable- without your help."

Silence in the room.

The tall cop walks around and puts a photo on the table in front of Ken.

"Melanie, twenty-three, on drugs for 9-10 years and probably camming the whole time. She had an infection and couldn't work. They found her in that crumpled pile in the alleyway on a cold, rainy winter morning. The residents all said she jumped, but we know the truth. They threw her from the window, Ken, like trash."

"G-give me my life back, s-shut up-" Ken feels lightheaded; a rushing, energetic feeling washes over him in waves. Tears fill his eyes, and doom implodes his chest.

"In her sick state, she wouldn't be able to walk, let alone end up twenty horizontal feet away from the building. Some sick fuck tossed her from the window or roof."

Ken looks at the photo of the emaciated woman with brown hair. Her face is a harrowing expression of loss and misery that seems to force a reckoning in his ethically adrift heart.

He rips his head away and stares at the wall.

"I- I have to go, get me out of here!"

"Rae-lee Sunchild," the tall cop said, dropping another photo on the table. This time, a hospital bed full of tubes, and underneath lies a young woman.

"She was 9 months pregnant. Big C found out it was his and had her kidnapped. They used a turkey baster full of acid and-"

"ENOUGH!"

Ken rocks in his chair and kicks back the table; the cops go silent for a moment.

The short cop walks over to Ken, sits down next to him, leaning against the table with one arm; he looks Ken right in the eyes as the tall cop walks out of Ken's sight. As the cop speaks, Ken's eyes lazily close, and each word echos in his head.

"Ken, I want you to picture you standing in an empty room. The room is empty. On the wall, however, there are two screens. Big screens, big TVs like those made you wonder if they were bigger than life, like when you were a kid and went shopping with your parents at Future Shop. That kind of big screen. One of the screens, Ken, the one on your right, is in colour. The screen on your left is in black-and-white, now the right screen, it's the same size as the other one, but it's in colour. Beautiful colours, too, Ken. Bright, cheerful, happy colours."

Ken feels a stabbing pain; his arm burns and stings, his head rushes, and he grits his teeth.

"Now on the left screen, we can see all these hotels, a bunch of them highrises, reaching up into storm clouds, and the windows Ken, they're open. Every room is an abyss of darkness, but can you see inside? Do you want to see what you see inside? People, Ken, mostly young women, on drugs, on

web camera. They're trapped. Powders, pills, needles. Every vice you could imagine keeps them chained there. Look at their pale bodies covered in blackened sores. You see those buildings every day, Ken, and you never think of the suffering going on inside, do you? Many of them, a whole neighbourhood of them, all worked to their deaths- to make a small group rich. Their suffering behind closed doors while the rich openly show off their wealth. Doesn't look happy, does it?"

Ken shakes his head slowly.

"Now turn, turn to the right screen, it's happy, the colours of green grass, grey sidewalk, blue skies, yellow flowers. See the people walking, birds chirping, a livable community. A people with genuine faith, living lives where their hopes and dreams can be a reality. A young mother pushing a stroller, an old couple on a park bench, they're blowing bubbles for a toddler, their grandchild- a cycle of positive cultural continuance- a renewal."

Ken struggles to free his arms for a moment, his vision warbling in a way he's never felt; the man's words continue to penetrate his head.

"A renewal, Ken."

Ken thinks his front teeth are going to snap off from biting down so hard.

"Look at the left screen Ken, inside your mind. Look at it, Ken. Soak in that misery."

"F-f-!" Ken breathes hard through his clenched jaw, his face and neck tense up thoroughly, trying to scream, trying to not see the portrait of hell.

"-Uuuuucckkk!" He screams with a spray of spittle, hitting the wall closest to him.

"Change the channel, Ken," the officer leans in and

whispers in his ear.

"H-how?" Ken breathes hard, his face numb. An odd sensation flows through him like his mouth is inside out.

"Make sure the bad guy doesn't win anymore."

The two cops are silent and stare right through him. The halo around the light above Ken makes the room spin and shimmer at the same time. Some time passes- or does it, he isn't sure.

"Give me the gun and the address," he whispers.

"You're a good man, Ken," the short cop says softly.

"Y-yeah," Ken is warm like everything will be okay.

The bright colours from the TV in his mind fill the room.

No more lies to Allie.

It is time to start the renewal.

It is time to change the channel.

Ken knows; life will be simple, ordinary, and honest again.

The tall cop pulls out his phone and shows Ken the scummy-looking apartment building and the various doorways inside, including photos of the back stairway and elevator in front. The top floor is where Big C hangs out, usually lounging around on his heart-shaped bed, drinking, doing drugs and yelling at someone.

"PiggyP, his 2nd in command, will be repairing the webserver tonight, as we are doing an unplanned outage on it. This will also allow for the models to all bug their floor boss for money or drugs. You can pose as a dealer- we'll give you some crystals- take the elevator to the top floor, eliminate Big C and then run out the back stairs. We'll drop your longboard inside an old mattress by the dumpster. Look for the slit in the side; we'll hollow one out and stuff it in. This man is a scourge to the neighbourhood, his presence a blight on the people trying to

survive- Ken- you have to do this. Just look at the endless string of victims."

Ken studies the tall cop's phone for a few minutes before asking questions.

"So, if- if I do this- when can I- have my life back?"

"You do this, and tomorrow you will get a text to the coordinates for drop-off. I suggest you either burn the shoes or throw them off one of the bridges. Your DNA and fingerprints are alllllll over them."

"She-, she said I was going to get them tonight." Ken half-whispers.

The short cop laughs.

"You think you were going to get your shoes that easy?"

The tall cop laughs.

"When Mistress S lets you feel in control, you're never in control."

Ken makes a mocking face at the short cop before the tall officer grabs the black hood, getting ready to put it back on.

"Tomorrow- I get my shoes- my life back-" Ken stares at the breathing floor and looks back at the cops. The room quivers like a bowl of pudding in a paint shaker as a strong headrush overcomes him. His unstable mind is racing full of thoughts he can't understand- everything is wrong.

"No more- after this- no more-"

Both cops nod.

"I'm ready for the renewal-" Ken whispers, the police putting the hood back over his head.



A van rolls slowly through a back alley in Chinatown; a distant streetlight casts enough light to barely see. Little puffs of steam exit the exhaust pipe as rain patters on the vehicle's roof. Inside, Ken sits on the floor next to a dirty white mattress.

"Just remember what to say, and take one of those coats you're sitting on to look the part," the shorter cop points at a pile of gaudy sequined jean jackets and sports apparel.

Ken chooses an old Toronto Maple Leafs puffy hockey jacket.

"Ooh- ah- geez," the shorter cop breathes through his teeth.

"What?" says the taller cop, who is driving.

"It-it's just that, you know-"

"Huh?"

"The Leafs?"

Ken looks at the rearview mirror, and the tall cop is looking right back at him.

"Don't jinx it. Ken will be fine- he comes highly recommended," the tall cop says, winking at Ken in the mirror.

"When you're done, lift this part up, grab the board, and throw the gun in. We'll handle the rest." the shorter cop

motions with his hand, Ken opening the mattress up enough to reveal a silver electric longboard and handheld wireless controller inside.

Pulling under an awning, the side door of the plain white minivan opens to let the Ken slip into the umbra; the van speeds away.

Ken ducks into a backdoor alcove and re-checks the gun. The safety is on, and it's loaded. His hands shake a little from the cold, primarily due to the adrenaline rushing through his body. Reaching into his new smelly used coat and through to his vest, Ken pulls out his flask and downs the last of his vodka. Stepping out of the alley, he is on high alert- on route to the Royale Suites near Hastings and Main.

Flashing neon, screams, the scent of urine, boarded up storefronts. It is all downhill and depressing, like the rain is the city's tears that night- tears of joy for the renewal. Ken hunches his shoulders and presses on, picking up his pace and keeping his face down. Not too low as to not see a sucker punch coming from any number of the dark figures he passes. Desperate people huddle in doorways all around. The rain comes down harder and harder as Ken can hear a helicopter somewhere overhead in the distance over the car horns and chaos of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

"Stick to the script," he reaches into his coat and feels the small bags of powder the cops gave him. His handlers' instructions loop over and over inside his mind.

Crossing the street and looking up at the dilapidated building, the facade is menacing. Needles, broken glass, and trash litter about the entrance; several people lying unconscious with their hair matted to cheeks. A man lies face down in the rain with a piece of torn cardboard for a mattress.

The front buzzer has a fresh smear of feces across the buttons.

Ken picks up a nearby needle and uses it to push "101" for the manager.

Bzzt!

Ken glances about nervously; he tries to look relaxed and confident to not be a mark. Shuffling figures move towards him in the rain, one of the passed-out bums at his feet grabs at his ankle, and Ken steps away politely.

"Manager," the intercom voice says in a pissed-off tone.

"Hey, it's Tina, looking for 205," Ken says in his most gruff voice, "-fuckin' let me in."

The door clicks and unlocks.

Ken drops the needle and carefully opens the front door to not squish the person sleeping behind it.

The lobby smells of old cigarettes and death. Shag carpet that once held colour is now dark grey and torn in spots, stains covering the walls, wiring exposed and distended like a copper hernia. A sliced-up trashbag spills out used napkins next to the elevator; its door ajar; a pink-haired skinny person stands on guard with a walkie-talkie in hand. They're covered in jailhouse tattoos and wearing a stained white tank top, an immediate rush of fight-or-flight in Ken's mind from the aposematic hints.

"Yeah, copy," the pink-haired person says into their radio, their split tongue flickers in the dim light of the lobby.

"Tina, 205," Ken says.

"I've never seen you before, and the Leafs suck," the pink-haired person grumbles, looking Ken up and down.

"Boss wants to move more product; the last guy smoked too much," Ken spits back, "I'm giving away free shit, San Jose biker crank; if there's any left after Big C gets his cut, I'll give you the rest."

Ken squints, having practiced his intimidating looks in the mirror recently.

"Big C," the pink-haired person radios in, "-you order some crank?"

The radio crackles to life, Big C rambles with the semi-incoherent speech of someone high on drugs.

"Crank? Fuck- no, yes? I said a fuckin' 8-ball for Shawna on the 2nd, not crank, not fent, an 8-ball, she's- I think- second, second for blondes, but only on coke, she smokes weed, and it's all fuckin' politics and veganism, goddamn mudder-fuckin' old-growth forest BULLSHIT, I say bitch, if you can move your lips, you can sucky-fucky!"

"Sure, boss," the pink-haired person replies on the radio. They don't take their eyes off Ken as they call the elevator, which comes in a few seconds; they step inside and keep tense eye contact.

"You Coming? You're right; 205 is always chicken flipping; boss doesn't tour the other floors much."

Ken nods, getting into the elevator with his escort.

The elevator reaches the 2nd floor. Ken walks down the hallway to 205, stops halfway and turns to the pink-haired man.

"Don't wanna scare her, eh?"

The pink-haired man stares at him for a moment, rolls his eyes and walks back to the elevator.

Walking up to the door, the 5 of 205 is hanging crooked. Ken knocks lightly. A gaunt blonde willow of a woman opens the door, caked-on makeup to cover her sunken and blank face. Following the instructions from the cops, Ken pulls out the small bags of powder; he holds a baggy out to her. The old-looking lady's eyes glimmer for a moment, her shaky hand

snatching the illicit goods from Ken's palm. The top of the little ziplock opens accidentally in her haste, and crystalline dust fills the air and sinks into the carpet. The woman cries out in grief, puts her nose to the tattered floor and begins to inhale anything she can. Ken steps backwards, unable to take his eyes off the miserable show. Curling into a ball on the filthy ground, with garbage strewn about- the old woman weeps quietly.

"Naa av nuh massi," Badrick shouts inside Ken's head again, "-nuh massi, Ken, nuh massi!"

He sighs and shuts the door for her, walking back to the pink-haired person guarding the elevator.

"I fuckin' need to see Big C,"

"No, you don't," replies the pink-haired person with a menacing scowl.

"I do- look, you want higher profits, so do I, this whole policy you have about no door-knocking is bullshit-"

"It's because they're doing live shows, dumbass, donations vanish if they get up and stop chatting to get high- they get their drugs before or after shows, never during!"

Ken pulls out his phone.

"Ok shithead, when the fuck is the schedule, shit-for-brains?"

"There is none; look around?" the pink-haired person motions around to the completely rotten and falling-apart building all around them.

"Does it look like this place runs on a schedule?"

Ken points at his phone.

"Fuckin' gonna piss off the boss if we send over one delivery at a time, it's bullshit. We could be out doing big drops and moving product, look-"

Ken pauses talking, smiles and closes his eyes before

looking down and laughing.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Ken opens his eyes and looks at the pink-haired person, who is now having a chuckle as well.

Ken just notices a hidden knife handle on the pink-haired person's waistband, right by where Pinky rests their hand.

"We're here to make money, you too, so I'm going to go talk to Big C and say having a schedule posted somewhere, or whatever, it was your idea, and it will make us all more money."

Ken smiles at the pink-haired person and makes a motion rubbing his fingers against his palm together like he is making it rain.

"He uses Robodriod, not a shit iPhone," the pink person turns and walks to the elevator.

"Boss, coming up," Pinky radios ahead.

He turns to look grumpily at Ken.

"Let's go, come on."

Ken follows inside as the elevator goes up to the top floor.

Ding.

The bell actually works on the top floor.

Pinky steps out of the elevator first. The red carpeting is noticeably cleaner, and every apartment door is removed from the frame. In its place, thin curtains, which Ken peeks in as they slowly walk down the long hallway to the gold-painted open french doors at the end. Inside each doorway is a scene of desperation illuminated by computer screens; drugs, sex toys, passed-out couples, acts of coitus and mini-orgies utterly oblivious to Pinky and the stranger casually walking by.

Disgusted, Ken keeps his face relaxed- but mean. His hands are steady; he can't help actually feeling good. It is time to change the channel—a renewal.

Pinky leads him to the door, which opens up into a room full of computer screens, a set of windows overlooking the back alley below. In the middle of the room, a massive heart-shaped bed with a very plump bald man lying on it, barely covered in a dirty, piss-stained sheet.

"The fuck you want?" screams the sweaty bald fat man.

"Schedule, I want a schedule; Pinky here said you have a cool Robodroid phone, maybe we could-"

"That fuck had that idea? Bullshit- no way, I've asked that fuck how many times to schedule the girls to shows starting on the hour, it- it NEVER fuckin' works!"

Pinky's face twists up with rage.

"Did you order my pizza? Did the 8-ball make it to 205? or 207? Her earnings have dropped; bitch better put in some fuckin' work!"

The fat man on the bed pulls up a little mirror and a rolled-up bill.

Sniff!

"Eatin' through my nose tonight," the fat man bellows with laughter before digging around under his body and pulling out a phone which he throws to Pinky.

The pink-haired person holds the phone up and away from them, tossing it to Ken, who catches it. It's warm, wet, and smells.

"Pass is one, two, three, four," says the fat man.

Ken looks at Big C and the pink-haired person before unlocking the phone. Photos of a couple of cute kids are in the background of the home screen.

"You like my fuckin' kids, you fuck?"

Ken looks up.

"They're nice."

"Yeah, check out the photos folder; we just spent 3 weeks with my in-laws up at a fishing resort; my one kid caught a giant salmon, the other a cold! We flew back and stayed in the Grande Paradisio in Whistler for a week, fuck- Guy's steakhouse completely FUCKED our takeout order, cunts, that reminds me-"

Big C reaches under him again and pulls out a tablet with a somewhat greasy smear on it. Rubbing it off with his elbow, the enormously gluttonous creature lies back against his pillows. He glistens with sweat, and his nose leaks blood.

"Fuckin' leaving a bad Welp review, and I'm going to email the head chef and call him a cocksucker for how overdone my steak was. Mother fucker! Fuckin' assholes, it's not fuckin' hard to fuckin' cook steak. Not to mention I forgot to fuckin' shit on my mortgage broker for locking me into that shitty rate, fag," Big C adjusts himself on the bed and breaks wind a few times.

Ken looks back at the phone and looks at the three children. Clicking the camera icon, Ken sweeps through Big C's phone, and there are so many photos of Big C attending the first day of school, birthdays, going to amusement parks, hoisting a trophy with his son, Big C with his wife inside the fanciest hotels.

A disgusted look spreads across Ken's face.

"You done with the calendar? Book shows every hour, my alarm will ring; I'll walkie Pinky to enforce it. Tell your crew we'll do two or three big buys a day; it must drive you nuts having to come back here every time one of these fucknuts needs to ride the dragon. Fuckin' Pinky is losing his mind trying to remember you all. Can you set alarms? Anything to keep these fuckers earning- fuckin' hot tub Glitch thots think they can steal our simps, no fuckin' way!"

Ken fumbles with the phone as he remembers the gun in his pocket, a blink in his mind of that woman's corpse the cops showed him. Thrown to her death, frail and helpless, discarded after being of no use to this gluttonous, repugnant creature before him.

His mission.

The two screens.

Change the channel.

He freezes, his eyes glaze over.

"It is time for the renewal," he whispers.

The pink-haired person and Big C look at each other and look back at Ken, whose hands are shaking and slowly reaching for the gun.

The first shot he fires veers wildly away from Big C, who is now, in slow-motion, dodging behind his bed near the window.

The second shot struck Big C in the buttocks as he dives for his nightstand, grabbing something from the drawer as he hides at the side of the bed.

The third shot happens as the pink-haired person comes in for a stab with their knife, the small but serrated blade failing to hit its mark due to Pinky's spine being shattered by a bullet. Ken's eyes gaze into the wounded man's eyes as he falls to the ground, turning to see the fat man duck behind his bed. A calmness envelops him, and he relaxes his grip on the smoking gun.

The wild fourth, fifth, and sixth shots hit the bed as Ken moves closer to finish his target, just as drugged-out and confused orgy guests are running into the suite screaming.

Ken dodges a few nude people and pushes another one out of his way long enough to see a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun peek out from behind the bed.

The first shot blows off a young woman's leg, sending her writing in pain on the floor screaming.

The second shot blasts through a young man's back, falling at Ken's feet in a mess.

Big C stands up completely nude, his folds so pink and so much excess flesh, his mitten-sized hands clutch shotgun shells as he tries to reload while screaming abuse.

"Fuckin' goof mother-of-fuck!" Big C screams, his face red as he fumbles with reloading.

Ken pulls the trigger again, and the gun jams. He tries to clear the weapon, it totally locking up.

Running towards the bed, Ken leaps onto it and jumps again, delivering a solid kick to one of the many chins of Big C. The sphere-like man tumbles backwards through the window, a crash of glass, and down to the alley far below. A wide-eyed Ken steps to the broken window and watches as he hits concrete with a thud, a red mist forms when he bounces. Big C struggles for a few seconds, scooping his guts back inside his burst belly, and dies.

Ken turns around.

The nude druggies are mainly gone, a few left cowering on the floor in nervous breakdowns. A few so drugged-out, oblivious, in the corner of the room. Pinky lies on the ground, looking up at Ken, mouthing a "fuck you," their eyes close, and they die on the spot.

The radio crackles alive.

"What the fuck is going on? Who's shooting? Hello?"

Both of Ken's arms shake, and his body trembles, the mission complete. He sprints out of the room and down the emergency exit.

His feet barely touch the stairs as he jumps down each

flight. Grabbing the handrail and flinging himself over railings, down, again and again, landing on the ground floor of the back alley exit.

Breathing hard and his heart racing, he boots the back door open, dashing out to the flipped-over mattress with the hole in it. The cops said it is a fast longboard- and he's eager to test its limits. Reaching into the stuffing, he grips onto one of the wheels and begins to yank it out.

The board sticks on something; Ken's panicked pulling just gets the board more tangled up inside the mattress. Lifting the bed open, he sees a stuck wheel. Screams are heard echoing from the building behind him. It rains harder; he can feel the rain soak him in his efforts to untangle the last wheel. Looping around it is some cotton stuffing, ripping and tugging with all his might; it doesn't budge.

Sirens and a rushing sound of footsteps in the wet alley; two men burst past Ken and spot the bloody corpse of Big C.

"Fuck- no!" shouts a man in anguish.

"Call Piggy, find Pinky, I'll call the boys-go!" says the other voice as Ken turns and watches one man slap the other on the back; the man runs into the building. Just then, Ken rips the board free from the mattress. Tossing the warm gun inside the mattress hole, he throws the longboard down and jumps on it.

"Hey!" shouts a voice.

"That's him!" shouts a female voice.

Ken looks up behind him to see a woman in the window pointing at him, her face a twisted mess of hate and pain.

His vision wobbles; her face morphs into a pulsating, messy spiral. The world around him is loud and forceful in every sense; he can't even hear himself scream as he jets down the alleyway.

Booms erupt at both ends of the street as figures peek from doorways; the yells surround him as he exits the alleyway. Passing a cyclist and a couple cars- he sees a man with a train of shopping carts blocking the road ahead. Ken turns to look for an alternate route, spotting a white-faced and wild-eyed BMX rider chasing him, riding one-handed. In the rider's other hand, he's got an axe, swinging it above his head in furious pursuit.

The longboard's electrical engine wails like a Tesla banshee as Ken hops the curb and zig-zags through pedestrians. Beyond the shopping cart blockade, he jumps off the sidewalk and back into the street. Flying down Hastings street towards Main, preparing for a wide left turn- a bus enters the intersection, turning in front of him. Ken drifts out of the way of the turning bus, slides into the curb and crashes hard on the sidewalk. Rolling several times, he comes to a stop against a lamp post.

"Ughh-" he moans, sitting up as fast as he can, his mind reeling from the crash. Adrenaline, pain, nausea, rage, Ken feels it all at once; he also wonders where the hatchet man is.

Turning to look, a crowd surrounds him at the bus stop- mostly stunned locals. Mostly harmless folk- a man in a balaclava charges him just as Ken manages to stand. Thrusting a fireplace poker, it hits Ken in the chest and sinks in, eliciting screams from the crowd. He looks down; the head of the poker disappears into his vest, stuck in him.

"Argghhh!" the crazy man growls, pushing the poker, trying to skewer him with it.

Ken stumbles backwards, hitting the lamppost with his spine and the back of his skull. The crazed attacker pushes with all his weight, forcing the poker deep into Ken's vest.

Ken's eyes close. Taking a deep breath, he resigns to die;

the breathing doesn't hurt as much as he thinks it should. A waft of warm vodka fumes drift into his nose; Ken immediately registers what happened. The stab punches a hole in one of his empty vodka flasks, interrupting his execution.

Opening his eyes, Ken throws an elbow strike, catching the man in the face and breaking his nose. With the poker still stuck in Ken's vest, the two men have a tug-of-war.

Off-balance and stumbling backwards, Ken regains his footing, pivots, and suplexes the man over him and onto the hard concrete head-first.

Someone from the late-night crowd on the corner blindsides Ken, hitting him with something.

Smash!

Ken stumbles forward in pain. His ears ring. Bits of freshly broken bottle glimmer and scatter on the road, feeling a boot connect right to his guts.

"Oof!"

Spinning around and keeping his head up, he spots a baseball bat swung at him at the last second- and ducks!

Coming up with an uppercut, Ken catches the bat-swinger in the jaw, sending spit flying. They fall back onto their ass, quickly sitting back up to continue their assault. Ken spins on his heel, mule-kicking the person back into a prone position, their head hitting the ground with a solid bonk.

The crowd splits, a man in all black and holding a butcher's knife rushes towards Ken. Ripping the fire poker from his chest, Ken throws it like a dart and impales the man through the groin, dropping him.

"Ahhhh!!!"

Ken turns and looks. The gathering crowd parts again; the hatchet man drops his bike with a racket and leaps through the

air screaming, axe held with both hands and swinging for Ken's head. Tensing up, Ken pivots all his weight onto his back leg and throws his right leg as high as possible, hoping for the best. Ken's athletic shoe's heel hits the hatchet man just under the chin- crushing his teeth to dust. The man's head snaps back violently, the axe falling with a clang next to the motionless body.

Pushing through the crowd and grabbing his longboard from the gutter, Ken jumps back on. More bangs in the distance- and a man running towards him from across the street with a sword.

Fleeing flat-out down the street, Ken's vision becomes a tunnel, his heart pounds brutally in his chest- more arduous than he can ever remember. Images through his mind's eye of flaming shopping carts heading towards him- horrible ghouls chasing from every street, monsters lurking under the Georgia viaduct. He can see all their faces- the suffering- none of them too unlike him. Ken wobbles on his board, dodging the little traffic out so late and cutting under the viaduct to lose any chasers he still has on his tail.

It isn't until he makes it home that he feels- whatever- wearing off- just before the sun begins to rise. His mind flashes images of Allie, her face so angry, Ken alone- nothing. Nobody- then the shaking starts. He tries to strip himself but only gets so far- his body convulsing in the shower, no matter how hot- he freezes. He quivers and vomits- feeling a choking sensation. Minutes or hours pass and the water runs cold- or is it- he can't tell. Trembling, he lies there and wishes he could stop breathing for real.



Waking up in a cold sweat, Ken feels sore, battered, and drained. He crawls into the living room and wraps his nude body in a blanket for a few minutes as nausea overtakes him. Limping back to the bathroom, he vomits into the shower and passes out for another few hours in his own filth.

Ken comes to on the bathroom floor, his phone nearby showing it is nearly 1 PM. He's still drunk- and something-different. Minutes pass as he struggles with the previous night's hangover and memories that don't make sense. Looking at his arm in the mirror, Ken can clearly see the marks and bruising left by several needles. Shuffling to his kitchen, he finds an old water bottle, takes it to the bathroom to collect a urine sample, and puts the tightly sealed bottle in his fridge.

Shuffling back to the couch and his laptop—the bright glow from the screen sends pain through his eyes, deep into his brain. The internet quickly shows him where he can get a blood sampling kit nearby, back at the same infamous London Rugs, the origins of his nightmare story.

Throwing on some clothes and not even bothering to look in the mirror, Ken steps outside and walks to the drug store. The overcast fall day with spitting rain has everyone walking

with their heads down, ear pods in, like students of some dark académie. Ken is on his way to do a science experiment himself. Pulling his hoodie tight, he avoids looking at the bike rack, shuffling through the London Rugs front doors. Remembering that he needed to put on his mask at the last second, which he does, mainly since so many snitches lurk about, ready to report non-compliance. The straps aren't tight but somehow makes his splitting headache worse.

Finding the blood sampling kit is easy. The lineup to pay extends back and around the cosmetics department as everyone stays six feet apart. Ken coughs and trebles, which keeps people at bay and earns him several dirty looks and the ire of everyone in earshot.

Ken battles himself to walk the incline towards home; a cataclysmic headache pounds away, and nausea hits him in waves. Opening his basement door, he falls on the couch, fatigued for another hour before being able to move again.

Sitting in his bathroom, he takes his own blood sample with a kit-supplied syringe. The last bits of sunlight drape a golden band of light on the windowsill; in the light, the fresh vial of blood from his arm resembles a cylindrical ruby. Carefully, Ken uses the testing kit and waits the recommended 10 minutes in the instructions. The next few minutes going by feels like hours; he paces around his place with tremors the entire time. His head is swimming, his stomach upset, and bruises paint his body like a leopard's rosette.

Looking at the test blotting paper, the results are in.

Cocaine positive

Ketamine positive

Scopolamine positive

Ken blinks his eyes and rubs them.

"You're fucking kidding me..." he whispers, standing up and taking the sealed vial of blood and puts it in the fridge. Returning to the drug kit instructions, flipping through them for any indication of false positives.

This kit is over 98.8% effective; further blood testing is available by sending in samples.

Ken looks back at the results.

"T-t-those couldn't- couldn't have been cops."

His heartbeat flutters immediately, and his throat tightens; an even more incredible rush of anxiety and betrayal surges through his entire being. Balling his hand into a fist, he throws a punch into the shattering mirror.

"Fuck! Fuck you, Samantha!" he screams, "fuck, fuck!- FUCK!"

Falling into a corner of the room among bits of broken glass, Ken goes numb and chokes to breathe. Leaning his head against the wall, he vomits what little is in his stomach and lies there.

His fist bleeds, and his head throbs; he stumbles to his kitchen, washing his hand and picking chunks of mirror from his knuckles. Filling an empty nearby cup with water, he chugs the entire glass, trying to hydrate away his brutal hangover.

After wrapping his hand in his shirt, Ken walks to his couch, lays down, and pulls a blanket over him. His mind boiling, alternating from despair to anger, to rage, and to depression. In delirium, he thrashes around half-conscious, pissing himself- the sun setting and rising again before any sense of normalcy returns to his failing senses.

Ken wakes up with a startle.

He is half-dressed, the blanket on the floor. His TV is on in the background, dirty clothing, bloody gloves -evidence of his crimes spreads haphazardly all over. The couch has a wet stain on it, among other bodily fluids.

At least his headache is gone.

After a coffee, Ken plugs in his dead phone; it soon spazzes out with beeps and notifications. His boss emailing and texting, Allie texting him; Jeff and Nina had been at the pub last night at 7, texting that they miss playing darts with Ken. Then, a scrambled number texts him with two words:

good job!

Ken sighs, leaning back on the couch, having forgotten what time, or even which day it is, and it really, really smells in his place.

Picking up his phone, a few taps, and Ken replies to Allie. She's busy at work, as always, but misses him, she says. She wonders why he's so quiet and barely texting, along with saying she has a couple days off coming up and really wants some time with him. The police calling her recently; they need to get a swab from Sparky for DNA testing.

"Sparky," Ken mutters, "-fuck."

He sighs, knowing this day has come.

Ken calls her work line.

He smiles when she is happy to hear from him and acting like the world is still a friendly, good place.

"Aww, Ken, I don't wanna sit around waiting for the police all afternoon!" Allie moans, "-some crazy guy beat up some homeless or something, and now I have to wait around all afternoon on my first day off in ages!"

She sighs.

"The last thing I want to do is sit at home."

"I h-have a surprise for you," Ken blurts out, sensing the opportunity without even thinking.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I- I booked you in at that lava rocks spa we always see the ad for on TubeYouber- you know-"

"The Friday fyre special? The one with the really cheesy ad? Re-REALLY?" Allie grows excited before pausing for a moment, "-you did get the couples package, right?"

Ken's mind races.

"Uh- actually hon, I just- I splurged for the top package for you, I- I can't imagine what you're going through at work with all of the new coof cases, the variants, I mean- it must be so drain-"

"What time? What package?" Allie is over the moon.

"Uh-, I'll forward you the details," Ken feels a bead of sweat form on his head as he forgets how much money he has, but a trip to the spa can't be too expensive.

"Oh Ken, that's so sweet; I loooove getting spoiled- I can't wait- and you'll deal with Sparky for me?"

"Yes, babes, love you!"

"I gotta run- send me the info!"

Allie blows a kiss on the phone, giggles, and hangs up her work line with a thud.

Picking his laptop up off the floor, Ken untangles the blanket from the cable, opening up his Faceberg and messaging the lovely little old lady he has been talking to off-and-on, she has an adorable black pom, and he has offered to take it to the beach for her on Friday.

Ken sighs. Planning this for a long time, the disingenuous

nature and the fake friendliness all weighs heavy on him. The knowledge of becoming such a manipulator burns inside his soul, digging through his dishevelled kitchen for any alcohol.

"I'm not Samantha," Ken tells himself aloud.

He sits around for hours drinking. The sun is already setting again when Ken steps to the toilet for some relief.

"Jesus, what the- what the fuck is that smell," he looks around and spots a dark stain around the drain, just behind the shower glass.

"I don't want to know," Ken flushes the toilet with his foot and walks back to his laptop.

The friendly old lady, Mrs. Ngo, has written back. She opens up quickly to Ken and says her grandson in Korea is big and strong like him. The old woman is lonely, and Ken feels terrible for scheming. Francis is an energetic dog; she likes poms for their look, but it is hard to keep up with their activity level at her age. Chatting with her for a few minutes, she's clearly happy- a young man offering to take her dog to the beach will surely put a smile on an old lady's face.

Ken writes back, finalizing a plan to pick up her dog Friday sometime in the morning and drop it off in the evening. He promises to tire out the pooch by running it on the beach, and he'd have plenty of photos for her to admire from the comfort of her home.

Looking at his laptop's clock, Ken squints to read it.

Thursday, 3:11 PM

"How the fuck is it Thursday-" Ken mutters, his head still not quite right and his inner elbows so sore, his memory a blur.

Opening another window on his PC, he searches for day spa specials, lava rocks, and finally, Fyre Fridays. Imagining Allie

having a relaxing time makes him smile, and it will give him plenty of time to get "Sparky" swabbed by the cops.

A special pops up on the screen.

Fyre Fridays, only at Veniis - WOW! - Hot rock massage & Facial \$499

The spa's website's aesthetic and facility photos are very stylish; it definitely will tickle Allie's style bone. Fruit smoothies and a hot rocks massage, definitely luxuries she enjoys. Ken clicks the contact us link and looks for a number to call.

Ring ring.

"Veniis day spa, Tiffani speaking, how may I direct your experience?"

"Uh- hi," mumbles Ken, taken aback by the energy and enthusiasm.

"Are you calling for our west coast Salish hot rocks rejuvenation? Our daily specials? We offer two-for-one clay baths when you buy a couples package!"

"Yeah, uh-"

"We offer rooms by the hour, couples sauna night, and exotic Samoan Saturdays!"

"Hello? Look, I just need to confirm a check-in time; I want to book a Fyre Fridays package for my girlfriend,"

"Her name, sir?"

"Allie Chang," Ken replies curtly.

"Oh yes, sir, right away, sir! We have a 6 PM Fyre Fridays body-relaxation experience for her package, and she is free to check in to the Wellness Abode lounge at 11 AM for organic smoothies and vegan coffee enemas! I hope she's ready for pampering because we have a full schedule of-"

Ken rolls his eyes as the highly enthusiastic lady adds up

the bill. He envisions the CEO of the spa corporation greedily rubbing his hands together. It's worth it; Allie will be happy.

"Yes, sir, that will be \$499 for the day, add \$69 for towel service, \$99 for unlimited smoothie bar and \$169 for the vegan coffee enema," the friendly lady finally takes a breath.

"Okay, yeah- sure. "

Ken sighs.

"Oh yes, sir, we ran the card!"

Ken thanks the woman and hangs up before leaning back in his chair. He puts his feet up and lets out a huge sigh.

All this, over a bike.

Or is it more than that?

With clicks through email, he forwards the booking to Allie. She replies quickly with some ecstatic emoticons and a string of colourful hearts.

Ken feels the world push him deep into the chair; perhaps a bit of it is fatigue; Ken is more tired than ever lately. Why did he do it? Why? Getting involved in this mess is the worst mistake of his life.

Ken's mind drifts back to the blue skies and gold tones of last summer. A slow-motion replay of when he would ride his electric longboard next to Allie on a rental bike. They cruise the seawall to share loving looks at each other, taking walks on the beach just to mush their feet into the cold sand. He would often steal a surprise kiss; she tickles him in return. They'd meet up with friends for nachos and let wanderlust lead them from one brewpub to the next, so carefree, so happy.

There will be no more pub nights, no more happy afternoons sitting in a cat cafe, no more zero stress days. No more lounging in Ken's favourite chair, looking out the window as he sips a latte between sending Allie texts with dinner

recipes and suggestive emoticons.

Now, life requires new lies upon lies and always more problems to solve.

Ken's face contorts into a scowl, trying his best to smile, his mind often wonders if he is watching someone, or something, take over his life.

Sitting forward with a burst of nervous energy, his hand reaches to his laptop and begins searching for doggy daycare for a bit of a game of switch-a-roo.

The next day, Ken shows up at Allie's in the morning and lets himself in with his key. A happy little Sparky comes jumping over to him, demanding pets.

"Aww, come 'ere 'lil guy," Ken speaks in a silly voice as he pets the dog. Pulling out a brand-new red collar from his pocket, he slips Sparky's fancy collar with his name on it off to fit the red one on.

Looking around, he finds Sparky's leash; the dog probably needs to go around the block for a pee before loading him up for the day trip to suburbia. In this case, a city full of million-dollar dingy homes called Port Coquitlam. The closest doggy daycare that can take Sparky on such short notice.

"Now, where is your crate," Ken searches around the apartment.

Later that afternoon, after Ken drops Sparky off with a portly woman in the suburbs, he heads to the little old lady's house. It is in a suburb of Vancouver, on top of a steep hill in New Westminster, and it takes a bit longer to find parking on the busy street. Francis, the black pomeranian, barks at him

from the lady's front window.

It takes him a half-hour to get out of Miss Ngo's house as she has tea and some cookies to share with him, wanting to know all about how much he loves Pomeranians. As a young woman, when Miss Ngo first moves to Vancouver, her first dog is a Pomeranian, and she talks about knitting sweaters for it. Ken finds himself smiling and listening, enjoying the company despite his dire situation.

After gorging on cookies and tea, he leaves with the adorable black furball; soon, he's out at the Kitsilano dog beach watching the other "Sparky" run and play in the water. He throws a little stick for the dog who runs and plays non-stop for hours in pure joy, the elderly owner lacking the vigour to entertain such an energetic hound. Ken takes many photos and texts them to the old lady who trusts his deceiving ways.

Getting ready to leave the beach, the dog jumps in the car and curls up in the front seat of the rideshare vehicle, licking Ken's hand when he puts it on the gear knob.

"You're just a little sweetheart, aren't you?" Ken smiles and pets Francis for a few moments before turning on the car to drive back to Allie's.

Back at Allie's, he opens a can of beefy dog food. Having purchased it on the way to Allie's that morning, he empties it into a metal bowl beside the couch, and the dog chokes it down in seconds. A bit tired and thirsty, Ken makes lemonade and sits in the chair by the window, waiting.

Nearly finishing his drink, his phone rings.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's me!"

"Hey, babes!"

"Oh my GOSH, this place is just the best!" Allie exclaims, "-you're not really living until you've had a colon cleanse while sipping pina colada smoothies, the coconuts and pineapples are organic and- get this, Ken-"

Ken smiles; he loves to hear her happy and excited.

"-Ken, they flew them in, fresh from Costa Rica this morning!"

"Glad you like it, honey," Ken says through a big grin.

"Ugh- one thing, Kenny, the investigation team for the dog, called- they're heading towards downtown, they said right around 4 PM. The cops need to swab Sparky, or they're going to keep harassing me, just-" Allie giggles, "-just make sure he doesn't bite one of them?"

Ken chuckles; Sparky is a bit skittish and has even bitten Grandpa Chang, yet lives to wag his tail.

Ken looks down at the black puffball pomeranian lying sprawled on the couch, exhausted.

"If dogs could talk, eh Sparks?" Ken reaches down and pets the snoozing pupper.

"They'll be there in like-," Allie pauses, "an hour-ish, okay?" Ken smiles.

"Don't worry, babes, I got this, relax."

Ken's palms sweat, and his hands shake for the last hour, the appointment for Sparky's swab at 4 PM and the clock ticking down. It is 3:57 PM when the buzzer rings.

"Hello?"

"Evening, my name is Agent Crunst; I'm here for- Sparky."

"Come in," Ken replies through the intercom button by the door; the Sparky-double, Francis, is lying on the couch with a full tummy, looking exhausted.

Ken paces in the apartment until the knock at the door.

"Hello!" Ken said, opening the door for Agent Crunst.

"Hi," Crunst nods, looking for the dog.

"Over here," Ken motions, walking with Crunst to the living room and motioning towards the dog.

Agent Crunst takes a swab in front of the couch, pulling out a swab and moving it towards the dog's mouth before stopping for a second.

Ken holds his breath.

Crunst takes two fingers and slides them under Sparky's collar, Ken hasn't adjusted it for the smaller Francis, and Crunst ends up sliding all four of his fingers under it.

Walking to the fridge, Ken opens it and pulls out a bottle of juice, trying not to be so nervous and remembering to breathe.

Crunst puts the swab in the dog's mouth and puts it away in a clear container, looking over his shoulder and speaking.

"When I originally got the list of Pomeranians owned in Vancouver, I remember speaking with Allison- she kept apologizing in case Sparky bit me, but this-

Ken feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"This is about the most lovable pooch I've dealt with," the agent remarks, "-a little low energy, and boy, looks like it's on a pretty strict diet."

The empty tin of beefy dog food and the empty bowl sits beside the couch; Ken forgetting to move it.

"Oh yeah, we went to the beach today; the pup is just pooped from all the running-

Agent Crunst stands up and puts the swab container in his coat, Ken moving to stand in front of the fridge door with its deep dent and numerous photos of Sparky and Allie taped to it.

"Well, I got what I needed, thanks-"

Ken notices Crunst's eyes lingering in the direction of the fridge a bit too long.

"Hey, no problem, glad to help- hope you catch the guy."

"Yeah, me too," Crunst replies, making eye contact with Ken before walking to the front door.

"Have a nice evening," Ken says as he closes the door.

"Right, cheers," says Crunst as the door closes.

Ken's heart races. The collar not fitting- the dog being tired- the tin of beef n' gravy dog food- Allie's photos of her with Sparky on the fridge. How did he forget!

A single large photo of Sparky on Allie's fridge is in a thick frame; the caption embossed underneath reads:

VEGAN PUPPY

"Oh fuck, oh shit, oh shit-" Ken grabs at his head in frustration and scurries around the apartment. Snatching all of Francis's toys and its collar and leash from inside the crate in a frantic packing.

"Come on," Ken says softly, carrying the little black Pom into its crate, pulling Sparky's collar off, and Ken puts him down gently as he is ready to leave.

Grabbing the keys to the rideshare car, Ken is in the elevator with the dog in moments. Into the underground, plopping the crate in the trunk and driving out the gate to the back alley. Just outside the entrance, a grey car, windows all tinted, sketchily surveilling the scene. Driving to the end of the grimy back lane, Ken watches the suspicious-looking vehicle in the rearview, the face of the driver too shadowy to tell who it is, but it is the perfect place to watch anyone come and go from Allie's.

Ken floors it out of the alleyway.

Ripping up the next block, turning left, flying down another block, and hanging a right with the tires squealing. Ken's eyes focus on the rearview, nobody following him, and he feels a little more relaxed.

The drive to New west is short and sweet. Miss Ngo is incredibly pleased to see her little fluff ball and gives Ken a bowl of homemade spicy noodles and a mooncake. She's so happy to have photos of her dog running along the beach, pink tongue hanging out the side of the pup's cute face.

"My pleasure," Ken replies, having the most genuine, carefree fun in a long time, innocent fun, too. The old lady's smile brings a tear to his eye.

After loading the goodies in a cardboard box, it takes Ken another twenty minutes to actually leave. He enjoys chatting, but the old lady's third story in a row about moon cakes is droning on, and he needs to pick up the real Sparky.

"Thanks- thanks again, Mrs. Ngo," Ken waves and runs down the steps and turns the block- his Bevo rideshare car is gone.

"Shit- shit!" Ken whips out his phone and quickly finds another car to share 3 blocks up the steep hill.

He notices another recent text message.

Sparky is crazy

Needed to be put on timeout.

Please come get him ASAP.

Ken shoots back a text.

Sorry so late will be there shortly

The streets of New Westminster are very hilly, and

naturally, the next rideshare car available is at the top of a local hill- Ken's legs ache as he nearly sprints the 3 blocks straight up, breathing hard when he finally makes it to the car.

"What a piece of shit," Ken says. The car is a bit older and beat-looking.

Ken jumps inside, cleaning bags of McDonald's wrappers off the console to reach the shifter. It sounds like a loud fart when he starts the car, as the muffler clearly has a hole in it. After driving for a block, he notices the brakes squeal, and the trunk makes a clunk as it doesn't adequately shut.

"Fix your cars, assholes," Ken mutters, thinking of how much money this trip will cost him.

The car vrooms towards Port Coquitlam and the doggie daycare, the trip long and tedious as the stereo cuts in and out. Every time the stereo stops working, Ken punches the dashboard until it works again. His knuckles becoming too sore to keep doing it.

Pulling up to the farmhouse, a plump lady comes bouncing out the house, Sparky already on his leash.

"Sorry, I- it's just not a good fit, for city dogs-"

"Oh no, I'm sorry!" Ken says.

"The owners are just too stupid, and they let-"

Ken feels his malicious scowl spread across his face.

The woman looks into his eyes.

"-they-t-they just let their dogs do..."

Ken's eyes twitch.

The woman takes a couple steps backwards.

"You uh- have a nice night-" she stammers, waddling back into the house- no doubt, to overcharge his credit card.

Ken opens the trunk and picks up Sparky, giving him a big hug and letting him lick his nose.

"I missed you too, stinker," Ken mutters, smiling.

Laying the pampered hound down in his crate with his blanket and favourite chew toys, he provides the doggo with a kiss on the snout. Taking a few minutes to pet him and calm him down, he closes the trunk lid as Sparky lies happily. Inside the trunk, as per the rideshare rules, also away from eyes that may be watching him coming and going from Allie's underground parking garage.

Ken drives nervously towards the highway back downtown; he hits a pothole on the way that seems to fix the radio. Things looking up for a moment, listening to some tunes and merging without a problem- then he spots the wall of traffic ahead.

"Shit," Ken mutters, crawling along at stop-and-go on the highway. A flick of his wrist puts the radio knob on for the traffic report, a few minutes go by of sports and other announcements.

"C'mon, cut the bullshit," Ken grumbles, punching the steering wheel.

The traffic report comes on, a flipped semi ahead. Only a couple exits to go; it shouldn't be *too* long.

An hour later, the gate to the underground clicks open, and Ken anxiously taps on the steering wheel as the gate retracts loud and slow.

Tires squealing and all, the car whips down and around the corner. Another quick motion of the steering wheel and the car flies into Allie's empty parking spot- Ken turns the vehicle off and pushes the trunk release button.

"Sparks has got to be thirsty-"

Ken opens the truck, and Sparky is there, lying on his side in his crate, magnificent fluffy tail and all, absolutely still.

"W-w-what- no!"

Ken scoops the limp dog up, noticing the smell of car exhaust rise from the trunk.

"No!" Ken cries out in anguish, turning to run for the stairwell, unlocking the security door with the dog over his shoulder. Dashing up the stairs and to Allie's, Ken bursts through the door and brings Sparky to the couch, putting him down gently and listening for a heartbeat.

Nothing.

Ken falls next to the couch, his chest is tight, his breath shallow.

"No-no-no..."

Uncontrollable sobs erupt from his body, his legs giving way completely. Realizing the agony at that moment- the pain he feels, the life he took, and the heartbreak to come that will surely shake Allie to her core.

Ken whips open the freezer in the kitchen, reaches for a bottle, pausing mid-way as his hands shake uncontrollably.

"N-no... I have to tell her-" Ken kicks the freezer drawer closed and grabs his hair with both hands, throwing his head back and groaning.

Ken paces for an hour, muttering to himself, overcome with emotion. He can't drink- too guilty to let himself have that escape. Ken has to own this. He has to feel what he is responsible for.

Ken takes his phone and sits down by the window. Allie's contact info is on his screen. Her smiling face, so full of joy, happiness- life. Her life, that, until recently, he made happier.

Not anymore, he thinks, clicking the phone icon.

Ken sits in the chair for hours. Allie has already come by. She walks in and spots Sparky; freaking out, she packs him into

her car with Ken's help and leaves weeping. Ken can't even cry, only numbness and a feeling of going blank. Of wanting to forget himself for what he has done to her heart.

Ken sighs.

He's lost everything.

Earlier, with Allie standing there, holding dead Sparky, he has no answers. She asks him- why- how could he- how does a dog just die?

He doesn't mean to tell her on the phone- that her dog died, but he can't hide that something is very, very wrong. The inability to lie to her, his tone gives it away.

"Allie- there's- been an accident with Sparky, please come home as soon as you can-"

She knows.

She just keeps asking, how?

His mouth uncouples from his mind. With Allie standing there, he is at a loss for words, unable to string together a sentence, his brain shuts down completely, his emotions disconnect.

Chaos infects his soul, wanting to cease existence.

Her scream when she first sees him- his little happy pomeranian face, devoid of life- his black fluff poofs never to jiggle in the way that makes her giggle until she snorts. The way she pulls her knees up on the couch, making a little shelf for him to lie on while they watch movies together—her joy, taken, by Ken.

She calls him from the vet.

"Monoxide poisoning, Ken, that's what they said-" Allie whispers, her voice hoarse and her nose sniffly.

"You- you want to come clean, tell me what it's about?" she asks softly.

Ken can't speak; he struggles to move his tongue-

"Allie, I-"

"If-" Allie interrupts, "-if you can't tell me, you can't love me."

"Allie, no Allie, I-" Ken can't spit it out.

"Don't worry, Ken," Allie sighs, "-I already had him cremated, whatever you're involved in. Whatever you traded your life with me for, it's all yours; you're free."

It's been over an hour since Allie hangs up on him for the first time.

She's never done that before; he's never hurt her like this.

Ken lowers his head, silent, in the dark.

Just then, Ken's phone beeps away.

An encoded Parlergram message.

Wish we could talk something other than business after midnight, but this is too spicy to wait until tomorrow.

An image pops up on Ken's phone; he jolts upright. His eyes slowly widening and his breath stops for a moment; it's Allie. A photo of her outside the animal clinic, under the glowing 24 emergency vet sign, her face caught in the throes of sadness. Her arms wrapping around a tall figure in a suit, his hair perfectly combed to one side.

Ken drops the phone on the floor, jumping to his feet and stumbles to the kitchen; he turns to pace with his hands on his hips and his face a raging scowl.

Crunst.

"Fuck!!!" Ken yells, leaning his body back, throwing his arms in the air; his screams echo in the loft.

Ken picks his phone back up and begins to furiously text a reply just as his phone rings.

hQK9#u!E6Z requests VideoChat - Accept? (Yes / No)

Ken accepts; his red face shows up as a dreadful scowl, his nostrils flaring and breathing heavy.

"Good evening Ken," Mistress S looks stunning as always. A purple dress and her red hair up, holding a glass of wine, she sits in a chair lined with furs and has her feet up- her heels rest on the back of a tuxedo-clad man on the floor, on all-fours.

A human ottoman.

Mistress S has a devious smile.

"What have you- how-" Ken's head spins, his heart races, his entire world- holding the phone in one hand. Opening the drawer to the freezer, he spots the replacement bottle of rum bought recently for Allie. One-handed, Ken grabs the bottle, puts the lid in his mouth and opens it on the first try, beginning to chug down the freezing cold liquor.

"Kenneth, my boy, you don't need to punish yourself- I don't enjoy this kind of suffering, which you clearly are. You're suffering- but for all the wrong reasons."

Ken stops drinking for a moment, his lips glisten with spittle, some rum drips from his chin.

"Yeah, -I am," he says, oscillating waves of excruciating emotions torture his mind.

"Well, what good is it to sit there, in that apartment- the apartment where Crunst and your girlfri- okay, ex-girlfriend, could walk in any moment..."

Ken frowns harder than he ever has before.

"Not saying it will happen, but it could- maybe I even know they're on their way now," Mistress S smiles and has a sip of her wine glass.

"Here, I have something for you, a favour from me, to

you," Mistress S reaches over and picks up a gold phone next to her and taps a few things.

"There, look at your texts, a reward."

Ken leans over the counter; the rush of alcohol and his mood swings have the room spinning and his heart racing.

His life is in ruins.

Struggling to keep his hands still, Ken has another long pull from the bottle, bringing up the phone to open the texts. Mistress S sings softly to herself through the phone speaker as Ken looks at the images she sends him- from yet another new, anonymous account number.

A photo on his phone of three men and the young Russian mime clutching her stuffed raccoon- a still image from security camera footage- the man in white's hand is caught hovering over Ken's drink on the photography night. He remembers nothing from the deliberate dosage, relying on details received from friends the next day by text. Apparently, he fell, split his face open- the drag queens driving him home- the helplessness floods back to him, and he cries out in mental pain.

"Now now Ken, come on, you're a big boy," Mistress S teases, "-now, look at the next photo I sent-"

Another image loads in the text conversation. The picture shows three men getting out of a car and entering an unmarked building; another man and several young, drunken women are following.

"Ken, I never believed you were a quitter- you sold your cloak and bought a sword long before the rest of us. You just don't have any true zeal for justice yet. You're just a broken man lashing out."

Mistress S giggles.

"-annnd that's- just- fine. The world isn't meant to be full

of still life, it's meant to be more like a Pollock, and people like you are the great buckets we can throw at the canvas."

Ken sobs and drinks, leaning on the kitchen counter for support; his forehead bangs on the countertop in despair at her words.

"Come on now, Ken- this is unlike you, so unlike you- maybe, maybe this will put the fire back into your belly."

Moments pass as Ken composes himself enough to look at the text messages, a map popping up with an "x" on an address downtown, the Champagne Lounge.

"I- I- thought they closed most clubs- and restaurants?"
Ken's head is in his hands.

"The city can't enforce anything, darling," Mistress S giggles and smirks, "-listen, it's confirmed, they are there- right now- in the VIP section upstairs. My people just watched another drop-off happen in the alley; the backdoor is an easy way in."

Ken closes his eyes and thinks of those three men, their snickering faces, the way they leer at the Russian girl and the shove they give him walking by. They have plenty of time to dose the drink he foolishly leaves unattended that night.

"What's in it for you, huh? Which of these three wronged you, maybe called your dress ugly? Which corner are your thugs going to be hiding behind, loading me up with a needle with some sort of poison-hate cocktail, a couple of fake cops giving me a speech and a gun- I still- still don't have my shoes- I can't keep living like this- fucking hell-"

Ken slams his hand down on the nearby sink, hurting his fist.

"Oh please," Mistress S groans, "-complaining about one little tiny prick and a little squirt when you've been guzzling

back bathtubs of liquor every day for months. I just unlocked exactly what the sober you already wanted to do- YOU pulled the trigger, Ken, and you've made the city a better place for it, you know you have. As for your shoes, you'll get them back once you help me with a couple teeny-tiny loose ends, then, and only then, can you have your life back."

Ken stands up and leans on the kitchen countertop with both hands. The bottle and the phone sit on the counter, both stare him down.

"Never again am I doing anything for you," Ken states.

"Never."

An uncomfortable silence; Ken avoids looking at the video chat screen.

"You can turn the shoes in; I couldn't care less; I might just turn myself in; I've already fucking lost everything," Ken grumbles.

"Not yet," Mistress S says.

Pushing away from the counter, Ken walks to the window and opens it; squatting down, folding his arms, he rests his head and looks over the city. Something about this place, something, made him react- made him defend it- this isn't about him, this is about doing the right thing. It is, isn't it? Tears form in his eyes; he wonders how Allie sees him now. Does she recognize him anymore? The city twinkles away; pretty, cold and unfamiliar.

A few groans echo in the alley below, Ken looking down, a hunched-over figure pushes an over-loaded shopping cart, and it spills its load. The shadowy person groans, letting go of their buggy. A shuffle back and forth, bending over, picking up their junk only to have it fall out after another few feet forward and elicit another woeful cry.

"T-this isn't about me," Ken whispers, "it isn't, it isn't-"
Walking back to the kitchen, Ken puts the bottle of rum back in the fridge and picks up his phone.

"This- one, -last-, time," Ken says, hanging up on Mistress S's smiling face.

Ken rushes home to change. Grabbing a few extra goodies this time, stuffing his cargo pants pockets full of premium East Van pen-launcher bear bangers. Exiting the door to the garage stealthily, Ken hikes down to the end of the alleyway, scooping his longboard from under a hedge, hopping on it and racing down Cambie street.

The city is pretty quiet with the ever-extending coof and coof variants. Everything fun is shut down; most people choosing to stay healthy and safe by drinking heavily and doing drugs at home, alone. With snitches all over and rabid Plebbitors naming and shaming their neighbours, any partying requires total secrecy.

Ken hears his longboard's electric engine whine in the narrow streets around Mainland and Helmcken, passing the front of the Champagne lounge. The lights are mostly off, but looking closely, he can see movement inside and some distant bass booms away. Ken glides around the block, slithering slowly in shadows towards the back door; a figure stands outside- smoking under a small light.

Stashing his board underneath the dumpster, Ken walks up to the stunned-looking cook and makes eye contact through his night-vision goggles. Reaching up, Ken takes the person's smoke and has a drag of it through the screen of his armoured facemask.

"Call an ambulance," Ken says gruffly.

"W-w-why?" squeaks the cook.

"There's about to be a lot of hurt people inside," Ken replies; he drops the cigarette and steps on it, turns and walks into the backdoor of the restaurant.

Inside the blue light of the narrow kitchen, one other person with a chef's hat on stands with his back to him, Ken slips quietly through the door to the bar area. It is empty, most of the lights are off, music and people can be heard from the stairs to the VIP section above. Picking up a circular serving tray, Ken puts all of the bear bangers from his pockets on it along with as many empty shot glasses as will fit. With steady hands, Ken carries the tray up the stairs and into the VIP lounge.

The upstairs landing is hazy with vape pen smoke. Figures navigate about in the dimly lit, open space; red couches punctuate the lounge, a bar against the back wall, and windows to the street on his left. The music is loud; nobody notices him. Just inside the doorway to the lounge, he puts his tray down on a reservation podium, tucking into a shadowy corner. Looking around the room, various women and men of mixed levels of intoxication, everyone garish, piles of bottles sit on tables, nobody wearing masks, either.

Then- he sees him.

The man in the white shirt and white pants.

One of his last memories from the photography night.

Here this guy is, standing next to the couch in front of Ken.

Ken lurks in the corner, adjusting the bear banger pens to face outwards on his tray.

"Yoooooo- hit this line, yo," shouts the man in the white

to a bro next to him, handing him a straw.

The man bends forward. His head moving sideways with a snorting sound, throwing his head back, closing one nostril with his knuckle.

"That's that Bolivian marching powder, baby, woo!" exclaims the bro, punching the air above him.

"Brooo- offer Mikayla-"

The man turns, looking at the woman on the end of the couch, her head rests backwards, her eyes a blank stare, facing the man in white.

"She's good, bro-"

Ken holds up a bear banger in each hand and aims towards the man in white.

P-pop!

BOOM!

BOOM!

The explosion's magnitude surprises Ken; the mirror on the back wall shatters, sending some partiers crashing to the floor in shock, some run and fall over the ends of couches. The man in white dives to the floor; rolling over, he traps himself between the coffee table and the lounge sofa.

Ken drops the two smoking tubes and picks up two more, firing them on a broad-angle this time. Chaos spreads as people dive through the tables stacked with cups and bottles, others now jumping over the VIP railing to the 1st-floor bar below.

BOOM!

BOOM!

The bear bangers cause a growing and thick cloud of smoke as Ken fires them off as fast as possible. Grabbing one in each hand, vaguely aiming into the lounge and clicking the firing pin. After launching, he drops them immediately to the

floor and picks up more, the loud booms every couple of seconds- inducing mass-panic.

"Wear your masks, stop the spread, be kind!"

Ken fires the exploding projectiles at a group in the back, sending them and their fully-stacked-with-bottles table crashing over.

One man in a sports jacket with blonde hair spots Ken and picks up a bottle from another nearby table. Ken quickly grabs one of the shot glasses from his tray, fastball pitching it right into the man's forehead, knocking him to the ground. Another man rushes towards Ken from behind a couch- his momentum put to use by Ken as he side-steps, trips him, and sends him face-first tumbling down the stairs.

People are scattering everywhere. Over the railing, out the fire escape behind the bar- through all the screaming, chaos and smoke, Ken can see nearly everyone has cleared out as he runs out of bear bangers. Almost everyone but a single woman lying, eyes open and still, on the couch in front of him. Everywhere else, it is just broken glass, overturned tables, and rivers of spilling booze. The music plays in the background with a heavy bass beat as white-and-red strobe lights flash from the window.

Fingers reach up from the floor between the coffee table and the red couch in front of Ken. The hand and arm rising up to push down for stability, the hand brushes against a baggie on the glass table and out spills a fine powder.

The man in white slowly climbs from between the red sofa and glass coffee table, getting to his knees, groggy; he turns and looks right at Ken, who is standing nose-to-nose with him with his mask off.

"Remember me?"

The man in white steps back, bracing himself against the end of the red lounge couch.

"Naw man, naw, I- "the man stares intensely at Ken.

"Wait, the- you- the boyfriend-"

"Last call, motherfucker."

Ken thrusts his knee forward, catching the man solidly in the groin; he buckles over and directly into a headlock.

Holding the man's neck under his armpit, Ken's grip tightens when looking behind him. The white powder spread out across the glass coffee table makes his face scrunch up in rage- he jumps in the air, leans back, and uses all his strength and weight to drive the man's face through it.

Getting up and surveying the grizzly scene, he steps over to look at the girl leaning over on the couch. Waving his hand in front of her face, she is totally unresponsive, sending a chill up his spine. Slipping an arm under her legs, another under her shoulder, the limp, young lady, offers no resistance to Ken carrying her. Out of the lounge, down the stairs into the brighter light of the bar's foyer. Her lips are a light azure blue, the same colour as her eyes.

"Oh fuck," Ken says, quickly stepping out the front door. A small crowd of bloodied and stunned people gathering near an ambulance. Ken runs up and puts her down on the sidewalk next to a group of concerned citizens who must have heard the 4th-of-July levels of cacophony.

"She's dying, help!" he yells, the scattered few people on the street looking stunned by his appearance in all-black; his armoured mask is pulled up, exposing his mouth, nose, and eyes.

One girl with short hair runs up.

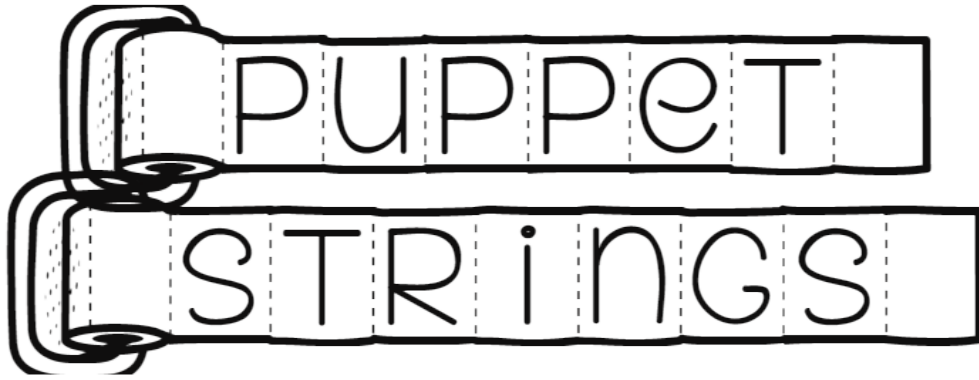
"Oh my god, is that- Janice! No! Janice, wake up!"

Ken's hand is under her head when he gently lowers her to the sidewalk, the sounds of sirens in the distance and footsteps of people running toward him.

With a head duck, Ken adjusts his mask to hide his face from the crowd. The paramedics rush over with a few people in tow; they're holding their phones up. A flash from one- then another- "It's The Shitkicker!" a voice calls out.

Ken stands up and runs back into the bar- he jumps over tables- through the back kitchen and out into the foul alleyway. Sprinting to his electric longboard- more sirens draw near, and people gathering on the street watch him exit the alley at top speed. Ken's path home through the busiest parts of the urban core, and he takes the corners in fast, sweeping arcs.

This time, instead of ducking down an alley and hiding at the first sign of any pursuing headlights behind him- he speeds up with reckless abandon.



Ken wakes up with a splitting headache. Rolling off his couch and heading to take a whizz, the first thing he does is check his phone.

from: naZ13\$50zT

I have to hand it to you; you did it, Kenny rescued a Percocet princess, and now you're a hero on the morning news- support for us at all-time highs. Kind of silly to pull your mask off inside the bar, cameras everywhere. Do you know how much I had to pay for the footage? Wouldn't want that leaking to Kissy at 6, or Allie, now would we. I must say, I am so proud of you. Re-introducing yourself to the man in white, looking him in his eyes before filling them with glass shards— an artisan display of solving karmic debt. You look so daring in the costume I got you. So glad it fits.

We must strike while the iron is hot. Tonight we liberate a tent city.

See you at 8:45 at Salmon Lake Park; the tape leaks if you no-show.

I think you're smarter than that by now.

Text the coords later.

MS :x

Ken lies back down on the couch and stares at the ceiling. He broke his life. He's still in his battle gear, might as well leave it on at this point- it reflects who he is now.

Walking to the kitchen, it is full of flies and garbage. Rotting food and mould take over the fridge; Ken takes most of the day to eat stale crackers, drink vodka, and listen to loud music. He accidentally gasses himself while clipping a can of pepper spray to a hook on his vest. Doing some stretches, Ken is already good-to-go when the coordinates from Mistress S beep on his phone. This is it, the big night.

Ken sneaks out of his basement with self-loathing and genuine excitement. Soon he's down the block, hopping on his board and heading east towards one of Vancouver's largest tent encampments through dimly lit streets. The sodium vapour street lamps give off a dull, warm orange tint. It always reminds Ken of home.

The sun finds its bed behind the mountains, and the orange and red painting across the sky gives way to deep blue twilight. Ken creeps slowly through the alleyways; he approaches the park under cover of night.

Peeking around the park's corner, the vast encampment covers the entire grassy field across several blocks. A nearby tennis court is full of port-o-potties and piles of garbage. Ken can faintly hear a helicopter somewhere in the distance as it starts to drizzle.

Ken checks the time.

8:44 PM.

"8:45 PM we rescue them." reads the text instructions from Mistress S; Ken walking his longboard and ducking behind the fencing at the tennis courts. He can see the extensive

round outline of PiggyP coming up a nearby street, some of his animalistic minions in tow, some walking normally. Others scampering along on all fours with leashes held by people in BDSM outfits. Scattered among that group are some construction bros in hi-viz vests wearing masks and carrying sledgehammers. Next to them marched some tuxedo-wearing supreme gentlemen and a few green-haired ecofreaks who are livid at Vancouver's park board in general.

Looking back at the tent encampment at the park, they have a few fire barrels going and grill some meat. Folk music plays, and some chatting gets louder as they notice the street full of shitkickers walking up.

"They're here!" a voice shouts out as a person runs from the large gathering near the fire barrels and begins to alert others in the tents.

Ken runs out behind the tennis court wall and joins PiggyP at the encampment where an older woman approaches.

"Please, this is a peaceful gathering," says the woman; her hair has a few flowers in it, she wears a teal wool sweater.

"We offer no resistance, please, be kind," she clasps her hands together and looks up at PiggyP, who towers over her.

"We're here for the kiddy fuckers, bitch," PiggyP points at the diminutive woman and immediately, some goons tackle her onto the gravel near to one of the fire barrels. A furry blue fox suit jumps on her back, and a green and yellow raccoon suit sits on her legs; the two tickle her without mercy.

"Search EVERY tent, fuck-up ANY resistance!" PiggyP yells to the flood of various vigilantes storming through the encampment, unzipping tents. Ken can hear hollering from all around, and a few flare-ups happen.

"Boss! Boss!" a dogboi runs up.

Woof!

"English, mutt," spits PiggyP.

"Look who we caught in a tent with this little, woof woof!"

A couple of burly dogbois drag over a tall, lanky man with a monobrow and a short, plump doggrl walks up, holding a lithe young woman by the arm. She cradles her head and is half slumped over on the doggrl's shoulder.

PiggyP walks over and punches the tall man square in the gut; he hits the ground on his knees, clutching his stomach, choking to breathe.

"City Councillor Peter Talbot," PiggyP grunts before pointing at him on the ground.

"Strip him, tie him to that bench over there- and any other kiddy fuckers."

Ken pans around the bright light he wears on his chest. He spots more young ladies being rescued from inside tents and more guilty men standing before PiggyP to receive punishment.

The man in the pig mask leans over one sobbing young woman. She's being comforted by a person in an orange tiger fursuit, gently petting the crying girl's hair with an oversized paw mitten.

"How old are you?" he breathes hard, his voice rumbles from behind the grotesque pig mask.

"Twelve and a half," she squeaks.

"Twelve- twelve and a half!" PiggyP yells and throws back his head, turning to the guilty-looking man kneeling on the ground between two hairy and sweaty men in greased-up dog masks.

PiggyP winds up his steel-toed boot and kicks the man in the testicles so hard he lifts off the ground. Ken winces as the man folds over like an omelette and vomits.

PiggyP spits on the man and laughs sadistically.

"Next!"

Ken feels nervous. The porch lights of the houses surrounding the park are almost all on; the neighbourhood is watching. In the distance, Ken can see a few cop cars staging at the other side of the park, a small group of police gearing up.

The crowd of tent city residents' shouting gets louder as the mob gathers near the fire barrels' light.

"What the fuck is your problem?" a large man in a buckskin jacket steps up to PiggyP.

"Eh, look around," PiggyP motions to the growing number of young children being pulled from tents by volunteers in brightly coloured fursuits. Neglected-looking kids, escorted by dogbois and doggrls wearing mesh and PVC pants, form a ragtag crowd behind PiggyP.

In the distance, several bangs could be heard- Ken recognizing it as bear-bangers immediately. Someone is signalling for reinforcements.

Scanning around the crowd, several activists surround a news crew next to a group of live streamers, all of their screens glowing at twilight. All being pushed and shoved around by the pushing and shoving of the rapidly growing crowd.

Ken turns back, looking at PiggyP, who is now shaking hands with the man. The pig-faced beast lifts his chin towards a few more children coming up the path by a person in a pink bunny rabbit costume.

"You didn't know they were here?" Piggy asks, still shaking the man's hand.

"No man, you don't really know your neighbours here- not all, by any means- and when you hear things go down- it's not your business if it's not your business, get it, eh?"

"I believe you, brother, snitches get stitches, for sure," Piggy stops shaking the man's hand and offers a fist bump which he accepts.

"Round them up!" PiggyP turns and yells, motioning with his arms to his crowd of followers; a streamer walking up puts his camera towards his face.

"Bro- I'm with Street Direct TV- can you-"

PiggyP turns and grabs the man's camera.

"This ain't about me, you sensationalist fuck- look!"

Holding the camera rig tight, Piggy twists and turns the camera to face a dozen or so children. Several people in fursuits form a circle of protection around them; they all huddle together in the middle of the jostling crowd.

"Human-fucking-trafficking, heard of it, asshole?" Piggy spits as he yells, the cameraman convulses as the much larger man shakes him with both hands.

"This is it, fuckers! This is it- in your backyard! How many rapes- how- how many while you sit a block indoors- or less away, comfortable at your fucking TV!"

"Bro! Chill, bro, chill!" the cameraman leans back and pulls himself away before melting back into the crowd.

PiggyP turns and looks around for a moment, spotting Ken in the shadows under a nearby tree.

"Pointer for you, shit shoe- that's how you handle the press!" Piggy points at Ken and gives a thumbs up.

A man in a hi-viz vest runs up to PiggyP and taps him on the shoulder, leaning in, Ken can't hear what the man says in the din of the crowd around him, but when he points on the horizon, Ken's eyes almost pop out.

In the distant, dark edge of the park, a large group carries flaming tiki torches and charges across the grassy field towards

them.

"Sons of Thor, it's a setup!" One of the fursuit people yells near Ken.

Ken picks up his longboard and turns it sideways like a shield, watching the torch-carrying mob getting closer.

"Don't just stand there; get the kids outta here!" PiggyP yells.

"Come on!" Ken shouts, letting one hand go off his board long enough to yank one of the fursuit people backwards and away from the advancing crowd. The group of a couple dozen kids are all shaking and sobbing in fear.

"Quick! Form a conga line!"

"Wha-what's that-" One of the kids squeaks.

Two fursuit people immediately put their hands on their shoulders and walk in a circle, causing the children to quickly form a perfect conga line.

"Go go!" Ken taps the lead kid on the head and points forward, a fursuit person walking backwards ahead and leading them to the path out of the park.

Flanked by a few furries, the kids begin to scurry towards the brighter-lit side of the park, and, unfortunate for Ken, that side of the park now fills with red and blue flashing lights.

Turning to look behind him, Ken watches PiggyP and many of his thugs beating a Son of Thor, having broken a tiki-torch in half over his head. Just then, teargas flies into the park along with a loudspeaker announcement.

...this has been declared a riot; you can and will be subject to the use of force...

With his eyes on Piggy, Ken can't see the brawling crowd behind him spill over into his space, knocking him forwards and

onto his stomach. Ken rolls over just in time as another body falls down right where he was a fraction of a second ago, taken out by a man in a puffy coat.

A fist flies at Ken- blocked just in time with his longboard, Ken dodging backwards and away from the man in the puffy jacket. Another punch- Ken escapes and weaves around the man, who quickly loses interest, turns to assault someone else who is being held down for easy pickings.

Following the clearing in the crowd, Ken catches up with the line of children when he hears a voice yell out.

"Get the fash!"

Two black-clad men rush out from the crowd, one caught on the top of the skull as Ken swings the longboard like an axe overhead- the other whiffs a punch but knocks Ken off-balance and into a struggle for the board.

Behind him, Ken hears the revving of a powerful motor skidding across the wet grass.

Dropping the man he's grappling with a vicious knee to the head, Ken turns and begins to run. The engine of the approaching undercover car roars as it slides sideways, smashing a tent into bits and hitting Ken with the drifting rear end of the vehicle.

Thwack!

Ken bounces and skips along the soft wet grass and stops just as a panicked camper trips over him and lands with an "oof!"

The driver's door flings open, Agent Crunst jumps out and pounces onto Ken, still tangled up, as the sound of chaos comes from all around them.

Ken turns and scrambles to get up, his longboard just out of reach beside a park bench on the nearby paved path.

Slipping and falling on his stomach, Ken feels a yank on his leg and then extreme pain as Agent Crunst stomps on the back of his knee while pulling on his leg at the same time.

"Ahhghh!"

Ken hears a loud thud, the pressure releases from his leg. Rolling over, he spots a couple of dogbois throwing punches and kicks at Agent Crunst beside his car.

Rolling over a couple more times, Ken uses the park bench as a brace to stand up and grab his longboard. He turns in time to watch Agent Crunst punch one dogboi out and boot the other one in the face, sending their mask flying off into the crowd of park combatants.

Jumping on his longboard, Ken feels the acceleration for a moment and a path to escape. A foot stomps on the board and ends that scenario fast. His board stops dead; Ken flies off onto the concrete trail and skids along on his face.

In seconds, Agent Crunst is on top of him, knee to the spine, slapping handcuffs on him as Ken can't move or fight back from having the wind knocked out of him.

He lies there, handcuffed.

Ken resigns to his fate.

He stops struggling.

"You're mine," says Agent Crunst as he leans over Ken, pushing his knee into his back with as much weight as possible, "-you're finished!"

Ken lies there for a moment, thinking about his predicament until a set of fingers slides across his neck, looking for the mask's seam.

Instinctively shrugging his shoulders up as tight as possible, Ken strains and groans with his hands cuffed behind him, buying just enough time until he hears the gruff voice of

PiggyP.

"Fuck the feds, free 'em bois!"

There is another loud crash and sounds of rushing footsteps by his head, a couple of panting dogbois and doggrrls by his side. Feeling something metal and sharp poking around his wrists, a loud snapping sound frees his hands.

A chorus of woofs ring out as a battered Ken rises to his feet, a line of young teens and children behind him, hands on each other's shoulders in a row, heads down.

"Get 'em outta here!" PiggyP yells as red and blue lights flash among the trees in the darkened park. Some police stand by watching the melee, others struggle to make arrests- there are people everywhere. Neighbours keep an eye on the spectacle from their porches with so many groups battling; the homeless, housing activists, agitator groups, various shitkicker gangs and, of course, a very pissed-off Agent Crunst.

"Get- get off me!" Crunst yells, fighting three bondage-clad dogbois and a rainbow fursuit person trying to choke him from behind.

With a solid elbow backwards, the fursuit person doubles over in pain and rolls in the grass. A solid uppercut and another dogboi sprays their dental work out and drops as well.

"Pokey, Rocco, sic 'em!" PiggyP yells.

Ken adjusts his mask and pulls it back down over his face, putting his foot on his board to flip it up into his left hand, his right hand patting a young blonde girl on the shoulder.

"Go, go, go!"

The line of kids follows Ken out of the riot, his head twisting around for any sight of Crunst- or anyone else coming at him.

The line of evacuees files down the path as Ken rides his

board to catch up with the pack leader, slowing down to cruise beside her. Looking backwards just long enough to see Pokey lift up the bolt cutters above Crunst's head as another volley of tear gas canisters whoosh by.

"There are kids here! Stop!" Ken yells, fireworks blowing up around him, swirling teargas and bodies pushing and shoving in groups all around.

Dodging people, tents and debris, Ken jumps off his board for a moment, using it as a battering ram to push groups off the path. Finally making progress in getting away from the main scrap, the park's edge is finally visible. On the tent city's outskirts, a few volunteer medics are helping the many pepper-sprayed and beat-up people.

Coughing and his eyes watery, Ken looks back as the kids are hurrying to keep up. Turning his head forward again, a line of police across the pathway, standing around talking until they all spot Ken at the same time.

"Ohhhh shhhhhiiii-" Ken whispers, looking for an escape.

Just then, the police shuffle aside and allow a stream of kids to burst through, running down the path towards the street. A group of neighbours quickly approach them as Ken stands there until the last one makes it out.

Putting his board down, Ken holds the remote tightly in his hand, gliding by the crowd of police; he's ready to flick the accelerator. His face in disbelief, some officers nod to him as he rides unimpeded out of the park. Ken spins around to see the neighbours offering blankets and hugs to some tent city children.

"Hey, hey you-" a squeaky voice comes from behind a nearby tree.

Ken turns and looks; a lithe teen girl stands there in sweat

pants and a baggy sweater; she pulls a blanket around her tight, her multi-coloured hair a tangled mess.

"T-thanks- t-they'd never let us leave-"

"Don't thank me- I'm- really-"

Ken sighs.

"-not a good person."

Ken motions to the houses nearby and the neighbours on the street.

"Maybe just -thank all these people instead, thank them for still having good hearts in a time where we reward people for doing evil deeds. Thank the people who still bring out blankets and soup instead of fists and baseball bats."

The sounds of sirens and chaos in the distance have Ken spooked. Glancing around, he makes eye contact with her, flashing a peace sign as he speeds away under Vancouver's amber streetlights.

Back home, Ken slips into his basement suite and closes the door behind him silently. Traversing the living room, he immediately pulls a bottle of gin from the freezer, lime from the fridge, and a cold bottle of tonic water. Ken pours a strong gin and tonic at his kitchen table, stabbing a key into the lime and giving it a squeeze above the cup. The first drink goes down fast, the second faster until he is just swigging from the gin bottle and chasing it with a sip of tonic and a bite of the lime. Time blends together, and soon Ken forgets why he is so upset. Lighting a cigarette in the kitchen, the smoke in his eye causing his vision to flutter. Stumbling to the couch, something brushes his leg, turning his head, the laptop slides off his coffee table, and he's falling face-first.



Vertigo and chaos greet a semi-conscious Ken. Thrashing around on the floor, sounds of glass on ceramic, his legs tangled in something. His head rolls on an uncomfortable, hard surface, his carpet squishes with spilled liquid and wets his hair. Cigarette butts and stale booze under a debris field of trash, the floor is a minefield of discomfort and stench. Somehow, the coffee table has flipped over while he slept, and in the dim light, his laptop's screen has jagged cracks.

Ken moans.

Every movement makes him flinch; a trainwreck of thoughts lie smouldering at the back of his skull, piecing together any coherency is impossible. Nausea coming in waves, he can only flutter his eyes open in dizzying bursts. Disjointed memories rush at him, the order indecipherable, but the visions clear; violence, screaming rage. Brutal fighting, smashing people in the face- his hands are swollen from gripping the board so tight.

Tossing and turning over on the floor, the blanket pulls tight, caught up in the laptop's charge cord. In agony, Ken cries out, tugs it hard to cover him, his eyes close tight to keep the hostile world at bay.

Shivering, flashes of his recent life, a maelstrom of sadness.

Visions of horror. The young, soft faces of the children from the tent city, eyes glossy from tears, full of confusion. Allie cradling a still Sparky as her sadness cascades down her cheeks. His arms and legs began to shake, pulling his knees to his chest, burying his face in his arms and sobbing.

Heaving sobs erupt from him, ending only when he has no tears left, replaced by lying on his back, catatonically staring at the ceiling. Broken, instinct takes over; Ken crawls to the kitchen, first slowly, then a bit quicker. Opening the freezer drawer- opening another bottle of spirits, he drinks until his heart rate drops and his body no longer shakes. Memories or hallucinations, he can't tell, but they keep coming, and so do the mouthfuls of liquor. Lying on the kitchen floor, putting his head down, Ken closes his eyes and tries to breathe softly.

Minutes later, a drunk Ken sits at his kitchen table, in front of him a glass of water, an empty bottle, and his phone. Mental faculties returning, his finger still refuses to unlock his phone's passcode, Allie's text still unread. Putting his chin on his palms, the alcohol, once a pleasant social lubricant used responsibly, now consumed to simply numb everything. Looking down the neck of the vodka bottle, nothing but emptiness at the bottom; throwing it towards his garbage bin, he misses- it smashes on the kitchen floor.

It is sometime in the morning, he thinks, staring blankly out the back window. The gorgeous mountains, tips of downtown skyscrapers are in view. He can see, somewhere behind the towers, a column of black smoke rising, possibly from Stanley park.

Barely able to keep his eyes open, lazily watching the

smoke rise, Allie's image intrudes again. She's crying over Sparky's corpse. His fault. He let her down, no- not only that, he ruined her life. He killed Sparky. Nobody forced him to do any of it.

"It w-was just a bike," he whispers.

Teary-eyed, Ken picks up his phone and unlocks it.

Allie writes:

I know your alcoholism is destroying your life, and I'm here for you, but only when you've taken steps to show me that you're stable. It wasn't normal when you attacked the taxi driver, and I never heard you acknowledge that. I take responsibility for letting you get away with so much. It should have been a red flag, and I should have had a talk with you then. Sparky would still be alive. Get better, and we can talk. If there is anything else going on besides the drinking, please, tell me now. My heart cannot take any more lies. It is fragile; once it is broken, there is no fixing it, Ken. I will always love you, but I will never be in love with you again if I cannot trust you.

Ken writes back:

Allison, I am so so sorry for everything. I promise to sober up. Some drama at work stressed me out, and it pushed me to drink, and maybe you're right, and I got out of control. I didn't know what to do, and everything just became worse and worse. I've been trying so hard at work to get that promotion so we can start saving for a place. The drama is over now, and I'm ready to quit drinking forever. For us. I love you, Allie Chang

Ken hits the send button, sighs, and drops his phone.

Tears he doesn't know he even has left drip into his hands, a rotten breath smell mixes with the cheap vodka; breaking

down again, his head collapses on his crossed arms.

Ken wakes up shivering in the dark. He's shirtless, in his underwear, face down on his kitchen table with vomit all over.

After washing up, getting dressed, and surveying the downright atrocious mess in his life, Ken sighs and boots an empty bottle across the living room floor. It breaks against the far wall with a loud crash. Sitting on his sordid couch, he puts shoes on, grabs his keys from the coffee table along with a disposable mask and is heading out the door.

Walking down Cambie street, the fresh breeze feels nice on his face. Across the bridge and through the DTES's foul streets, his fists ball up. His smile is gone, not watching what he's stepping in or on; this time, he finds himself staring people down, moving them out of his way with his glare.

Turning a corner into Gastown, Ken's feet pick up the pace. He walks through the door of his favourite bar, always warm and welcoming to his weary soul- a bed of fresh beer foam will put his worries to rest.

Almost empty, the bar has a bunch of coof rules posted on the door out front. Inside, they only have four stools set up, evenly spread out, and one man at the end is lifting his mask up, sipping his beer, and putting his facemask back down. The man ignores Ken, his eyes glued to one of the pub's several TVs.

Sitting at his favourite stool, Ken tries to smile, but it doesn't come out quite right.

"What'll it be?" says the stout young bartender with a smile behind her transparent face shield and mask. He doesn't recognize her; she must be a new hire.

"Bushmills, neat," Ken replies.

"Any occasion?" says the bartender, pouring the drink and putting it on a napkin before sliding it over.

"Just ah-" Ken pauses, "celebrating moving in a new direction in life-"

The bartender pours the caramel-coloured alcohol into a wide tumbler.

"Aren't you supposed to celebrate once you've changed-"

Ken goes to sip his drink; it meets his mask, dripping down onto the bar.

"-Scuse me miss," shouts the man at the end of the bar, "'-uld you change the channel? 'ockey iz on in 5!"

Ken turns and grins at the old codger at the end of the bar with the thick accent; remembering he is wearing his mask, he shakes his head and curses, ripping it off.

"Hey! you have to put it back on when you're not drinking," says the bartender.

Ken grimaces, sipping his drink again, putting the torn mask back across his face where it lazily hangs from his ear.

The bartender flips the TV channels; the news is just finishing up, and she mutes it.

Ken sips his drink, nearly spitting it out when a photo of Seth pops up on the screen- next to an icon of a plane.

"Hey! Put- put the sound on! -unmute it!" Ken yells at the bartender; she's at the other side of the bar, pouring a beer for the old man.

Jumping up and kneeling on the bar stool, he reaches across the bar to grab the remote, unmuting the screen and sitting back down.

...stunned police officials finding the same handgun used in recent downtown eastside murders among the wreckage of the bombed plane. Tonight the police chief confirmed that they

recovered an electric longboard and night-vision goggles from Seth's apartment, along with a lengthy manifesto. This evening, the police chief confirmed that the longboard and goggles match the ones seen on the police dashcam video on the night of the original tent city terror attack. The bomber was wearing the shoes that left the infamous fecal smear inside the 24/7 convenience store. We'll have more as the situation develops.

For Worldwide news, I'm Kissy Wong...

Reaching across the bar, Ken takes the bottle of Bushmills, tilts it back, and swallows mouthful after mouthful of it.

"The hell is wrong with you!" screams the bartender- Ken standing up, bottle in hand, making a run for it out of the bar.

Up the block and nobody chasing him, Ken resumes a strolling pace through skid row, drinking from a bottle of whiskey. Scrolling through his phone, first re-installing the secure chat app Parlergram, and second, trying to find the leaker's old Plebbit post. He signs up for a new throwaway account to message them with.

"Ah, there we go," Ken mutters, clicking on Big_Chonk_Squirrels Plebbit profile and writing them a message.

call me for airplane crash scoop on parlergram, my id is just_a_nobody

Drunkenly wandering at a slow pace while on his phone, taking a moment to look around, he's standing in the middle of the Cambie street bridge pedestrian walkway.

"Fuck off, buddy!" A cyclist screams, narrowly missing Ken, who is oblivious to the riders flying by. Leaning on the railing and gazing at Science World, Ken drinks from the bottle

with his eyes glued to the phone.

His phone beeps, and a Parlergram message pops up.

LLiang:

hello?

Liza Liang, the busybody blogger and big chonk squirrel.

LLiang:

it's you, isn't it

just_a_nobody:

She had Seth killed and I am probably next

LLiang:

If she can bomb a plane full of the children of Vancouver's most elite family you are probably right

just_a_nobody:

Children?

LLiang:

Yeah, didn't you look at see who else was on the plane?

Ken has a long drink from the bottle, walking from the bridge railing over to a nearby bench, putting the whiskey down beside him. Using both hands to hold the phone steady, he opens the Worldwide News website, the headline article reading:

FLOATPLANE BOMBED EIGHT DEAD INCLUDING TENT CITY
TERRORIST

Tapping the link, photos show everyone who had been on

the plane with captions underneath their faces.

Pear, 3

Kaeden, 7

Saturna, 11

Reading the ages next to the names, Ken's already swollen eyes fill with more tears.

He drinks and drinks, turning his head to vomit several times.

Sitting there, numb, lost in thought.

Ken's phone beeps.

LLiang:

Soooo

Struggling to keep his eyes open, his shaky hand grips the phone, propping himself up with one arm to avoid passing out. Ken pushes himself up to his feet through force of will, beginning to shuffle towards home while texting with Liza.

just_a_nobody:

I had nothing to do with this evil act. We must stop Samantha somehow.

She is pure evil.

just_a_nobody:

I am so so so sorry for those kids. I wish I could turn back time

Ken tilts his head back and screams into the night; none of the cars or cyclists going by notice or stop.

LLiang:

Document everything, get some evidence so we can tie her to Seth and the bomb, anything give to me and I will make that shit go viral.

There is a reason why they used to burn witches

His arms and legs begin quivering, his heart rate shoots up, breathing feels shallow. Dropping the nearly empty bottle, he turns to grab the railing for support while catching his breath.

"Ahhh- arggghhh!" Ken slumps over the handrail, hollering and sobbing, one of his legs kicking the concrete by his feet, hurting his toes.

Beeping erupts from the phone some more as he falls to the ground, propped up against the concrete base of the railing, staring into his screen with his intoxicated eyes.

LLiang:

I believe in you Ken

Consciously making an effort to keep his head from slumping forwards, Ken holds his phone tight, hoping Liza will write something that would fix his world. Everything spins, everything unstable; he closes his eyes.

A pair of soft, strong hands lift him to his feet.

"Oof!" Ken grunts, large fuzzy hands under his armpits, shoving him roughly spine-first into the metal bridge railing.

"Load'em in-" grunts a familiar, sadistic voice.

Suddenly being carried, Ken's head droops down, trying to touch the ground with his feet as he's pulled across the walkway. Up and over the bridge's barrier, he's lifted, now dragging to the road with several black vans awaiting his arrival.

"Wait!" shouts the same voice, the sound of a sliding door is heard opening.

Someone snatches Ken's phone from his hand.

"Huh, a rat- a filthy, stupid drunk rat-"

Hunching over and with Ken's drunken eyes closing, he sees the pulsing, amber hazard lights of a vehicle flash on the back of his eyelids.

Ken feels a sharp blow to the kidney on his left side. Then another, and a kick to his ribs.

"Ugh-"

"Boss- she said-"

Someone forces a cloth bag over his head.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah- just avoid his face."

A flurry of punches rains down on Ken's body for what seems like minutes. Going limp, he can hear a zipping sound, his arms uncomfortably behind his back. Thrown in the van, he's sat on by several heavy people in sweaty furry costumes, crushed even harder as the van takes off.

Ken drifts in and out of consciousness, coming to while being carried. Sounds of a sliding door shutting, jostled by his captors, feeling nausea as they walk along. A few more steps- then stopping. A lock is heard coming loose, a chain drops to the ground, through some creaking doors, into a large echoing hall, now into a musty-smelling passage. Ken can hear a crowd of people murmuring while being carried downstairs. Thrown on his back on a pile of lumpy plastic, Ken's shoulder wrenches in the socket, making him cry out in pain despite all the numbing booze.

The hood catches on something as they throw him down and halfway pulls off; he can see down the bridge of his nose where the fabric isn't totally covering his eyes.

Overtured boxes and junk scattered about, with a brightly lit stage setup. There is also a row of chairs filled by men in suits sitting in the front row. The attire of the attendees doesn't reflect the venue.

"One exit, smart," remarks a familiar, brutal voice. Ken angling his head to spot the grotesquely masked pig-man under the dim audience lights. PiggyP leans out of his chair and reaches out a fat hand towards a man wearing a tuxedo beside the stage.

The burly man in the tuxedo spins to look at the pig-man groping his buttocks and is about to throw a punch when another tuxedo-clad man grabs his arm.

"Not now, later, trust ma'am," says the man, holding back the pissed-off guy in the tuxedo staring the pig-mask brute down.

"Boys, settle down," commands Mistress S, directing everyone to sit.

The thugs settle in among a few old couches and makeshift piles of costumes, boxes and junk. Meanwhile, upfront, VIPs sit along the edge of the stage in folding chairs. Mistress S is on stage, dressing up as a newscaster and looking through a sizeable wheeled case. The stainless steel container is without a single scratch and has slick carbon fibre handles. Perfectly luxurious, it matches her, pushing a few buttons, a projector pops out of the top of the case and beams an image on a large white screen behind her.

Ken, unceremoniously dumped on a stack of mannequins in a shadowy corner under the stairs, frowns under the hood. His hands and feet zip-tied, guarded by weirdos in fursuits sitting next to him, their giant smiling faces and wide-eyes stare off towards Mistress S. Everything from the neck-down

on his body aches from the beating earlier. Taking a few deep breaths, he tries to get in a more comfortable position, difficult to do in such tight bonds. The stairs are only a few feet away- if only Ken could find some fight left in him, he thinks- if only he could fight.

Maybe he would escape.

But where can he even hide?

"Ahem, gentlemen," Mistress S commands presence on her stage, and the crowd goes quiet.

"We have a problem in this city," she bellows, adjusting the focus of her projector, "-the problem is with many of you."

A few murmurs scatter among the couple dozen in the room.

"Every day, men give me an hour of their day while offering twenty-three to the system."

"You want to be able to represent your community? Walk free on the street? Then listen up. Tonight our plan begins, our manifest destiny." she clicks on her laptop, a slide appearing on the screen behind her.

A photo, taken from above, likely by drone. It shows a tent, a few men standing outside and a young girl about to duck inside.

"We cannot have community because a community can no longer form; we cannot walk free on the streets because the streets are no longer ours."

The projector fan kicks on, Ken hears it over the silence of the crowd.

"The public, they've been fed lies, convinced by the media that our rulers are benevolent, when clearly, they're not. They accuse their opponents of everything true about themselves; they operate on gaslighting and projection. A classic tactic, as

old as divide et impera."

She clicks the next slide button, a Roman SPQR eagle with two heads appears.

"-but we can tempt the public with tasty tidbits of truth. The truth always wants to be free; the propaganda of empires becomes more obvious as the light shines in. Their world is in the darkness, and our lights are only so bright. We will shift our lives collectively, living in our separate reality away from those afflicted with this- modern sickness. When we show them how happy and free we are living in the sunshine of truth, the mainstream narrative will crumble like mommy's pie crust."

She clicks.

An image of Mistress S in a full-length dress, her hair in a bun, putting a pie on a windowsill. A boy and a girl stand to each side of the window, smiling at the treat.

"Some things, they feel right."

Mistress S giggles; her expression morphs from a smile to a glare.

"-and some things, feel very, very wrong."

The dark Mistress clicks another slide, zooming the first tentcity photo with the little girl out. Ken recognizes Crunst, the silver-suited federal agent, a few steps behind the girl entering the tent.

"Now, I'm not," she chuckles, "-I'm not suggesting what it looks like, but..."

The small crowd has a few laughs.

"The people, they need to see this. Even if it were innocent and simply a wellness check, as they call them, what was he doing in the tent, alone, with a young girl, for almost thirty minutes?"

Clicking another slide shows her sitting at a news desk

wearing her newscaster power-suit outfit and making a cutesy face.

"5th generation warfare is simply how many screens you're in front of. And, gentlemen, thanks to your support, our organization is in front of many, many screens."

The room breaks out into clapping for minutes, followed by an encore as she bows.

"This news is ours to spin," she grins.

"After we liberated the first tent city, the public got an unpleasant taste of what the city really looks like. Drugs, sex, theft, housing- it's all related to human trafficking. But what is the root of it all, gentlemen?"

Mistress S pulls off the elegant brown wig, tossing it into the enthralled crowd and unfurling her dyed neon-pink hair to gasps from the front row. A small man in a grey suit falls out of his seat and faints as she begins to loosen the collar to her news outfit, revealing underneath a form-fitting, latex white bodysuit. Men in the front row convulse in their seats, professing their love for her, calling out and kneeling. Adjusting her hair, she puts a headband on with plush white cat ears. Undulations of the crowd reach their climax as she makes her trademarked look. Crossing her eyes, mouth wide open, drool dripping from the tip of her extended-out pink tongue.

"Ohhh, Mistress, I love you!" shouts someone from the front row, prostrating himself in front of her.

Her face returns to normal for a moment, switching to her one eye half-closed, smug-smile look.

"Ask yourself," her voice hypnotic, "-why would a man risk everything for 30 minutes, or less, of pleasure when the risks are so high?"

Observing the men in the front row, Ken can see them

clutch at and wipe their faces, tears streaming down, star-struck into complete delirium.

Mistress S struts across the miniature stage, two tuxedo-clad gentlemen holding chrome and pink SKS rifles stand at the flanks of the projector screen behind her.

Giggling, she winks one of her thick eyelashes in Ken's direction.

"I hardly even call it that- pleasure? Really? Sex in a nasty tent, in the middle of a homeless camp, while you're probably rolling around in rubbish!"

Playfully covering her nose, she makes a cute, stinky face.

"So, let me get this straight, if I may, gentlemen."

Putting her hands on her hips for a moment to pose, lifting a dainty hand, she reaches out to the side without looking- as one of her gentlemen slides a pink clipboard in her palm.

"So, according to the numbers-" Mistress S giggles, "-oh boys, you're not going to believe this; it's real!"

"They're really doing it in Vancouver, 50 million for a hotel here, 75 million there- all to house you like a caged animal. The business plan is simple; they feed you, house you, give you no opportunity- if the despair doesn't get you, the overdoses will."

Ken's face scrunches up; none of these men in suits have ever seen poverty or ever missed a single meal.

Mistress S crouches down and puts her wrists together, pouting with her lips and fluttering her wing-like lashes, her eyes welling up with tears.

"They want you to beggy-weggy, to ask fo' po'mission, please, sir, can I have a meal? Please, sir, can I have my drugs? Please, sir, I'll eat the bugs; I just want my porn, I just need my weed, please, please... PLEASE, sir! Please!"

Even Ken holds his breath; Mistress S has the whole room enthralled.

She prowls back and forth on the stage, crawling on hands and knees, smiling and making eye contact with her front-row guests.

"They risk it all because their lives are perpetual rock-bottom. What the government likes to call 'harm reduction' is only half a lie-

Mistress S gets to her feet gracefully and drops her smile.

"It's mostly about reducing the harm the poor can do to the rich. It's not about reducing the harm men can do to themselves. Men, who until now, had no other choice but to suffer-

Seductively sauntering across the stage, she nods her head at one of her gentlemen, who hands her a silvery remote control. On the projector screen, a slideshow begins with scenes of desperate men shooting up drugs.

"Please, gentlemen, take your seats; my big announcement requires your absolutely undivided attention. I need you to find your conviction; there, you will find your reward."

The front row of adoring fans, half on their knees worshipping her, take a second, find their chairs again and settle down. Mistress S paces across the stage hypnotically, unzipping her bodysuit just as she steps behind the screen for the projector. Stepping out from behind the opaque white sheet, she reveals herself in a short combat skirt and a metallic armoured bra. Ken briefly makes eye contact with Mistress S as she stops in the middle of the stage to look at the crowd. He feels her stare at his hooded face, a menacingly seductive woman. Standing straight to face the audience with a smile,

she alternates between clapping for herself and waving to her adoring pawns. Men in the front row falling back onto their knees in a frenzy again, hands in prayer, thanking her.

"It's clear, gentlemen. Rich or poor, until now, nobody has met your needs," the striking, red-haired beauty spins in her short skirt, and her pink pigtails dance on her head.

"I'm here to change that."

"I'm here to provide *a future*."

"I'm here, to-"

Mistress S giggles.

"-escalate your bonus."

Her face goes cross-eyed, sticking out her tongue, drooling until her chest glistens. She has the look of a supermodel exorcism.

With a few giggles, her eyes return to normal, and she is reeling her long, pink tongue back in her mouth.

"We have the best people; we have the best plans. Mr. Ping, please, come on my stage-"

The short man in the tailored shiny grey suit walks up on the stage and faces the crowd with a vast, wide-eyed grin.

"Mr. Ping and his associates are funding our next move- Ten K Day!"

The short man enthusiastically nods his head.

"Enrolling in the Bonus Escalation alpha test requires a DNA sample and a wee little document to sign. For this, they get a thousand dollars in cash and a voucher for more money- up to ten thousand in cash; if they meet our contract's obligations. Only the best of the best will be invited to work for our organization. Bonus Escalation will launch tomorrow- we will save this city and give people something to live for, something to believe in again."

Mistress S hands the short man the remote for the projector.

"Please, do the honours," she says, stepping back and looking at the screen, putting her hands on the short man's shoulders, his smile beaming brighter.

The excited man clicks the remote, and a video begins to play. The intro shows a black and white scene of a person waking up to a loud and jarring alarm. They're just going through a wake-up routine, followed by going to a job, sitting in a box labelled a wagie cage, then going home, eating, and sleeping. The video speeds up until it shows him getting old, being alone, and dying. The screen returns to colour and instead shows him choosing a different life path- the path of Bonus Escalation.

"We will escalate your bonuses; you just need to produce. We have a system in place for all professions, from each according to their need. The S-institute needs you to build the community of the future."

"The Sin-sti-tute?" Ken whispers to himself.

The video begins and shows people farming, looking at blueprints and solar power panels erecting among a village of homes; uplifting and inspirational new age music plays in the background. All the actors from the previous minutes of the video appear on the screen, surfing somewhere on the Pacific coast. Happy faces of men and women of all skin colours and sizes, all sitting around a campfire at sunset toasting marshmallows. The camera, zooming away, reveals a beach full of little fires and a massive construction site in the background illuminated at night.

A giant JOIN US! fades into view across the screen.

"The first of many colonies, the bleeding edge of lifestyle

research- imagine, work, money, belonging, and-" Mistress S giggles and begins to tickle the short Mr. Ping.

"Guaranteed sex!"

Mr. Ping giggles and turns bright red, jumping off the stage and going to sit down. Mistress S smiles, brings her hands together in prayer, and closes her eyes.

She opens her eyes and pulls her hands apart, palms facing her audience for sympathy.

"Just- envision it- a community where we facilitate an environment where every man and woman can have a relationship. Everyone can reach homeownership and have roles to play- with Bonus Escalation- this is reality, gentlemen. This is how mommy is going to love you all at once."

Ken shakes his head slowly, frowning.

Mistress S ends the meeting by blowing kisses to everyone and disappearing behind the small projector screen to change; the armed men in tuxedos direct the crowd out of the makeshift seating area.

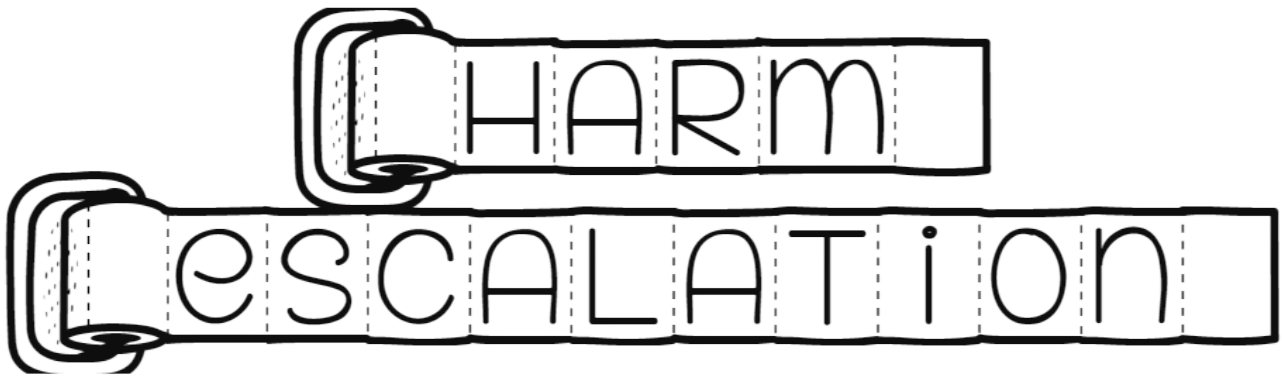
Ken lies there, his palms sweaty and his hands shaking a little; the room spins a bit still from all the booze. His heart thuds in his chest, wondering what's next.

"Hey... when's a guy going to catch a break- what if I have to piss-" Ken mutters to the orange fox beside him. The fursuit's beachball-sized head has an oversized fluffy tongue hanging out; Ken doesn't think the furry can hear him.

The crowd files out one by one; Mistress S's goons are the last ones left.

"Bring him, and keep him quiet."

Furry hands tie a gag around his mouth, slightly choking him. A bag covers his head again, returning him to blackness for transport.



Jet engines are loud above when the vehicle stops.

A sliding door opens, and Ken is roughly dragged out. After a short carry, he's deposited in a comfortable chair, a scent of perfume tickling his nose. Quick-moving hands snip off his plastic restraints; the same hands remove the bag from his head and gag from his mouth. Ken squints from the sudden bright light, trying to understand his odd predicament.

Minutes pass as he sits there, dizzy and drunk, eyes adjusting to see what appears to be a small office. A polished mahogany desk with two thick glass portholes on the wall behind it, in-between them is a sturdy-looking chair, a harness of some sort attached to it. A flush-mounted TV screen sits inside the back wall; it is currently off. The muffled sound of a turbine engine spinning up jolts Ken's head around, two thick bulkhead doors lead out of the room for him to escape from, that is, if he could move. Looking down at his chest, a harness with multiple clasps has him tightly seated. The vibration of whatever he's in taking off has him wondering-no- no, he's right, definitely too sober for this.

The quietly-flying craft tilts slightly as it flies; once at cruising altitude, the forward bulkhead door opens a crack and

lets in some noise. A whirring, maybe a helicopter, Ken thinks, a chill up his neck when Mistress S's voice is overheard talking to someone. Ducking his head, he pretends to be asleep.

Ken has his head down and keeps his eyes closed, listening to Mistress S's charming voice. A drink can be heard being poured.

"Piggy showed me your phone, Ken."

She speaks softly, if a bit sad.

"Some would see my operation fail, that my goal is somehow unworthy or ignoble- like I planned all this simply as a tribute to, moi."

Ken wonders if she knows he's faking.

"Let me assure you, this isn't about you- or I."

Head down, breathing slow, he hears the engines of the flying craft whirr away.

"I know you didn't beat those bike thieves for any selfish reason, you could have bought a new bike, but to you- to me- the principle is what counts. Remember- your gallery neighbours? The old couple?"

Mistress S pauses for an answer, continuing when Ken pretends to snore.

"-or should I say Allie's neighbour- I saw him on the news. Gallery Italia was his pride and joy. Do you know what that break-in did to him? Do you, Ken?"

Her voice loses its softness.

"He owned a deli in Burnaby and handed out sandwiches on the street, bitten by the same mouths he was feeding. Generous, kind, but weak. No spine, no moral courage to rebuild- he still had the land, his health, the building, but instead of making a stand, he quit-"

There is a pause, and Ken hears the soft clink of a glass

being put down.

"-and, criminals won." Mistress S speaks in a lower, meaner tone than her normal sing-songy voice.

"History always looks down on cowards, Ken."

Heat rushes to his face while trying to ignore the witch and her cursed scheming. It's all lies, he thinks, shutting down her doorway into his soul.

"He was a fool," Mistress S growls, "-he thought he lost everything in that break in- his wife- she had a heart attack shortly after. Then their dog ran away and was later found dead, hit by a car."

Ken sighs, taking a deep breath, fluttering an eyelid open briefly.

Mistress S is having a sip of her drink.

"I really do make the best cocktails," she says to herself.

Ken rotates his head slowly to stare out the window; the colourful lights of downtown Vancouver shining bright.

"Oh Kenny, you'll love this," Mistress S giggles a little.

"After losing his gallery, his wife, and the dog- the police charged him with animal neglect for the dog getting hit. They got him for an expired dog license, too. Instead of steeling his resolve to fight the corrupt city and eradicate the local scum, he quit."

Mistress S sips her drink again.

"Nobody likes a quitter, Ken, and he- gave- up."

Ken focuses on listening to the well-muffled whirring of the aircraft's engine, plugging one ear with his shoulder.

"He hung himself from the rafters the day the lease ran out. His story never made the news, did you know that, Ken?"

Mistress S cackles with vicious laughter.

Ken's face burns, teeth-gritting, turning his head to scowl

at her wide-eyed and crazy, she returns the look with her smirking, evilly-cute face.

"In a city so cold to the law-abiding citizens, do you think most people have what it takes to stand up?" Spittle flies as Ken talks in a growl, "You speak like you've put yourself in danger when you never have!" snarling in his hoarse voice, red forehead veins bulge out like meaty, throbbing worms under his skin.

"You have no right to judge that man for what he did- what he endured- the untold difficulties and challenges-" Ken's voice trails off. His anger gives way to despair, noticing Mistress S holds something shiny in her hand.

She smiles right into him.

"Missing something, Kenny?"

Mistress S tosses Ken's phone in his lap, along with a shiny liquor flask.

His mind swims, his body tenderized with repeated beatings; emotionally drained and drunk, Ken opens the flask. Having a drink, he stares out the window at the twinkling scenery below.

"Ken," Mistress S changes the tone of her voice, dropping the callous manner, warm again, her charming self.

"When you cracked the skull of that rich boy playing trust punk, did you care what struggles he had? No- no, you see, in love and war, they say everything is fair when, clearly, they know it isn't, but we play along given whatever social position we need to maintain. Housing activists would be out of a paycheque if housing were possible under the current paradigm, but the paradigm is just that- unfair by design."

Mistress S sips her drink.

"You didn't crack that man's skull because of your desire

for revenge or your need to get another bike, you had the money for a new one, so it's not like the thief put you out. You had enough. You saw injustice and took action, Ken; that is the spark of hope that keeps us going. That little spark turned into an inferno when you killed Big Candy."

Ken turns his forlorn gaze from the window and back to glaring at Mistress S. Looking so collected, calm and cruel in her black dress and natural red hair; her emerald green eyes disarm him from within. A crystalline wine glass held in a lithe hand with blood-red nails, she sits in her plush throne looking heavenly dark.

"You had the fucking money too!" Ken yells, his voice cracking. Sharply leaning forward and straining against the harness, pointing his index finger at Mistress S while screaming.

"You could have just bought the hotel, not have the blood of children on your dirty f-f-fucking hands!" Within moments, the inner bulkhead doors open, and four tuxedo-wearing gentlemen rush in.

"No, it's okay, we're fine," Mistress S waves to shoo the guards; they turn back, all stare Ken down before the door closes.

"Seth made the sacrifice to save his city. He didn't do it out of any narcissism, personal vendetta, or greed. His act was righteous, and I will always have a special place in my heart for him and the rest of my fallen gentlemen."

Mistress S holds her hand to her heart, a hint of moisture appearing in the corners of her eyes.

Her voice cracks.

"That. Is. Beautiful."

Her eyes close, and she finishes the other half of her

cocktail in one mouthful.

Ken's eyes bulge out, his rage boils over.

"You-you're sick, there's nothing, I mean nothing- nothing beautiful about blowing up a plane full of people, full of c-c- CHILDREN! -nothing beautiful, nothing, you hear me? Nothing beautiful- about asking a man who loved you- to commit that act. If I knew- If I had known what-"

Ken can barely catch his breath, continuing his hoarse rant, "-the day I met you, I should have dared you to turn me in; you never would have- everything you do is a lie, a scam, all for power-"

The tete-a-tete is quiet for a few seconds; all Ken can hear over his own breathing is the helicopter's engine and the bulkhead door opening again. A man in a tuxedo comes in, handing her a USB flash drive and silently leaving; the door behind him closes with a soft click.

"You're so quick to defend people you don't know anything about," she says, plugging the USB key into her desk. Pulling up a small silver remote control from a drawer, flicking on the back wall's TV screen.

A smiling, bearded man appears on the TV wearing a captain's hat.

"This calls for something special," she says, tapping a button on her desk; a panel opens in the middle. Mist swirls around as she removes an old-looking green glass bottle, the little freezer door closing automatically.

The bottle pops open loudly; Mistress S pouring herself a full glass of sparkling gold liquid in a slender wine glass.

"This is, or was, Tim Klassen. 44 years old, two counts of domestic abuse, five years behind bars, countless accusations in his hometown of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario- his ex

disappeared five months before moving out west and began to use an alias. He was the pilot on that flight-"

Ken can feel the vehemence in him. His hands shake violently; he takes a spilly swig of his liquor flask- it tastes like vodka and coats his lips, his screaming spits the residue at her.

"Stop! just f-f-fucking stop! You're going to sit there, bring up one man's past, with no proof-" his words ring with agony, "it's- it's all f-fu-fucking lies- and you'll tell me this justifies sending a man to his death? In your sick mind, it's- okay to bomb a flight, with a mother, and her-"

He takes a few heavy breaths, shaking with anger, tears bursting from his eyes and down his burning hot face.

"-three children onboard? Are- are you? Really? You're sick, you- f-fucking-"

Ken's heart races; short of breath, he's struggling to finish.

"Y-you f-f-fucking MONSTER!"

Mistress S rolls her eyes and sips her wine.

"If I weren't drinking a 1961 Petrus, your little act of being a drama queen might actually piss me off." Her tone changes again, quickly clicking the silver remote to bring up a photo of a grinning, fit and pretty woman.

"Mila Brown, or now known as Mila Mattenson, the wife of Vancouver's richest and most despised men, Big Candy. His real name, Otto Mattenson. Do you recognize that, Ken? He's heir to the pacific lumber fortune, But being rich just didn't do it for him; his kicks came from his other business. He worked full-time to expand his sex and drug trafficking empire, with growing ties to gulf cartels."

Mistress S clicks again, the photo of the smiling, beautiful older posh woman fades out, replacing it is a montage video. Numerous clips play. Mila speaking at events, her family in a

tropical location with Big C, a man in a red shirt, and a couple other families in luxurious areas. A yellow box appears on the screen to follow the red-shirted man standing with another lean man. The video displays a still image and pauses. It's Mila and the man in red. They're in front of a floatplane, embracing in the background of a selfie photo. The man in the foreground is Seth.

"Do you see that man hugging Mila?"

Ken doesn't move a muscle, glaring at the screen.

"The red-shirted man was Diego Delgado, heir to the Flaco cartel. The other man was his brother, a man only slightly less cruel. When I found out I could get them all on a plane at the same time, I had to channel my inner Ken- I had to act."

"Home videos," Ken whispers, "-do not justify taking any lives."

Mistress S cackles.

"Are you pretending to be so naive, Ken?"

The video cuts to a security camera scene in what looks like an auto shop with another click.

"You should have some more vodka," Mistress S sips her wine, "-now."

Ken's scowling eyes glance at Mistress S for a second. The flask reaching his lips for a mouthful of fummy vodka, looking back at the now-unpaused video playing out on the screen.

The video shows 4 different security camera feeds, each with several blurry people walking about in their own little square. A mechanic stands by a hoist working on a car, in another feed, an older man at a countertop. The back alley is full of stacked tires with barely enough room for a car to drive in.

"What does this have to do with anything," Ken mutters.

"Drink, and watch," Mistress S speaks in a serious tone without her fake accent or hyper-cuteness.

The video plays; Ken drinks back the last sips of his liquor flask; the old man moves about the auto repair shop on the screen. He's answering the phone, shuffling about, and goes to help the mechanic examine something before disappearing off camera for a minute. He comes back with another part; the two men return to the shop's back door together as a vehicle pulls up in the alleyway.

A young woman gets out, walks to the back of the car and opens the door for a small child to pop out, presently running towards the garage door.

A black SUV is rolling into the alley, parking behind the woman's car; the garage door opens. The old man and the mechanic greet her happily. The child runs in for a hug on the mechanic, who tries to not hug her with his dirty hands- but it is too late, and everyone is having a laugh at the greasy hand marks on the toddler's shirt. The doors to the black SUV open, several men climb out, one in a red shirt, walking towards the open garage door.

"What you're about to see is going to change you forever." Mistress S is unusually serious, standing up from her desk, putting down her drink. She opens a panel on the wall, dims the lights and puts something in her palm. Walking over to Ken, she stands behind him, gently turning his chair to face the screen.

Ken's head nods forwards involuntarily, his entire body going numb and limp.

"Ken? Ken? You have to wake up. You have to watch this. You have to understand why we fight."

In the dim light, over his shoulder in the reflection from

the window- Ken can see Samantha's face. She's crying and moves close to whisper in his ear.

"Innocence is the beauty that shines from within children... innocence- Ken, do you really understand the meaning of that word? Innocence is in the belief of absolutes. You can be absolutely sure of your happiness when you see a purple dinosaur as a child- and absolutely sure of the horror of the skeleton lurking under one's bed. Remember Ken, the first time you swim in a ball pit? How about a zip line? A slide? The euphoria of a playground is something we forget, or maybe-taken from us."

Taking his arms, she crosses them in front of Ken, resting his hands on his opposite shoulders.

Ken musters up as much strength as he has, trying to keep his eyes open as the redheaded siren holds his fingers in her palm, resting on his own shoulder. A sharp pain stings his hand for a moment, a warm sensation pushing him deeper into his cozy flight seat, more alert suddenly.

"Just imagine innocence as a special place, somewhere you can never return to once it is gone." Samantha stands behind him, the floral scent of her red hair; she's rubbing his now-sore backhand affectionately.

"All those kids on the playground, blissful in little worlds of carefree joy. They're surrounded by parents worried about mortgages- yet those worries are kept away from little ones through a firewall of knowledge. We know so much more about mental health than we did in the past, and that innocence, Ken, that innocence exists in one form. Joyous youth; they alone bring life to the slide, swing set, monkey bars..."

Samantha puts her arms around Ken's chest and hugs him,

her soft cheek pressing against Ken's. Her fragrance and touch overwhelming his senses to the point where he submits completely, his arms useless, unable to resist her.

"What if we're wrong about everything we've been taught? Maybe the foundation of society relies on squashing our innocence. We replace it with a cynicism that eats us alive, needing our fix of whatever our addictions demand- keeping us trapped in a cycle of slavery and mindless consumption.

Anyone who isn't naive will tell you how the world works-"

Mistress S digs her nails into his neck and screams in his ear.

"-it's A DOG EAT FUCKING DOG WORLD, isn't it, Ken?"

He hears the engines whirring as Mistress S falls silent; she begins to gently stroke his hair.

"Those places where children feel safe and loved, Ken, that's why we fight. We will extend that sense of belonging to adult life. Preserving and amplifying innocence, not taking it away. Our allies are those who seek to fill parks with happiness, to build a society based on respect for that innocence- innocence only found in those not yet exposed to the meatgrinder of adult life. Our enemies sell instant gratification- drugs and sex slavery in exchange for obedience to the system's rules and corrupt hierarchy. Our beliefs are the opposite; the system should serve us in exchange for good behaviour. Tent cities take over where families and children once played, an unhealthy society breeds unhealthy lives. Those parks Ken, use your mind's eye- think of all of those parks- full of all playful, happy children- children, free to self-express and just be- without worry. They can truly, truly live in the moment, Ken. Once you become an adult in this world, life requires anxiety of the future while past mistakes are meant to

haunt you- cracks placed with purpose in your soul for the rot to seep in, draining from us the most precious thing of all."

Samantha pushes the recline feature on the luxurious flight seat and gently places Ken's arms and legs into a comfortable position.

"Now, here we go," she whispers, kissing Ken on the cheek and folding Ken's arms across his stomach.

All Ken can do is stare outwards; his eyes burn, cheeks streaking with tears, unable to blink. Extremities completely numb- his anxiety raging; he can't control his breathing!

Help!

"Now now, it's okay," Samantha says, reaching above into a panel and pulling down a mask with a thick headband, adjusting it to fit on Ken's face. A gentle sound of flowing air is heard as Samantha gently strokes Ken's hair.

She sniffles.

"You've been through a lot, I know, and it's okay to be mad, to be confused. It's not every day people get to be a part of something... bigger than them?"

Ken screams inside his head, eyes stinging, no sensation in his body at all, utterly at her mercy.

"I know, I know," Samantha whispers, getting up and walking around for a moment, coming back to gently hold his head, administering eye drops with care.

"Now, you might not like what you're about to see, and I know it was tough for me to get over the nightmares. So, I hope you can imagine, after this, that it's not personal. I just needed someone else capable, someone else to feel my pain. To understand me."

Ken feels Samantha wrap her arms around him again. With her long lacy black sleeves, it's easy to envision her as a

hungry spider, her words drip with poison.

"If this were any other time or place, it would be so lovely, Ken."

Samantha kisses him on the forehead, her soft, warm, pillowy lips.

She drops one tear onto his cheek, and it rolls down his neck.

Ken's eyes blurry; he's paralyzed with a mask on his mouth and nose. Samantha turns his chair, adjusting the recline feature to point him directly at the computer monitor closest to him, impossible to look away. With her red-painted dagger nails, she pushes the intercom button.

"I need the doc in here-"

Seconds pass, Ken hears the door open and footsteps.

Mistress S motions to Ken in the chair; taking his time carefully, the attendant puts some drops in Ken's eyes. Whatever she fed him in his flask, he can't move at all, not even to blink. Feeling the man adjusting his respirator, the man positions Ken's head on the headrest to face the screen, the attendant leaves through the bulkhead when complete.

"I'd tell you to watch, but that would be redundant," Mistress S giggles cutesy, clicking her remote.

The video on the screen shows a few burly men walking into the back of an automotive shop, which looks like Mexico to Ken. The screen cuts to another camera, showing the young lady with the child in the front customer waiting room, the young man in the back looking puzzled by the appearance of the men.

Numb from head to toe, he can't move, feeling like ice is filling his lungs.

An old man walks into the frame, hands in the air, briefly

motioning his son to leave. The son refuses, immediately beset upon by three men, he's kicked to the ground and stomped on.

"You don't get to pick and choose your morality, Ken; you're either one of the good ones or-"

Mistress S lifts her drink towards the screen with one hand, dabbing her eyes with the knuckle of her other.

One of the men rushes to the front of the shop, grabbing the woman and child and dragging them, faces twisted and mouths wide open, to the back of the shop.

In the open area of the garage, with sunlight pouring in from the alley, stands a man wearing a red shirt.

The man begins to yell at the old man, motioning towards another man who rolls over an oil drum, grabbing nearby coveralls and throwing them inside. A third goon sprays a liquid inside, tossing in a match; tall flames burst out and flicker wildly.

The young man is waving his arms frantically while lying on the ground, one of the men beating him without mercy until he stops. The old man getting a couple punches to the stomach and face, his arms held behind him so the thugs can land precise hits. His face rearranged to bloody shambles, an expression of total defeat.

The young woman is held by the hair and kneeling; every time she struggles at all, one of the men kicks her until she can no longer grip her child, the toddler falling to the floor in front of the red-shirted man.

Ken's only feeling is his heart; it pounds inside his chest.

The red-shirted man smiles at the toddler; the young woman, young man, and the old man cry out at once, faces of sheer terror.

Ken can't blink, can't shout, can't look away.

"Cocaine is a little less cool when you see how they make the sausage-"

Sounds of glass clinking on crystal champagne flute, Mistress S pouring another elite beverage.

Picking the child up and holding it over the flaming barrel, the man in red drops it- catching it before they fall completely in. The family throws themselves on the ground, begging. With the anguish so universal, Ken's eyes pour tears as Redshirt repeatedly dunks the child in the barrel, the flames licking at its body.

"Sometimes, Ken, you have to suffer for your art," Mistress S muses.

"-and you are suffering right now, I hope, for the right reasons; to vaccinate yourself against your previous state of ignorance. Choosing blindness to the suffering of others was how you lived, Ken. Now, relax, and let me free you, permanently, from returning to your life of convenient indifference."

Unable to move, unable to stop watching, the gallery of diabolical evil playing on the screen pours malice concentrate into Ken's psyche.

The man lifts the burnt child up in the air and holds it, pretending to offer it to the old man. The old man reaches for the child and takes a boot to his back, falling to the ground hard.

Mistress S pauses the video.

"Ooh, let's do subtitles! I mean, it is a foreign film, I guess."

Mistress S giggles.

With a few clicks, the video continues.

"-stupid old man, you chose to stay, you choose to go to

the city, you chose to talk to the police."

The old man rolls over, managing to moan, "please- just me-"

"You made your choice, and now the cartel makes its choice, and you may now choose what happens next-"

Redshirt drops the singed toddler, pulling a large knife from his waistband; he walks over to the young woman to stick the blade in her mouth.

"Option one, I take your daughters tongue, so she may never say I love you, dad, again,"

"No, no- please- me-"

Pushing her to the ground, Redshirt turns to a nearby table full of tools and picks up a set of heavy-duty bolt cutters, walking back to the crying child on the floor.

"Option two, I take your grandsons hands, so he may never wave hello, Papi-"

"No! No! Please-" they all begin to shriek; even the other thugs start to glance at each other.

Dropping the bolt cutter, Redshirt motions to one of the thugs who steps to the black SUV for a few moments, coming back with a small chainsaw.

"Option three, we take your son's arms, so he can never hug you or push a defeated old puta madre around in his last, failed days."

Ken's heart thumps savagely in his chest, and he struggles in futility to look away.

The family all scream in horror as the old man looks at his family, all held down by thugs; Redshirt lifting up the singed, crying grandson to hold him back over the flaming oil drum.

The son motions to the father, nodding vigorously and waving his arms.

"No please- just kill me- leave them-"

Redshirt smiles.

"Not so simple. If you die suspiciously, how will we take your property? You will disappear from this province; if we see you again, you are all killed. Honestly, you are pretty lucky today. Now, choose your punishment."

The old man looks at the ground. A waterfall of spit and blood form a bib of gore on his shirt; he's clearly overcome by the sounds of his daughter crying. His son frantically begs his father to choose him over the cries of his burnt and bloodied grandchild.

"My son," he whispers.

Redshirt nods to the thugs, the one with the chainsaw stepping forward, pointing to the son to kneel beside a steel workbench.

Shaking and nervous, the man kneels, putting out his arms with his head down- the chainsaw runs along his elbow joints, quickly leaving two bloody and squirting stumps in their place.

All of the family erupt in screams, the old man rushing to wrap his belt around one of his wounds while the young woman crawls on the floor, trying to get closer to her child.

"Here you go," the red-shirted man says, casually dropping the toddler on the floor, uncontrollable sobs from the mother nearby.

"Now," the red-shirted man turns to the father, "I suggest you get him to the hospital; a taxi is out front; he will take you there. You had a horrible accident today, and the shop burnt down. Hope you make better choices in the future, Mr. Gomez; you do not want to meet me again."

The old man helps his daughter up; she dashes out of the garage with her battered toddler, blood spraying from the

adult son's arms. They make a run for the front of the building —the echoes of their painful screams lingering in Ken's ears.

Redshirt laughs, motioning to another thug who begins to pour liquid from a jerry can, leaving a trail as he goes. Once it's empty, the men walk to the alley. The security camera flashes and turns yellow, glitching out and going grey as smoke fills the auto shop.

"Now Ken, do you see why you're a little bitch about this whole- 'bomb' thing? -I mean, really, it was art- two archons of global capital taken out and nearly all of your loose ends neatly tied up. Seth even wrote a long manifesto to cover for you. You'll be a free man- soon."

Ken struggles to scream, only slightly fogging up his mask.

"Crunst's phone- the last piece- once we tie him- and, by proxy- the government, to standing in the way of Bonus Escalation... the people will revolt. The government will fall. Our plans accelerate."

Mistress S clicks her remote again. A video pops up on the screen of Grandpa Chang hugging Allie outside of a restaurant.

"I always get what I want, and the cost is steep for anyone in the way. Well, if you haven't learned that by now... you will... you could."

"Besides," she giggles, "-what else do you have to lose?"

Mistress S pushes the intercom button.

"How much fuel do we have left?"

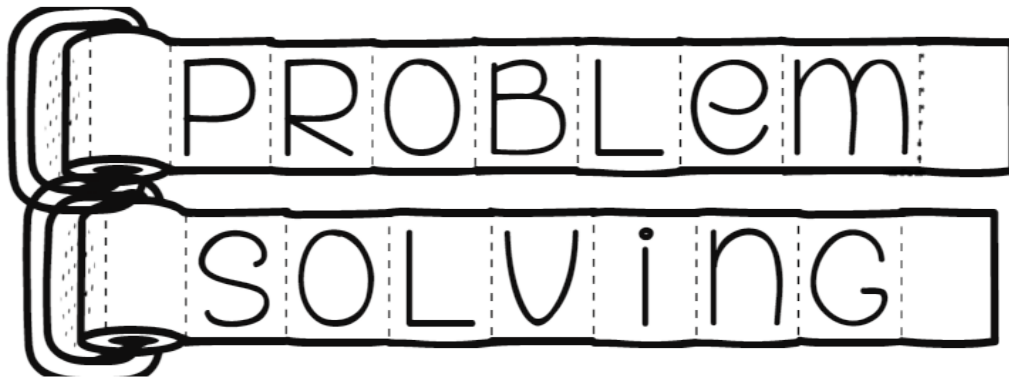
"Two hours," crackled the voice that replied.

Moving back to Ken's side, she liberally applies more eye drops and pinches him on the cheek, "Ooh, you're just so cute," she smiles. Turning, she clicks on her remote, resetting the screen back to the cartel torture video and pausing it at the beginning.

"Okay, you, until tomorrow- big day! Five o'clock at Wrathcona Park. I'll be handing out money and feeding the needy! See, we're the good guys, and when Crunst shows up to party crash, my Kenny knows exactly what to do. Get his phone; it is the final key we need to expose the corruption and sway the public at all costs. Will send the deets by the time you wake up tomorrow, pooppy-shoe," Mistress S wraps her arms around Ken and hugs him tight.

"In the meantime, we'll take you home after you've watched this for a couple hours on repeat. That should do it, get the ol' heart ready for some shit kickin'- rest up, muffin!"

The mistress in black walks to the doorway, turning back to push play on the TV remote, blowing Ken a kiss before she closes the door.



He doesn't remember getting home again. Lying on his disgusting couch, a stain-covered blanket wraps around him; he sleeps in until the late afternoon sun creeps down the back kitchen wall. Navigating through his basement suite to the bathroom, Ken shuffles through dunes of empty cans and bottles, knee-deep in places; it makes an awful racket. Using the toilet, Ken's blue and purple body reflecting in the broken bathroom mirror. A few cold and potent drinks later, he puts his armoured shitkicker gear on and Ken's ready to roll for 5 PM.

Leaving through his backdoor in his conspicuous outfit, he's soon whipping through the city streets on his longboard. Mistress S sends the coordinates for the exact meetup location via Parlergram. They lead him a couple blocks from the edge of the notorious Wrathcona Park tent city.

Slowing down, he notices a few people inside their houses, peeking out from behind their curtains and watching him roll through the hood and turn down an alleyway. About halfway down, the destination on his left is an oversized four-car garage.

Walking up to the door with his head on a swivel, Ken

knocks; murmuring can be heard on the other side.

The door opens, a masked, tuxedo-clad man motions for Ken to step inside.

In the middle of the garage is a car-sized pink platform with handles, surrounded by men in bright reflective jumpsuits with lights strapped to their heads. Flanking the gentlemen on either side stand men in tuxedos and people in fuzzy, cartoonish fursuits. Other groups of people in leather puppy bondage gear and other rag-tag costumes pack themselves into the corners of the spacious building; everyone looks pumped for a fight.

With standing-room-only, Ken can barely see Mistress S's canopy, his view blocked by men in tuxedos loading paintball guns with pepper balls.

PiggyP pushes through the crowd and looks right at Ken, spitting on the floor.

"It's *him*," says the greasy pigman.

"Master Shitkicker, so glad you could join us," Mistress S coos from behind her canopied platform.

One of the shiny suit men hands him a small, durable-looking tablet.

"Use that to track any drones you see, our intel says to prepare for a drone to instigate a riot- and we know a certain fed that loves his toys."

Ken nods, looking down at the tablet to turn it on; powering up, it beeps as it scans, showing no drones or signals on the overhead map view.

"It's time," she says, opening a curtain to her canopy and pointing to the door.

With a whirr, the garage doors open.

Ken and the other shitkickers stroll out of the garage,

walking the half-block; they arrive at the edge of the street. Slowly gliding along, Ken is on point with his electric longboard. Glancing behind him, Mistress S is sitting on her canopied throne with the curtains open, regal and stunning. Carried by her knights, her inner-circle wears shiny chrome jumpsuits while tuxedo-clad supreme gentlemen have pepper ball guns and form an outside ring around her. Ken shakes his head, sighing. Just then, Ken notices a few loincloth-wearing dogbois and BDSM-clad dogrrls huddling along telephone poles in the lane. Lifting their legs and peeing, splashes hitting those who get too close for a sniff.

"I should've bought another fucking bike," Ken grumbles, speeding to the end of the alleyway and as far from that repulsive scene as possible.

Scouting the park, Ken sees a large crowd is already gathering, spilling out into the street. Many different groups scattered about, some carrying signs, some chanting, distant drumbeats also boom away above the festival-like atmosphere. Ken adjusts his mask, pulling out a flask and drinking a big mouthful of vodka, knowing Mistress S is about to make a scene.

"Hey!" shouts a man in all black; he's leaning against a white van blocking the road.

Looking right at him, Ken adjusts his goggles, cracking his neck side-to-side.

"You're dead meat," the bat-wielding man advances and turns behind him to wave for reinforcements. From the other side of the van, he's joined by several others wearing all black-hoodies, jeans and carrying weapons. One of them balances a golf club on their shoulder, sneering menacingly at Ken with their middle finger extended.

Mistress S, PiggyP and the whole gang turn the corner from the alley, marching in formation. Upon seeing the resistance, PiggyP gives a command to charge. Nearly a dozen tuxedo-clad gentlemen carrying chrome pepper-ball rifles begin sprinting. Side-by-side charge latex-masked dogbois and doggrrls on leashes, some running on all-fours in their deluxe bondage gear, all barking excitedly.

"Oh- Sh-shhhi-" the man with the golf club stumbles backwards, falling to the ground as they all immediately rout, startled by the size of the crew heading to the park.

Ken puts a foot down and stops; dog-people rush by him to tackle the golf-club man while the sound of Oxford leather shoes beating the pavement is heard. Tuxedo gentlemen are sprinting by, firing their pepper balls at the retreating thugs wearing all black.

With a perimeter established at the park's edge, Mistress S's canopy approaches the very threshold and opens her curtains wide.

Mistress S steps out from under her shaded throne, holding a megaphone moulded to look like a set of pink and pouty lips. The crowd of park dwellers is growing increasingly boisterous; the few police cannot stand between the groups and have to fall back. Ken notes her hair is particularly gorgeous that day; she radiates beauty; the hairs on the back of his neck standing up at the sound of her voice.

"I come in peace; we are here to help!"

Ken shakes his head, hallucinations of a cobra-like mistress coiling up to strike flooding his mind, her demands of him repeat over and over- get Crunst. Get his phone. Ken checks the drone-tracking tablet; no blips on the screen just yet.

Barking dogbois and leaping doggrls charge the small crowd of fleeing defenders, black-clad anarchists making pepper over morning eggs looking more precisely placed than their defensive formation. PiggyP marches with a row of rainbow fursuits carrying shields emblazoned with the laughing-with-tears emoji face, each of the anthropomorphic legionnaires wearing a sash that reads FUR POWER in comic bubble letters. Wild dogbois scratch for fleas in the middle of the road, a few jumping up on hoods and roofs of nearby cars, hopping back off them to form a line along the park's edge. Some others choose to scale the baseball diamond fence, bypassing a line of homeless activists forming a wall in front of the camp entrance. They form a barrier, holding garbage can lids as shields. In front of the main pathway are a grouping of TV reporters, police, local politicians, SWIVEL lawyers, and the most notorious of all of Mistress S's critics, blogger Liza Liang. Spotting her, Liza begins the heckling immediately.

"Murderer! Slaver! You are the embodiment of privilege! You horrible, horrible witch- you're terrible! You know, and you just don't care-"

The red-faced Asian woman jogs beside Mistress S's platform, the entire crowd starting to stampede with her. Catching the police and reporters off-guard, the rush of bodies sending them all tumbling to the ground. The Tuxedo-wearing gentlemen form a firing squad in front of her platform.

"Stop! Stop! Stand down!" Mistress S yells on her megaphone, "I've come to help; we are here to pay to fund the personal development of others. To build better lives."

After a few moments, the shouting and aggressive leering die down enough for Mistress S to pay attention to Liza's rant.

"Pay? Pay for what happened to these people? Pay to

make this class war go away? Pay to heal the wounds of people unable to get a basic rung-up in life- many people forced live in tents, as elite like you live in luxury!"

Prickling on Ken's neck, confused, which side is he on?

"I can pay; that's why I'm here. I'm here to pay for healing, to pay for doors to open-"

"Cut the shit, lady- what's the catch? Nobody does shit for free," shouts back the diminutive Asian woman with fiery eyes and bronze skin. She's fired right up; her tenacity is impressive to Ken.

"I need a promise," Mistress S slips her silk words through the megaphone, sultry and firm, yet warm and motherly- hints of a British accent.

"I need to know some of you will practice self-care. Self-love."

Enthralled by her, the waves of agitation in the crowd evaporate, the camp falling quiet as anarchists, cops, freaks, normies, and Ken are all listening.

"Love, and self-care, let me provide for thee-"

"No way! No way! This farce has to stop. Has. To. Stop!" Liza wildly waves her arms like a football referee.

The police and news reporters are on their feet and jostling with the jam-packed crowd to get in-between the opposing sides. Ken watches while standing just to the side of Mistress S's platform among her gang of knights and can hear the distinct sound of a helicopter approaching.

"I want to introduce to you, to the world," Mistress S stands up from her fancy pillow throne and peeks out from her curtain. Ken looks up and can see she has a camera mounted on the top of her megaphone, streaming live, no doubt.

"Bonus Escalation. The only logical alternative to the

failure, that is," Mistress S pauses to make a cutesy stink face, spitting out the words with contempt, "-harm reduction."

Everyone turns to look at the helicopter flying low over the park. A sleek black and gold ultramodern craft, it banks towards the open field. As it swoops in, hats blow off people, and the trees sway from its tremendous down-draft; hurricane-force winds needed to hover such a formidable machine.

The crowd faces the helicopter, many covering their eyes as bits kicked up by the blast of air fly around. Signs are sent flying and knock over many of the park's tents, branches fall out of trees. People may be yelling, but nobody can hear above the roar of the chopper.

"Eek!" Mistress S pokes back into her canopy and closes a retractable metal shield in front of her.

Moments later, the engines shut off, and the door to the chopper opens up; a few suited individuals step out with briefcases as the back cargo door swings open. Men carrying a few folding tables walk down the ramp, set them up and cover them with tablets and other office equipment. They maintain formation to create a funnel for those gathering near.

The reporters focus on the chopper as Liza runs through the park, cussing about the vile Mistress S to anybody who listens. Barking dogbois and doggrrls keep the cops tied up and away from the swelling crowd of distressed and destitute people. Ken looks up and can see Mistress S open her canopy curtain; she peeks outside with her megaphone.

"See! It isn't a lie. Bonus Escalation is here, everyone; go sign up, and you will collect a thousand dollars each. Completing the requirements makes you eligible for up to ten thousand dollars each, and that's just the first payment!"

One of the tuxedo-clad men opens a briefcase and holds it

up for the crowd to see.

The sight stuns the crowd; a few already begin mingling over there to sign up; Ken grabs his longboard and ducks into the confused jumble of folks.

"Go! Look! Franco? Is Shay with you? Open the briefcases, cut open the pallet," Mistress S points and commands to her employees.

A few armed men in strange military outfits come out of the helicopter's back and stand guard. The tuxedo gentlemen line up in front of the now-open briefcases lying on the tables they set up; Ken touches his goggles and uses the zoom to see what's inside.

Each case holds bundles of brand new \$100 bills, right to the brim.

A couple more trips to the helicopter and briefcases line the table behind the guards. Bewildered people joyously begin to line up for the cash, unsurprisingly polite given the assault rifle holding soldiers on site.

Liza runs over to the briefcase lineup and pushes her way to the front, grabbing a tablet with the sign-up form.

"What! What is this?" Linda bellows, "this is some sort of user agreement from hell! You witch! What- what does it mean when it says here- fuck! Who put a checkbox beside implants and vaccines?" Linda raises the tablet in the air and brings it down across her knee, snapping it in an L shape. A couple of soldiers rush over and tackle her, pinning her down. She's quickly dragged away and handed off to the police at the park's edge, taking her away kicking and fighting.

"Fuck you! Shit! F-uuuuck!" four police officers can barely contain her as she spits in anger as Liza yells.

"Samantha, you're twisted- who do you work for, who?"

Who? burn you, evil witch-"

"Bye! The real helpers are here," Mistress S is calm and composed, "please, the food trucks are coming, oh- they're here!"

Ken spots a traffic control person in a high-vis vest beginning to part the crowd. There is a sea of diverse folk; homeless people, dog-people in bondage, silver-wearing men, and patchouli-smelling activist streamers. They all slowly form into groups, letting in a series of food trucks opening up and handing out meals.

"Glorious, enjoy, friends!"

With the start of the cookout, the boisterous crowd becomes calm. A socially distanced lineup forms at the helicopter; nearly everyone is in line for Bonus Escalation or a food truck, mostly lining up for the cash. The conflict between the groups is gone, the sign-wavers no longer incensed; even the dog-people go back to sniffing each other and peeing on trees. A few old homeless people walk by Ken with full plates of food and smiles on their faces, queuing up in their desperate need for support.

The small tablet starts beeping.

Pulling up the small device, the overhead map shows a blip on the screen, a steady, square box showing the location of the controller signal.

Ken puts his board back down on the street and starts circling the park, glancing at the tablet. The drone signal fades in and out, but he can't get a good glimpse of it in the air. He does notice the crowd swelling at the park and in the streets leading toward it. Several more black-clad groups carrying weapons, some people in masks marching with signs and scattered concerned citizens on their porches. A half dozen cop

cars pull over and park block up from the helicopter, food truck, and tent-filled field.

Screech!

He's so focused on the tablet that he blows through a stop sign and is nearly hit by a delivery truck with a graphic of a big wet noodle bowl on the side. The driver waves to him.

"Sorry," Ken says, waving at the driver and turning out of the intersection.

Circling back around, the free food and stacks of cash being handed out are keeping the scene orderly. Mistress S stands on her platform with her cute bullhorn with the camera sticking on top. Ken can only guess how many thousands or millions are watching her live stream right now. Ken observes as she helps supervise the lineups, offering her personal, undying support for the destitute as counter-protesters try to shout her down.

"You piece of shit capitalist!"

"Slaver, get out!"

With the tension escalating, a mass of police begins to push forward into the park. Gathering near the media personalities and rest of the streamers, all eyes are now on the riot squad. Everyone wants a brutal clip of a nightstick smashing someone- or a Shitkicker punching a Son of Thor out. Anything to keep the clicks rolling in for hungry viewers at home. Ken rides his longboard slowly down the street bordering the park, scanning for any drones.

Just then, another beep.

"There!" Ken says to himself, looking up at the treeline behind Mistress S's platform; a large black drone with something on the bottom is hovering closer to the crowd lined up for the cash payment. Ken sees flashes of what looked like

mist coming out of the drone's bottom side, followed by a popping sound, as it buzzes behind a tree.

"Shit, shit, shit- it's shooting the crowd with pepper balls!" Ken excitedly says to himself. A red square flashes on the screen down the block from the park on the tablet- and as fast as it pops up, it's gone.

Riding back into the park, he cruises along slow, his eyes lock on the tablet, looking for any blip or sign of the signal again. The air smells a bit spicy, and his eyes begin to water. On his tippy-toes, trying to look over the crowd, there are a few cop cars and an RV parked on the far side of the park, and even more people pushing and shoving towards the free money table. The crowd starts fighting, many choking on the pepper ball gas, Ken's eyes now burning.

Through watering eyes, he spots the drone crisscrossing the crowd, firing its pepper ball gun indiscriminately and agitating the park residents.

Up ahead, he hears some screaming as a pile of cops grab and jump on an anarchist. A splatter of thrown yellow paint covers a few riot police, the crowd around them growing increasingly angry and energetic.

At that moment, the sea of discontented humanity parts and a friendly, grinning clown-like redhead in a sequined suit walks into a circle of would-be rioters.

Surrounded on all sides is Super Steve, the redhead from the art gallery protest. He is calm, even cocky, his eyes hide behind oversized gold sunglasses- his maskless smile wide and toothy.

"Here! Take it- take it all! Enjoy the blazers, my bros, toke up and make friends, my bad-ass buddies!" he laughs, holding up his bag of free joints as the crowd begins to notice, they

swarm him- all jostling for the free doobies.

"Bros, ch-ch-chill my bros, Bonus Escalation buddy! Drop the scarcity mindset, abundance, abundance everywhere, friends!"

Struggling to hold onto his bullhorn with the shoving mob engulfing his personal space, Super Steve has it up to his mouth.

"Hey- s-stop pushin' come on, you're wre-wreckin' my vibe here, c-c-come on-"

In moments the joints are all gone from his bag, the crowd growing frustrated as they begin to realize that. One drunk-looking large man stands behind him when Super Steve pulls the very last doobie from his golden jacket pocket. A look of jealousy spreads across the big guy's face.

"One wee doobie left for me, ya boi, Super Steve needs to get hiiii-hiiii-hiiii- as fuck!"

Putting the joint in his mouth, Super Steve fumbles in his pocket for his lighter before lighting his smoke and taking one big toke.

"Ahhh, the scent of love, people, love is in the air, remember that, always!"

"Shut the hell up, dickbucket!" yells someone from the crowd; they're holding Super Steve's bag upside down and shaking it for any more doobies.

"Where'd the weed go?" another voice calls out.

"Look guys, I brought like five hundred free doobies, someone must have taken two, we all like, have to learn to share- sharing is caring, after all!"

Just then, the large drunk man behind Super Steve grabs him by the green beads and studded-diamond rapper chain he wears around his neck and chokes him, causing Steve to inhale

his lit joint.

"Ahhh-hiccup!" Steve claws at his throat with smoke exiting his nose, frantically coughing; the still-lit joint escapes his lungs and lands in the grass; the crowd in a frenzy as a dozen people dive for it.

Realizing he can't get any free weed, the large man picks Super Steve up by the throat and throttles him back and forth before dropping him.

Crawling on the grass and reaching for his bullhorn, the redheaded man lifts it to his mouth as he extends his other hand out with a stop-motion.

"Bro! Chill bro... you just need weed, bro, weed is the key to love, bro- I-I-... I love you, bro-"

By the power of his annoyance, the crowd of black-bloc and police momentarily end their jostling. A police officer opens the door to a nearby Porto-potty while black-wearing anarchists lift Super Steve up, throwing him head-first into the blue portable toilet.

One mohawked girl with an ample bosom in a slayer shirt jump kicks the door, the crowd watching as it tips it over with a huge splash, trapping him inside with the sloshing mess.

"Oh god! Oh god, what the- hellpppp meee!" Super Steve still has his bullhorn, and he turns the volume up.

"Someone- oh god, the smell, hellllp!" Super Steve coughs and bangs on the door, switching the megaphone into alarm mode, its siren causing people nearby to grab their ears.

Ken sees the young woman with the mohawk raising her arms in the air, waving. The police and anarchists team up to part the crowd so a small Honda could drive into the park and stop by the Porto-potty. A diaper-clad dog boi in a pleather poodle BDSM mask with matching studded collar runs up on all

fours, a rope in its mouth. The mohawked woman takes it and ties a knot around the Honda trailer hitch, looping it around the Porto-potty.

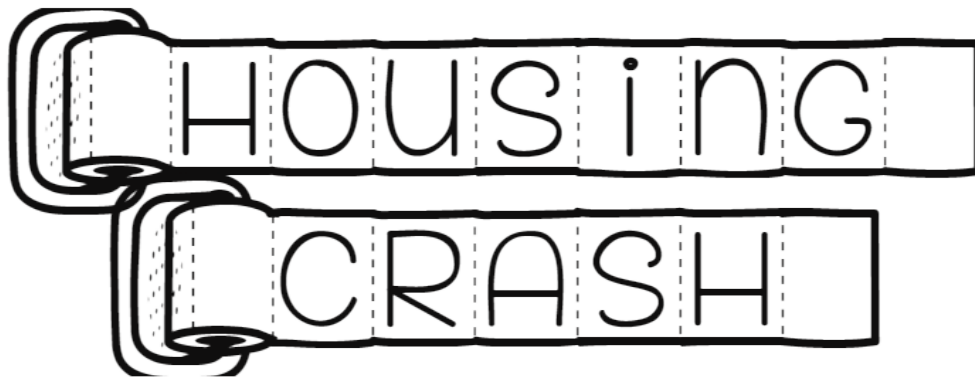
With a slap on the Honda's back window, it begins to drive away, towing the Porto-potty out of there as Super Steve yells from inside.

"Why- why am I moving? Someone -please, I-I-love and light! Get me the fuck out of here!!!"

Super Steve's voice carries off into the distance as the Honda drives off the curb, turns up the street, and is soon gone; the cheering crowd has a brown smear from the park onto the road to remember him by.

As the mob split, Ken loses track of the black drone while the tablet beeps. Watching the red square blink up on the screen, the position shifts quickly before hovering in place. Looking back at the drone in time, Ken catches sight of it, landing through the roof of an old mobile home at the other end of the park.

The cheering for Super Steve's exile stops, and everyone is immediately back to fighting- anarchists spraying cops with paint, throwing fireworks, bashing them with riot shields. Tear gas canisters go flying and cause a stampede of desperate folk. Dogbois, doggrls fighting with the street preachers, fursuits wrestling with Faceberg Karens, flat-earth extremists with homemade shields covered in coof conspiracy memes are battering the police. Caught up in the eye of it all are Mistress S and her Bonus Escalation team, scrambling to brace themselves as the raging tsunami of protesters begins to overwhelm them.



The crowd is brawling, and tear gas canisters fly overhead; Mistress S's canopy platform falls to the side with a tremendous crash. The Mistress rolls out from behind a torn pink curtain and hits the ground; an airbag inflates from the collar of her princess outfit to protect her.

"My knights! I need my knights!" she shouts, standing up straight and fixing her hair; her nearest minion hands her a small pink gas mask from the wreckage behind her.

Several gentlemen in tuxedos immediately form a perimeter around her to create a shield; the ring of men wearing black and white hurry her through the crowd towards the cargo bay doors of her sleek helicopter. Rag-tag groups of people clamour for spilled briefcases of cash while clouds of tear gas billow everywhere, others running away blind and coughing. The police, their ranks breaking and unorganized, now flee from the enraged mob along with the media. The screams and battle cries being drowned out by whistling turbine noise. The helicopter, firing up its engines and spinning the massive rotors, speeds up quickly to take off. A money tornado kicks up and mixes with tear gas, protest signs and shreds of torn tents.

Ken dodges a thrown beer bottle and ducks behind a tree, focusing on the RV accelerating up the street and away from the park. Grabbing his longboard, Ken charges through the crowd, spearing, bashing and pushing his way to the road before jumping on the board and rushing after the mobile home.

The street has people crisscrossing and screaming, debris fills the air all around him as the helicopter takes off. Riding through the chopper's wash, \$100 bills blown by the extreme air pressure pelts Ken, one hitting him in the face and briefly covering his goggles. Ripping the fiat paper off his mask, he spots the RV hang a left. It drives past the baseball diamond and onward toward the next intersection. The vintage vehicle leaves puffs of blue oil smoke behind it. Gritting his teeth, Ken scowls while in pursuit- dragging his knee for stability around the turn, the surface of the road leaving a trail of sparks from his kneecap armour.

Startled to hear an engine roaring behind him, Ken quickly looks over his shoulder to see an undercover-fed car with deeply-tinted windows rushing towards him.

The high-powered longboard flies down the street towards the intersection and closes distance from the motorhome, leaning forward and engaging at maximum speed.

As Ken blows through the stop sign at the four-way, a noodle truck, the one Ken saw earlier, is rushing towards him from the right, with no indication that it's going to stop.

"Oh, shhh-" Ken winces under his mask.

Smash!

Ken teeters on his board, throwing his arms wide for balance, slowing for a tick of the clock to glance behind him. The noodle truck t-bones the fed car; it now spinning out,

flipping over onto a grassy lawn and becoming a smoking wreck.

Ahead, the target slows and turns right onto a busier street and pulls away. Whipping through traffic, Ken loses direct sight of it a few times, following the blue oil smoke trail instead. He chases it for blocks and blocks, barely avoiding crashing and getting run over multiple times. Turning onto Knight street, the RV is fast but not fast enough as Ken rushes up to the back of the vintage motorhome and around the side.

He sees two men inside.

There, in the passenger seat, is a very shocked-looking Agent Crunst.

The RV swerves towards Ken; he zooms in front of the vehicle. Its engine roars with the front bumper rushing towards Ken; he spins, jumping off his board and onto the front grill of the motorhome.

There, face to face on the window, Agent Crunst sneers, then flashes a devious grin. Ken feels his cold blue eyes burning into him while climbing over and onto the grey and green mildewed roof, holding on for dear life. The RV sways back and forth, continuing to accelerate. Ken, grasping onto an AC vent on the top, feels the panel he is lying on flex under his weight and bend while the vehicle rocks side-to-side.

"He's got a gun!"

Ken hears a shout from below him, followed by a loud boom as a shotgun blast blows through the roof from below.

"H-ho-ho-lee, shhhii-" Ken yells, rolling around on the roof, tumbling to the back of the pitching RV.

Boom!

Click-clack.

Boom!

Click-clack.

"Bumbaclot!" Badrick shouts from somewhere in Ken's mind.

Another blast, closer, and another, huge holes explode from almost underneath Ken's body. Bits of fibreglass and insulation shoot into the air as Ken rolls to escape the shots and is about to fall off the vehicle.

The sunlight glints off a chrome ladder at the back of the RV, Ken's hand grabs it at the last second just before falling into the path of a speeding black Mercedes behind them. Another shotgun blast echos; Ken peeks through the back window; he spots Crunst reloading as he looks up through the ceiling holes.

The agent's eyes turn to look out the back window, he makes eye contact with Ken. The shotgun immediately raises and fires- Ken pulls himself up the ladder to the roof- just in time to hear the window blow out.

Running forward, the roof is swiss-cheese; Ken jumps in the air and cannonballs himself towards where Crunst is standing; he closes his eyes and braces for impact.

The roof collapses, Ken tumbles into the RV and lands among a bunch of computers, paperwork, and fast food containers litter all around him. The muffled shouts of one furious federal agent who he's on top of. The gaping hole in the roof is sucking debris out, creating a whirlwind of garbage in the fast-moving vehicle. Curious small blue baggies catching Ken's eye, scattering about everywhere in the chaos of the cave-in.

Upside down, trapping Crunst underneath him and the broken roof, Ken does a small somersault and jumps to his feet. Agent Crunst's fist punches through the ceiling panel on him, breaking it in half and sending it flying- half of his body remains

stuck under bits of the roof. Suddenly, Crunst leaps up from the wreckage faster than Ken anticipates, the agent delivers a devastating side-kick to Ken's chest. The titanic blow sends him flying backwards and smashing into a desk behind him spine-first.

Ken feels his ribs crack when he takes the hit, and before he can draw another breath, Crunst stands over him, preparing to deliver another kick.

Ken rolls out of the way at the last second. Grabbing whatever he can, he flings a computer keyboard at Crunst; he effortlessly slaps it away. Crunst throws another kick at Ken, narrowly missing, his foot smashing out a side window instead.

With a downward chop, he smashes Crunst on his stretched-out leg near the knee, using the momentum from the blow to then backhand Crunst in the face, knocking him back.

Crunst slams against the other side of the vehicle; losing his balance for a moment, he quickly draws a gun from inside his jacket holster.

Throwing a quick kick, Ken connects with the gun just as it goes off- the barrel points away from Ken, instead, towards the driver. The bang ringing Ken's ears instantly- the powerful thrust of his foot sending it flying from Crunst's hand.

Pivoting on his back foot, his footwork aligns to throw a perfectly executed spinning heel kick. His abs flex, and his leg swings fast through the air; Ken expects to feel the heel of his boot connect with Crunst's face; instead, Crunst expertly blocks it. In one fluid motion, the agent's other hand grabs a piece of broken glass from the window frame, thrusting it towards Ken's neck.

The rushing of the wind and roar of the engine, the smell of cigarettes and fast food inside the RV, everything hits Ken at

that moment. Ken feels the glass shard, first scraping along the bottom lip of his protective metal skullcap, then, through the thick cloth liner he wears, through the layer of his unkempt hair, skin; then the crunch. It drags along the bone in his neck, finding a home between two vertebrae; Crunst cruelly snaps it off inside him.

Ken drops to his knees as Crunst lets go of his leg, now grabbing Ken by his throat and slamming him on one of the tablespots in the RV nearest to the open window.

Looking upside down, Ken can see through his watering eyes that the world is going by fast- and speeding up.

"I knew it was you, Ken; you're a terrible liar; I'm shocked you lasted this long. Pretty cold with the dog-" Crunst screams over the road noise and whistling wind.

Ken is choking, gasping for air with his arms holding Crunst's hand and trying to pry it free- the agent grips Ken's windpipe tight, crushing it with the leverage of his weight.

Ken can hear honking, and a jolt rocks the RV.

"Roger, slow down!" Crunst yells.

Just then, the RV hits something; With the help of momentum, Ken knocks Crunst off, allowing him a moment to breathe.

The vehicle dips hard on the suspension with a loud bang, sending both men to the floor.

The RV hits a ramp at high speed, sending Ken and Crunst airborne as an even larger crash is heard. The wall from behind Ken rips right off the frame of the vehicle and falls off; the RV side-swipes the railing of a concrete overpass, continuing to speed up, a showering of sparks everywhere along with a deafening screech.

Crunst gets up and once again grabs Ken, punching him in

his face several times until his goggles crack and blood leaks from behind the thick cloth from under his now-cracked helmet and mask.

The manically grinning agent screams savagely as he chokes Ken. Another slam again as the RV grinds into the rail, the contact with the vehicle throws more sparks as Crunst's immense strength pushes Ken's face farther and farther out of the window, inching his head toward the barrier whizzing by at high speed.

"You're beaten!" Crunst shouts, "-outsmarted since day one, Ken, only saved by your treasonous, gangster girlfriend!"

With immense strength, the suit-wearing agent pushes Ken's chin with both palms and the top of Ken's protective hood makes contact with the railing.

"Terrorist! Scum!"

The RV shudders, ripping apart; it begins to lean over in the high-speed turn.

"Roger! Roger?"

The sparks from the guardrail are pouring into the open cracks and shreds of Ken's hood and mask, torn fabric reveals the metal skullcap. A smell of burning skin and hair. Crunst laughs, pushing with all his might. Ken's head makes momentary contact with the guardrail rubbing against the vehicle; a piece of Ken's mask rips off and opens a massive gash on his face.

Crunst leans in closer. His intense blue eyes meeting Ken's eyes face to face through the shattered goggle lenses, so close that he can see him flare his nostrils and smell his hot coffee breath. Ken resists as much as possible, but the agent is too strong, his head approaching the railing for a final kill shot. The fury builds up inside him, thinking he'll lose it all, and for

nothing; No!

A war cry erupts from Ken, shrimping sideways; he desperately uses all of his abs and legs to make a slight bit of room. Loosening up the agent's grip gives Ken's a chance for a counter-attack. Right as Crunst lifts his hand up for a punch, Ken manages to move his hand to activate the can of pepper spray on his vest.

Crunst's punch hits Ken hard in the cheek right when the pepper spray stream sprays out; Crunst recoils for a second and grabs his face while Ken ducks to avoid the chemical blast.

Directly hit in the face, the agent reels backwards, blinded- in a daze, Ken sits up, glancing around him. Howling wind comes through the ribbons of the roof above, papers fly around, broken computers with cables that snake across the floor, the drone half-crushed under the ceiling collapse. Half-eaten food and coffee cups litter the dashboard, sliding sideways; the debris begins to gather on the driver's side, Ken's eyes now on who is behind the steering wheel. Slumping over in the driver's seat, a circular red stain covers his back. Spotting this just in time, Ken notices everything shifting fast to the left from inertia; the RV exits the ramp at high speed, drifting sharply in a skid.

Everything is tranquil for a second; trash lifts off the floor; Ken feels weightless as the vehicle begins to invert.

Crunst regains his composure and opens his eyes, only to see the mask-wearing, agile shitkicker run up the side of a table in the flipping RV. Stepping off, Ken delivers a double-foot, diving torpedo kick right to the agent's crotch and connects with all of his weight behind it. A shockwave ripples through Crunst's body. His phone slides out from his inside jacket pocket and out the window; the groin strike momentum ejects

Crunst as well, leaving Ken alone in the rolling, thrashed shell of the camper.

Ken pulls his arms and legs in tight and slams around the rotating interior of the out-of-control vehicle. Deafening destruction and breaking glass envelop him, terrifying him to his core. His eyes slam shut, his body thumps and bumps around inside the rolling RV, screaming faithless prayers as the crash goes on forever.



...sirens, smoke, pain...

...grabbing and dragging...

...shouting...

...bumpy ride...

Ken awakens in the dark.

Breathing through a mask, his head dizzy, a numb sensation through his entire body. Drifting in and out, no sense of time, vision blocked by bandages. Arms and legs under straps. Delusion takes over.

Sometimes, he can hear an odd accent, but with different voices speaking in whispers when he comes to. Machines beep, and a door opens and closes multiple times. Ken passes out and awakens again. A smell of cologne wafts to his nose; Ken opens his eyes to see a dim light coming from the window and a dark figure standing with their arms crossed at the foot of the bed.

Phantom feeling in his extremities, tubes across his face and in his mouth- unable to scream, he struggles for a second and stays still. Did it go on for minutes, hours, or days? He can't tell. The figure, not the first time visiting, his face obscured by

shadow, raises his hand to his face to give the softest "shhh."

The figure departs, the same door-closing sound over and over; hearing it again, it shuts behind the stranger.

Ken lies there, unable to sleep; he looks around the dark room- nearly empty of anything. It is devoid of a single seat or decor. The room contains his hospital bed, his IV and tubes with a machine that beeps regularly. Ken hears someone coming, his eyes closing, pretending to be asleep. A few people again enter the room, speaking in that same accent; someone handles the tube with his IV connected to it. Ken's eyes flick open, and he can spot a redhead and a stocky Asian man in his blurry vision. Turning to his side, his eyes meet a figure staring back at him with a blank expression. Feeling a rushing sensation, Ken reaches out to grab his IV-

He can smell wet grass and hear birds chirping.

Too bright, his eyes sting.

"Ken... Ken..."

A man's voice can be heard.

"He's coming to," a woman's voice.

"Close the blinds-"

His eyes flutter open, brain like a tangle of wires- an older man in a woolly vest with bulging muscles and a clipboard stands next to Ken's bed. A nurse walks over to open the blinds partly, turning to smile at Ken, who holds his head with both hands.

"How are you feeling?" The nurse walks over and sits him up.

Ken's head hangs, fuzzy vision and ears ringing. For the first time, he sees his restraints gone. Pushing with his arms, they quiver; he can't sit up on his own, a struggle to adjust himself in bed.

"Here," the nurse props him up with pillows.

"T-thanks," Ken mutters, stretching his neck with a grimace.

The fit older doctor wears at least five mask layers; his eyes shoot Ken a warm smile.

"Ken, you've been on quite the adventure!" the man says in a British accent severely muffled by personal protective equipment, "-glad to see you back in the world of the awake. You should feel some stiffness, I don't have to tell you that- you also have several bone fractures, but the ten-day coma we had you in healed those up quite nicely."

"W-what, t-t-ten days?!" Ken's tongue is an unruly fish flopping around.

"Yes. You had signs of extreme alcohol dependency as well, and given the condition you were in when you arrived, the controlled coma worked. We had to do it; it allowed you to stabilize for our comprehensive detox."

Ken stares at the ceiling.

"I'm sure you've got many questions and business you feel the immediate need to attend to, but you'll need to recover in a controlled manner. You've been through a lot. Rest assured, Ken, the rest of your stay here will go smooth, and your family has been notified about your affairs."

Ken swallows. His mouth is so dry, his tongue pokes around, finding large tracks of stitches in the inside of his lips.

"With all of these situations, before we wake the patient, we like to make sure there is a family member present- are you ready?"

Ken looks through the doctor.

"S-sure?"

The doctor turns to the nurse by the door and nods; she

grabs the door handle; Allie walks into the room, and Ken's face lights up.

"Hey, Ken-" Allie's voice so soft, walking over to him, a small vase of flowers and a couple of Brix candy bars in her hands.

"Allie, I-" Ken's eyes begin to fill with tears.

Allie sits beside Ken on the bed, the medical staff seeing themselves out.

"Ken, please, before I say anything else- you need to get better, okay?" Allie's eyes meet with his, her hands slip into his hands, and she squeezes them tight.

"Yes, of cour-"

"For real, please, Ken-" Allie's eyes look deep into him with tears at the edges.

She looks down at her bouquet of flowers and Brix bars. Ken smiles.

"I knew exactly what would make you happy," she says, her voice trailing off as she turns her head, hiding a faint smile and looking away.

"You- just being here makes me happy," he says, reaching over to hold her hand.

Allie puts the flowers down on the table by the bed. Standing up, she walks to the window and stands there. Staring out of it, Allie sighs.

Ken watches her; Allie's shoulders hunch forwards, her hands go to her hips, and she takes a deep breath.

"I- I- can't do this," Allie says softly, walking to the chair she has her bag on, throwing it over her shoulders and with brisk steps to the door.

"Wait, Allie, please!" Ken reaches his arms out as she stands in the doorway, waving with his hands to beg her back.

"Remember when we spoke- I asked you, are there anymore lies?"

"Remember what you said?"

Ken nods slowly.

"I just- I just want to know, who paid for this- and the cover story these doctors say, that you fell hiking while drunk?" Allie motions around the room and walks to Ken's bedside.

Ken sits silent, his eyes out of focus, diving into a daze.

"Eventually, Ken, you can tell me, but- now- please, get better- you, know my number."

Allie walks back to the door, opens it for a moment, and lets it go, turning to look at Ken again and putting her bag down.

Running over to give him a huge hug, Allie's body convulses a couple times as she begins to sob in his arms.

"I- miss you, the old you, so much-" Allie whispers through tears and sniffles.

Ken hugs her tight; his face remains blank as they embrace. Leaning back, Allie looks into Ken's eyes, their expressions so different. Tears stain her face, her eyes red—his face a patchwork of stitches, his eyes are a thousand-yard stare, two bloodshot windows into his broken heart.

"Ken, I know you can beat the drinking; we can- we can talk about the future again, okay? You just need to get better- listen to the doctor; he told me that they can really help you stay sober with these new meds. Okay? We got this."

Allie makes him pinky swear and hugs Ken again really tight.

"We got this," she whispers in his ear.

Ken smiles, hugging her back just as tight.

Allie steps away from the bed, walks to the door and turns

to blow a kiss and wave. Putting her hand up to her ear, she makes a phone with her hand and mouths "call me," with a hopeful smile. Her hair is uncharacteristically messy; Ken feels his heart sink again as she walks out the door and is gone.

Not long after Allie leaves, a nurse comes in and brings Ken some new clothes and directs him to the shower, informing him that dinner will be ready soon and he is welcome to join other patients in the lounge, or they will bring him a TV, and he can stay in his room if he chooses.

After showering, Ken goes back to lay down in bed; using the intercom, he asks for a TV, and it isn't long before the nurse comes in with a TV on a rolling stand and a hot tray of gourmet food.

"This doesn't look like hospital food-" Ken mutters, poking his fork around steak in a rich gravy, mashed potatoes, and a healthy portion of cubed carrots and peas.

"Thunderbird Lodge is proud to be Canada's best private clinic," the nurse says, positioning the TV cart and bringing Ken the remote.

"How uh-," Ken speaks between bites; he is ravenously hungry, "h-how much per night?"

"We have different packages. I wouldn't know what your complete coverage is, but you have a private suite and the west coast detox healing package, at a minimum."

Ken devours the entire meal in seconds.

"Mmmhm, that was- incredible-" Ken chews a bit slower than he can as his face still hurts from 10-day old punches.

"Would you like more?" asks the nurse.

Ken's eyes bug out of his head.

"Uh, yeah!"

The nurse passes him the remote and walks out of the

door.

"Shit, this is pretty comfy-" Ken smiles, flipping on the TV and browsing the channels.

The nurse comes back into the room with another steaming food tray, a mound of food even more significant than the last.

"Tomorrow, you have an optional yoga class, reiki healing, astral projection- we also have Ayahuasca healing ceremonies every Friday, so that's in two days. And you'll definitely want to do gardening with Tao, that's in the afternoon tomorrow in the greenhouse- a perfect prelude to therapeutic tremoring before supper."

"Am I in a clinic or a 5-star hotel?"

The nurse laughs.

"No, sir, you are in one of the world's leading addiction and healing centers specializing in rapid detox and rehabilitation. We have physical, spiritual, and mental health counsellors available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week- no other business in the healing arts can claim total coverage of mind, body, and soul."

Ken feels more relaxed and eats his food slower, listening to the nurse speak in her well-practiced tone.

"Mhmmfph, this steak and gravy... is hitting my soul- in places, I- I never knew I had-"

The nurse laughs slightly.

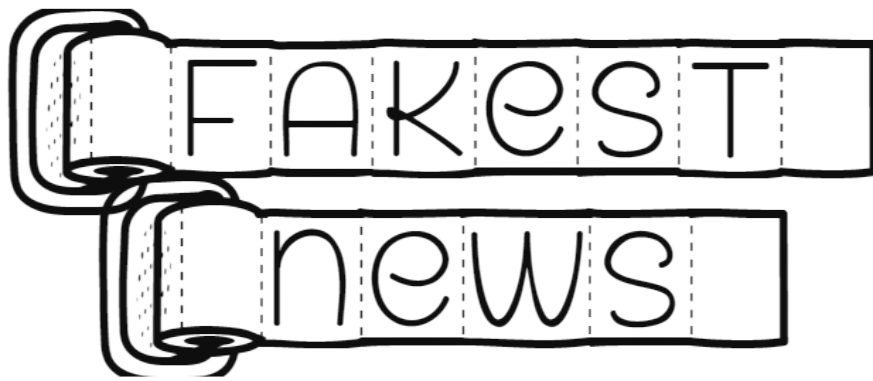
"Wonderful, sir, I'll let the kitchen know; breakfast is at 8 AM in the sunshine galleria; we'll see you then!"

The nurse leaves, and the door closes with a soft click. Ken fumbles with the remote to put on some 80's movies without politics, the good ol' days. There is nothing preachy, no narrative crafting, and minimal corporate influence- just

genuine humour that can reach across generations. Ken flips through the channels with a smile upon his face; all the old favourites he used to watch are available. Ken's warm feet reach maximum coziness. The hospital bed is a lot comfier than the cheap UKEA mattress he has on the floor at home- or his couch that he crashes on.

Ken clicks the remote.

Samuel the Seagull, a classic 80's movie- he finds himself dozing off pretty fast, full of tenderloin and mashed garlic potatoes with extra gravy, remembering Allie's arms around him- the warmth, her smile, her heart- he can feel the chance of love again, the good times are coming back, and this time, he won't risk losing it ever again.



Loud ommms from a Flying Yoga class are heard off in the distance, a staff member puts Ken's lunch down in front of him. The white serving tray holds a big glass of water, and a white cotton napkin is next to bright silver cutlery. On a large square white plate sits a buttery grilled cheese sandwich, perfectly grilled with symmetrical toast lines. Next to it, in a gargantuan square white bowl is a steamy bowl of tomato soup; on top of the deep red liquid is a single basil leaf.

"Thanks," Ken smiles.

"Your welcome, is there anything else?"

"Yeah, I uh- have a guest coming, I think she's lost-"

"Name?"

"Allie Chang."

"No problem, sir, we'll page her; enjoy your lunch," the nurse smiles and turns to walk out from under the covered gazebo toward the main building.

Ken's eyes close, he takes several deep breaths.

Moments pass; he inhales and exhales.

Everything is going to be okay.

Putting his hands together, Ken focuses on showing gratitude for the moment; he picks up the spoon and blows on

the steamy soup.

Ken makes sure to enjoy every bite of the sandwich; he imagines himself gobbling up gold coins like some sort of cartoon character with each chew. His first week awake at the facility, he learns to make it through the day without alcohol. Daily vitamin shots chase away the night sweats. He goes to the sauna, yoga, basket-weaving, knitting beanies, and one-on-one therapy each day. Finding himself sobbing more than once, especially after finding out exactly how much the rehab center is costing him.

"They wanted WHAT!"

Ken is in his robe, standing at the payphone by the front desk. The posh lobby has soaring cedar beams and indigenous and contemporary art all over; Ken feels the nosy receptionist glaring at him again.

"I mean- what the f-" Ken whispers.

"Bro, I got them down to \$1000 for lot fees; you did leave the car there for, what, months?" Jeff says.

Ken sighs.

"So- what did you get for it?"

"18 grand," Jeff replies.

Ken reaches back with the phone and raises it over his head while cringing for a moment before putting it back to his ear.

Looking down at a notepad he's holding with some numbers written on it, he sighs.

"Thanks, man, I- I can't exactly do much in here. They only let you in here if you surrender to stay for your full term. Breaking the contract means big fees, and they won't even let you leave without fifty percent of your bill paid. If you didn't get my car sold, I don't even think I could leave. This place is

shady, hell, this phone call is costing me ten dollars a minute."

"How much are you short?"

"Hmmm," Ken mumbles, doing some quick calculations on his notepad.

"Minus lot fees, phone bill I owe, power bill, internet bill, but- without my rent- and the remainder I owe here to reach 50%-"

The phone goes quiet as Ken massages the numbers.

"I'll leave here with a net worth of sixty bucks."

"Enough for a few pints to get you back in the saddle. Just get better bro, we miss you, man," says Jeff.

The last bite of the grilled cheese goes down with a mouthful of gourmet tomato bisque, notes of basil and aged cheddar, butter and crispy sourdough play out in Ken's mind, and he savours the moment, all thousand-dollars per day of it.

"Paging Allie, Allie to the front desk," the PA system chimes in, the quality of the audio superb and the voice coming from it both calming and professional.

Ken pushes his tray away and leans back in his chair, wrapping himself with one of the outdoor blankets; he turns up the outdoor heater and looks out over the misty landscape. Grassy meadows and the alpine backdrop of the North Shore mountains, the air is so crisp and fresh. Each day Ken spends in the rehab center, he doesn't want to leave, almost.

"Ken?"

He looks.

Allie has a big smile on her face hiking up the path lead by one of the nurses; the nurse gestures towards him and turns to walk away.

"Hey," Ken grins, leaning over to turn up the outdoor heater.

Allie walks under the covered area and tosses her bag down.

"Oh my god, you wouldn't believe it- the girls at work brought Kypros, smell!"

Allie leans in and gives him a big, fragrant smooch.

Ken giggles.

"What are you doing-" Ken says as he chuckles; Allie hops on his lap and puts her arms around his neck, covering his face in garlic hummus-flavoured kisses.

Allie and Ken lie there for a while, embracing under the heater, alone in the gazebo. Sharing an intimate moment or two. Wrapped together under the blanket, it begins to rain, and it taps gently on the roof above.

"What do you want to do the first day you're out of here-" Allie tickles Ken.

He laughs and tickles her back.

"Haha, well, hehe- I thin- stop! haha!"

Ken tickles her, and she kicks over his lunch tray by accident.

"Oopsie, hehe!"

She picks it up and sits back on his lap.

"I- I really have to beg Azmina for my job back, I mean- it's been what, almost a month?"

Allie laughs.

"Oh, don't worry about that silly work thing, she loves you, remember- maybe you can even get a raise now that you're not a 'lil drunkie-"

Ken smiles.

"I bet- I bet you want to ride your longboard, and this time- I won't need to rent or ride your spare bike. I'm going to get my own custom cruiser bike," Allie says with a smile.

"Really?"

"Yeah- an electric one, with a basket on the front, I-"

Allie pauses and looks away for a moment.

"Here," she turns and opens up her purse and pulls out her phone, an image of a small dog on it.

"She'll fit right in the basket," Allie whispers in her cute high-pitched voice and pretends to pet the dog on the screen.

"Her name is Budgie," Allie giggles softly.

"As in the-"

"Yeah, the bird-"

"Budgie the dog," Ken grins and squeezes Allie tight.

Allie closes her eyes and puts her head on Ken's chest.

"You can meet her soon," she whispers.

Thunder rolls in the mountain valley.

Ken and Allie lie there, enjoying the company, masks off, his fingers gently trace hearts up and down the skin on her forearm with his index finger. She squeezes him, they kiss.

"One more long shift, tonight, then- tomorrow is your party!"

Allie giggles and glances around.

Allie speaks soft, "I invited a few of our friends, but don't worry- it will be a dry party... and masks are mandatory indoors, but we'll feast, I promise!"

Allie pink swears with Ken.

"I should go- I'm getting sweepy," Allie groans as she gets to her feet and yawns.

"Tomorrow night!" Ken smiles.

"Tomorrow!" Allie points back at him, picking up her purse and walking a few feet.

"You coming?" she smiles.

"I'll always walk a lady to the door," Ken grins, stands up

and ties his robe back up.

"A robe, it's- what time?" Allie says.

Ken laughs.

"Don't knock it until you've tried it."

"Some of us work!" Allie replies with a smirk, swinging her hip out and butt-bumping Ken almost off the concrete path to the main building.

Ken sees Allie off with a kiss and promises to see her tomorrow night, but first, he needs clearance to leave that evening. After several rounds of meetings, a long chat with his doctor, sobriety counsellor, and a walk through the lobby with staff applauding him- Ken steps out of the front doors of the rehab center for the first time in a month and smiles.

An extended cab ride later, courtesy of Thunderbird Lodge, Ken makes it home to an absolutely fetid basement suite. Perching atop a mountain of dirty dishes in the sink is an empire of fruit flies, mud, blood- vodka bottles everywhere, multiple notes on his door from the landlord.

Ken sits down at his computer and opens up his banged-up phone for the first time in a month. Part of detox involving a complete lack of computers; Ken kind of likes it now; the urge to drink creeps back into his mind as Ken sorts through annoying emails, messages, bills. Life catches back up to him in a hurry. One of the landlords' several emails, he's totally choked. A new tenant lives upstairs and has shorted the rent due to the smell rising from the basement; Ken is also two months behind in rent.

He sighs and closes the email; eviction is something he can handle. He involuntarily swallows, nervous while searching for his name online. Nothing really comes up except a small local news article about an injured hiker named Ken K, with his

photo. The intoxicated man needed rescue from a trail on the North Shore mountains about a month ago. After falling, the man was found and rescued by a dog walker; Allie told him the same story. The cover story is that he went hiking drunk with his camera and apparently took a tumble.

He shakes his head and closes his eyes.

Ken sits and tries to remember. The park. The tents. Mistress S and her suitcases of cash, the fights- Agent Crunst. The RV. The crash.

Ken takes a deep breath, feeling the first spikes of anxiety in a long, long time.

Closing the laptop, he stands up, goes right to the kitchen, and opens the cupboard under the sink. Grabbing a box of trash bags, he throws the garbage and filth away, handfuls at a time, and his recycling bin overflows with bottles. Hours pass as Ken sweats away, cleaning up his broken life, only taking a break to write Azmina a long, thoughtful email asking for his job back. It may have been too much, but he asks for a possible front of some money to get back on his feet.

"Absolutely, I was always a fan. Talk soon," Azmina writes back within the hour.

Ken smiles when he reads her email.

Walking to the kitchen door, Ken pauses, sober, overlooking the setting sun just kissing the pinkened tips of the downtown skyscrapers.

Pulling up his cracked phone, Ken takes a picture.

"The first day of the rest of my life," Ken whispers with a smile, sending the photo to Allie.

Have a good night at work babes, c u tomorrow

Turning back to the kitchen table, he picks up one of the

eviction notices and looks for the number.

"Ahh, I'll deal with you tomorrow," Ken mutters, putting it back down before walking to hit the couch and flipping on the TV. He kicks his boots off and puts his feet up; it's good to be home. Even better, knowing that in less than 24 hours, he'll be sleeping back at Allie's place, waking up to make her waffles and share maple-flavoured kisses. Ken's eyes flutter as he passes out, feeling cozy and a grin on his face.

Ken wakes up to the sound of his new upstairs neighbours cranking music, an impromptu concert at 8 AM, the thudding bass of the new hit song "My Hole B Drippin'," shakes the plates in Ken's cupboards.

"Arghh, fuck," Ken mutters, rolling off the couch and starting his day early.

After getting the basics done; a coffee, a whizz, and finding nothing in his fridge to eat- Ken sits at his computer to see if Azmina has emailed him. He will email her anyways and ask to start again next week; in the meantime, he'll spend some quality time with Allie, fix the dent in her fridge, and make things right. Noticing a curious pop-up message on his email, it's a notification from Parlergram. The hair on the back of his neck stands up as he clicks the link.

Message from: LLiang

I really need to chat with you

LLiang requests VideoChat - Accept? (Yes / No)

Ken sits back and finishes his coffee slowly, wondering exactly what she wants to talk to him about.

Pangs of worry tingle inside him, using control of his breathing to keep them at bay.

"What could she want," he whispers, staring at the ringing notification.

Liza is the first person to know his identity, and early on, too. His folly; he doesn't have any previous experience as an outlaw bicycle vigilante. He has never needed to disappear. Will she ask for money, maybe? That phone of hers he smashed while protecting her, but- she can't be that petty, can she? One step into Samantha's web, and you're already trapped. Maybe ignoring her is worse. Confronting problems in his life is the only way towards being present; anything less, and he would return to drinking and procrastination.

Leaning his head back, determined not to drink, he breathes deeply in and exhales. Parlergram goes silent. After a few moments, the urge to drink floats away, dispelled by the hours of therapy and cognitive-behavioural conditioning treatments at Thunderbird lodge. Recalling his basket-weaving class, he has visions of the splendid Japanese ovals he made.

"Breathtaking," he whispers to himself in recollection.

Almost tearing up because he never finished his Mongolian wicker chair project.

The notification rings again.

Ken sighs.

Even after she blabs about Allie working at the hospital, he has only tried to protect Liza. That night on the parking garage roof. Liza mentions Ken's TubeYuber videos of him saying "yeehaw" -just like he foolishly does in the original tent city terror video upload. But never exposing him like she could have. Liza could've ratted him out early on- but as far as he knows, Liza hasn't. She knows he is a good person under dire circumstances. Right?

Ken nods to himself.

She will never turn him in. Then again, maybe she's a manipulator too. What can she gain from hurting him at this point? The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Ken takes a deep breath.

"No matter what," he whispers, "I'm not going back to the bottle."

"No way."

Feeling a bit shy, he walks to his desk and grabs a piece of tape to cover the webcam lens.

Ken clicks Yes.

"About time. I need to show you something," Liza says to the black square she is talking to.

A video begins playing in place of Liza's face.

The camera is shaky; heavy breathing- a running cameraperson. The camera image straightens out to reveal a man with his arm in a sling, and using a cane becomes clear; he steps out the front door of a house, a hand in his pocket digs for keys. He looks over his shoulder and scowls at the camera.

"Agent Crunst- do you have anything to say about the government facilitating theft and providing drugs in exchange for stolen goods?"

Liza's voice.

"No, no, go away-" Agent Crunst replies angrily.

"Agent Crunst, do you have anything to say about the vigilante groups that rescued sexually trafficked boys and girls that your agency lost track of?"

Crunst moves slow, a brace visible on both his knees and swaying as he lifts his keys.

"First off, it's not 'agent' anymore; you can just call me by my first name, David," Crunst locks the door to the Kitsilano

townhouse and begins to walk to his car.

"How much of what leaked in the was true- Did you coordinate with the various vigilante organizations at all?"

Crunst looks at the camera, a grid of scars on his face and some hair missing in places, his steel-blue eyes full of cold, calculated rage.

"The investigation is not yet complete, so I can't comment other than to say I am innocent of all wrongdoing, and I will have my day in court- but I'll let you know what I can comment on-"

Crunst's face crumples up in a sinister sneer, his nose wrinkling like sniffing foul air, his eyes intensely meeting the camera.

"Seth's accomplice that got away- Ken- the name Ken came up in several coincidences- he worked in the same office, Rise Helicopter and Crane. We verified that he socialized with the bomber. Ken's a member of Mistress S's twisted gentlemen's club- a club built on incel hate and proven to be behind assaults- what else? He's an alcoholic and a drug addict; Ken even killed his girlfriend's dog to obstruct justice. People worshipping these violent acts online spurred them to do more. A vicious cycle where their fans celebrated them on social media with hateful memes to further dehumanize and debase those suffering from addiction. Seth and Ken had a personal friendship; I know they worked together, and someday the truth about how much Ken helped Seth will come out. If people can be friends with a murderous terrorist like that, well-"

Crunst's brow furrows, and he outstretches his index finger an inch from the camera's lens.

"You'll get what's coming to you."

Crunst turns and walks with his cane to the car as Liza chases him.

"Is that what you'd say to the people of Vancouver- the people you're supposed to serve- the people you let down-"

"Oh shut up- " mutters Crunst, his cane and legs move as fast as they can to a white Ford parked down the block.

"-The people who are still living in fear, Mr. Crunst-" Liza presses him, her voice raises.

"Shut the hell up," Crunst growls.

"-with criminals free to steal and assault anyone standing in their way- when someone steps up to fill in gaps the police leaves open, the feds come and sabotage any hope!"

Crunst ignores the camera and approaches his car, using a key fob to unlock it.

"Good to see Rudeau's number one guy, tail between his legs, going back to Ottawa, see ya, wish you cared, you know- like a patriot would!"

Crunst starts his car, and the camera swings away; Liza points it at her own face.

"-and that, friends, is why we're fucked, no leadership, no vision, just all these assholes collecting a cheque and the status quo goes on!"

"Hey!" a shout is heard off-camera.

Liza turns the camera back to Crunst; he's standing up in the road, resting his arm on the roof of his car, scowling.

"Maybe you're just too young or naive, but I doubt that; you did the research to find me- but attacking the people trying to fix things is just letting the bad guys win."

Liza walks forward and zooms in on Crunst before speaking.

"People every day show up to jobs they hate, their backs

sore at the end of the day, no money to build a future on-" Liza screams, pausing to take a deep breath before lowering her voice.

"No wonder they do drugs just to feel something or to kill the pain. You are a cog in this overall machine that hurts people; where's your plan to fix the broken system?"

Crunst slams the roof of his car with his one good hand, his face contorting grotesquely with rage, spitting uncontrollably as he screams.

"I am just one man!"

A wild-eyed David Crunst points his finger at Liza.

"You don't fucking get it! You don't fix a system by lighting it on fire, and you don't help the suffering with radical, unproven theories! The four pillars can and will work- we know it can, and people- people like you need to lay off on the guardians of this nation- go after the people blocking the four pillars! But oh- Oh no, let's- let's go after Crunst instead- I know you, people like you, you want your little story for some piss-ass blog so you and your coffee shop friends can have a laugh! Suppose you weren't some biased little scumbag. In that case, you'd interview the real heroes- the VPD officer who has to tell the mother that her son is dead, only the third heart-wrenching thing they did that day. Go speak with the paramedics getting yelled at because they didn't do CPR for another 20 minutes after no sign of vitals for 40 already, and if they don't keep going, the family standing around will call them heartless on social media. Or fuck, why not thank the fucking firefighter's widow, her husband went to 200 overdose calls a year- over time, it drains him. He loses it, PTSD- kills himself, and the mom has to tell her five fuckin' kids that daddy is never- coming- HOME!"

Crunst lifts his arm and slams the car's roof with his fist.

"Yeah, you take this video back to whatever rock you crawled out from- you take it, you can edit my words and make me seem like the bad guy when all, when all I've- ever done or tried to do- is dedicate myself to ending the overdoses that take so many, so many-"

Crunst wheezes, catching his breath. "-and those people trapped in addiction, they, in turn, ruin the lives of everyone around them. We don't do enough to help others, that's a fact- but no, that's not going to be a hot take to get the clicks, right?"

Liza says nothing as she zooms in on Crunst's very red, veiny head and neck; he's breathing hard, a bead of sweat on his forehead, catching his breath from his long, loud rant.

"Yeah, that's exactly what I thought," Crunst says before getting in his car and peeling off in a cloud of tire smoke.

The video ends.

Ken sighs.

"Wow, he was pretty upset, yeah, I uh- I don't see what's so bad- where does Crunst incriminate himself or expose the system?"

"He doesn't- but," Liza exhales.

"He does mention you-"

Ken's heart pounds.

"I hope you understand, but I, uh, sold the tape to Worldwide news- they gave me a killer rate. You should delete your old TubeYuber videos and Plebbit posts, too, before people find them. I didn't give them everything... just enough to get an interview with their head office. My big break... I needed this, okay, it's nothing personal- nothing can tie you to any crimes, either. Nobody takes me seriously with my fucking

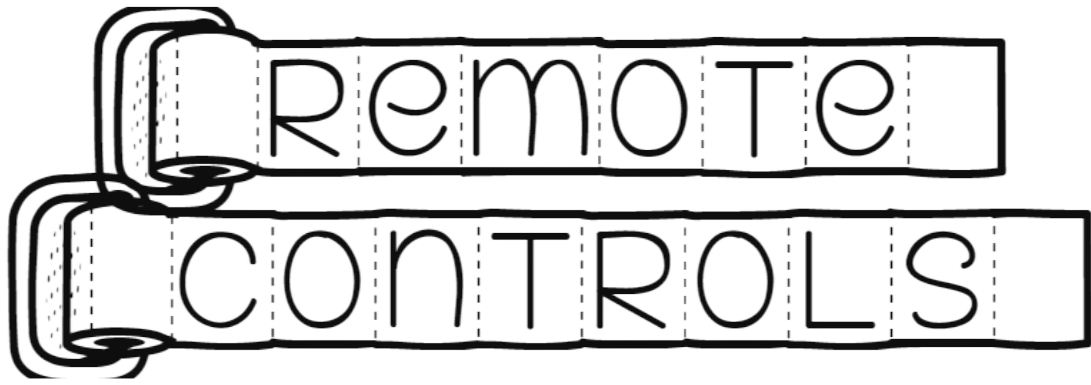
blog and Plebbit posts... It's all running tonight on the 6 o'clock news; I just wanted to give you the heads up, you know. I mean- professional courtesy- you did start the movement towards change- With Big C gone and the Royale Suites flattened, so many are better off because of you. I still think you're a hero... Please don't be with Allie as the tape rolls. You don't deserve that, and neither does she."

Ken's face is blank.

"I hope you can understand someday. It's for the greater good, having me on the inside at Worldwide."

The phone drops from his hand.

"I'm sorry," Liza hangs up.



It is still dark when a single bird begins to chirp.

wee-oooh,
wee-oooh,
ch-ch-ch-ch-es-keeeeeee-you

Song Sparrows remind Ken of nature's modem, the feathered friend connects to his mind, a short distraction from having to resume a broken life in solitude. Stolen from him is the peace he found at Thunderbird Lodge, his heart and soul now drowning in booze. He's not a problem drinker, or never has been- alcohol is his anchor, not a superpower- it is not a part of his identity. Or maybe-

Yes- yes, it is. The drinking, Ken's medication- the only thing that keeps him throwing haymakers back at a hostile world.

His forehead twitches from an electrical shock- whether real or imagined, he can't tell.

The smell of his couch lets him know- he's safe at home.
Just breathing, in and out.
I'm just breathing slowly.
I'm glad to be alive.

A second bird joins in the morning choir.

Pain racks his body; he lies as still as possible to listen to nature and stop thinking. Any movement brings profuse aches- attempts to remember last night cause shocks to course through his head. Blip images of him watching Liza Liang's video, where everything all goes wrong.

A bolt of electricity zaps from behind Ken's right ear, through his head, and stings his left eye.

Ken tosses and turns; nausea, vertigo, muscle cramps and soreness accompany every movement, he finds no comfort.

Through the pain of a series of mind-frying jolts, Ken digs into his memory of the previous evening. Walking- he walks to a nearby park. To stay sober, to hold himself accountable. Folding paper, he makes little cranes, building a small pile next to him, part of the teachings from the lodge. He stays mindful —origami over intoxication. Be present, the gurus say. Be present.

Last night, at the park, flashing memory images, a man sits down next to him.

The man's lips moving, but Ken cannot remember anything he said.

"Ahh-" Ken moans, unsure if the pain is an unforgiving and brutal hangover- or a growing tumour.

The birds sing away; more join in.

Intense pain with each image, every word he vaguely recalls the man saying. At first, when he speaks, the words anger him, soon into sympathy for the person next to him. The man sharing how his fate intertwines with Ken's, pulling out a brown bag from a satchel beside him; inside is a glass bottle and a baggie with two little pills. The man offering both to Ken.

He accepts.

Washing the pills down, swigging from the jug.

Speaking some more, the man leaves Ken there, with a nearly full bottle, alone.

Controlling his breathing, he lies as still as possible, allowing the memories, or hallucinations, to rise up on their own.

Instead, they rush him all at once.

...rolling... water falling... the sting, pain- pain on his leg, his back- his cheek... vomiting...

"Sir, sir, can you hear me-"

"On three-"

Thud.

A door closes.

...pain...

Blue gloves, a mask going over his face.

Brighter lights, a table.

Drilling.

Panic.

...danger...

Ken sits up, screaming.

"Euuggghhggggaaaaaahh!"

"We got a 10-50, 10-50!"

His arms tense up against resistance.

"Euugh... euuuggghh.... euggggaaahhhhhhhhhhh!"

Bindings snap, Ken dives forward-

...door bursts open ...bright lights... ...sirens... tumbling... sliding... his shirt is torn...

Ken sits up, choking.
Reaching his arm out.
Retching, grimacing, splashing about.
The body aches and stings all over.
His hand hits a lever, sound of water falling stops.
He slumps over.

*...destroy destroy destroy... kicking... screaming... shattering...
throwing... running...*

Kicking every newspaper box over, booting cracks in every storefront window.

Picking up a nearby construction sign and throwing it through the back window of a hatchback car.

Ken screams as he runs, kicking, thrashing everything he can. The streets are empty; his lunacy finally abates when sirens wail in the distance.

...home... stripping down... vomiting... shower... vomiting some more...

Being cold. On a mountain top. The buff doctor speaks. Ken reaches behind his ear and feels a hole, his fingers bloody. He blinks. Ken is in the misty meadows of Thunderbird Lodge, riding horses with Allie, the sun on his face, sober, happy.

...shivering... shivering...

Ken struggles to turn the shower off; his hand hits the lever after many attempts. Crawling along the soaked bathroom floor, wounds all over him hurt; he flops on the couch and passes out.

The birds outside chirping can't lift Ken from his darkness; at least they are soothing to the soul; what's left of it, anyway.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

"Ken? You in there? You're two months late on rent; I'm giving you the last warning before a 24-hour notice, eh?"

Ken's eyes remain closed; he can tell from the revolting smell he's lying on his dirty and blood-stained couch. Maybe that voice is authentic? Highly disassociated, Ken's conscious sense of his body comes and goes, and the time comes in non-linear waves. A severe hangover makes itself known; the hangover brings its friends; he is also cold, nude, and shivering.

"I know you're in there, pooch killer, rent is due, get off your ass or get out!"

Footsteps around the side of the house to the window behind his couch, going quiet for a few seconds and continuing up the walkway. The window blinds might be wide open. He doesn't care.

His eyes barely focus when open; his puffy face throbs and his jaw hurts too much to close. Clotting blood pulls on the pillow when he rolls over to sit up. It must be later in the afternoon, maybe; Ken has no idea what time it is, stumbling around in the dark. He trips over a couple of empty vodka bottles on the way to the bathroom and steps on his laptop by accident. Wet towels cover the white-tiled bathroom floor, spots of blood dot all over. Nearby are pieces of the mirror—Ken's fist having destroyed it, his reflection smashed in countless ways.

Twenty minutes later, Ken is out of the shower, towels under him squish with every step; chunks he doesn't

remember vomiting clogs the drain.

"Fuck," Ken whispers; his ragged jeans lie across the bathroom sink, he digs in the pockets. Finding what he needs, a cigarette gets lit in the dark bathroom, and Ken turns on the overhead fan.

Looking at himself again in the mirror, he holds his breath for a few moments and sighs.

After a few drags of the cigarette, Ken leans on the sink, stretching his neck out to each side and taking deep breaths. Scrapes and bruises like ads on a Nascar, his body a sponsor of pain, his foot feels broken. Ken tosses the smouldering butt down the sink drain.

Ken grits his teeth and raises his balled-up hand at the already-smashed mirror, tensing up for a moment- his fist releases, and he walks out of the bathroom.

Finding a couple cans of Ivory Talon seltzer in his hoarder-like kitchen, he grabs the 6-pack plastic ring still wrapped around the cans, drags it to the couch and flops back down. Some papers sit on the floor beside the upside-down coffee table, bills, a few flyers, junk mail. A bright colour leaflet shows an image of Dr. Aziz Ross-Singh smiling. She's running for Premier of British Columbia; controversial yoga practitioner Zelowan Nhargau runs for Mayor on the back.

Ken stares at the political flyer for a few ticks of the clock.

In his mind, Mistress S runs for Premier, PiggyP on the back is vying for the Mayor's seat.

"Fuck," he grumbles, "in current fucking year, anything's possible, I guess."

Cracking one of his drinks open, he leans back to relax.

Gold light from the sunset tracks along the wall as the purple-and-blue skin man drinks in a daze. He finishes the first

can, then the second; now Ken sits in the dark, alone, loud footsteps and music begin to thud from the suite above.

Ken sighs with his chin to his chest.

It takes a while; he eventually sits up, flips his trashed laptop open, and checks his bank balance.

Overdrawn.

Even with the unidentified, anonymous donor paying his rehab down-payment, the one-thousand dollars per day fee for the month he spent there put a killing on his entire savings.

Ken can't recall- what was he thinking about- staying at Thunderbird Lodge for so long; intense brain fog when he tries to remember.

"Why..." Ken mutters, "Why did I stay for so long-"

His voice trails off; clicking through his email, he finds one from his former boss, Azmina.

Ken,

Due to the nature of the allegations against you and your ties to Seth from engineering, you are no longer welcome on Rise Helicopter and Crane property. We will ship the contents of your desk to you; if you attempt to enter the building, we authorized security to detain you for trespassing. Rise Helicopter and Crane are legally entitled to garnish your last pay period owed. You will also be facing a civil suit for defamation as your conspirator role has caused us to lose many customers.

You are officially terminated.

Regards,

Azmina

Ken sighs, reaches for his lighter and lights up a smoke. He ashes in one of the seltzer cans nearby.

"Shiii-ttttt."

On social media, a few notifications catch his eye right away. One of Allie's friends has sent him a few messages, calling him an asshole, and the email explains how Allie is crying in his arms after Ken stood her up. Then the Crunst tape came on the news, and she got more upset. The email continues to say Ken is worthless trash and he should jump in front of a Skytrain.

Ken looks around his place and thinks about his life.

"Yeah, might be an improvement," he reaches for his phone; the screen totally smashed; he slices his finger on one of the sharp fragments as it turns on.

"Fuck!"

The phone lights up and beeps to life, vibrating in silent mode as a few texts come in, Bob, Aussie mike, the rehab clinic for money still owed- his phone bill reminder.

Then Allie. All she writes to him is:

where are u

Ken's wet eyes shine in the screen light. Sitting there, he tries to think of something to write. He wonders what she is going through. After sitting there, waiting for him, then facing his abandoning ways with no warning, going to her friend's and then watching the news report. His name out there as a cult member- killing her dog- accusations of terrorism. He can't bear to bring that disgrace upon her. She probably feels terrible, and for the first time in his life, this is where telling the truth will make things even worse.

Her face appears in his mind's eye, she smiles at him from his bedside in the rehab clinic.

Her face, so full of love for him again.

He sits in his dim basement and lets out a wheezing sigh.

Ken clicks away at his phone, reading other messages from friends showing concern- the few he has left. Aussie Mike sends him a news link about Crunst and a few laughing emojis; his Aussie friend's chill reaction to everything in the news makes Ken smile.

Bob asks him by text how he is doing. If Ken needs help.

"Puh-" he exhales, a self-mocking single laugh.

The only person who seems to care anymore is a boisterous, fat, old, and unemployed security guard.

With a sigh, Ken dials the number. The phone rings a couple of times before a cheerful voice beams out from the line.

"Kenny! Howzit going, bud?"

"Yeah, uh-" Ken's voice is hoarse, "shit's bad, man."

"What's up, Ken?" Bob's voice takes a serious tone.

"Not too many people on my team right now, I guess, kind of need to figure out my next step in life."

Ken pauses; he hears a TV on in the background at Bob's location.

"I guess you must have seen-"

"Yeah... I did," Bob speaks without his usual excitement, "looks like a full cancelling to me. Trust me, I know what it feels like. Sucks."

Ken's face twists into a frown.

"They're holding my last pay; I'm getting fucking evicted tomorrow!"

Both men go silent; Ken can hear the news in the background, droning on about the latest scary coof variant.

Bob clears his throat.

"My ex-sis-in-law, she's a good person, really kind heart-

she's got connections in housing."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, for real," the excitement returns in Bob's voice. "The only thing about the deal is they have a soup kitchen nearby- you'll have to wash dishes on weekdays- the apartment is like a live-in worker deal if you don't mind."

"It's paid minimum wage, so you won't starve!"

Ken's eyes close, his mouth drops open, and he exhales.

"Yeah, fuck it- sure, better than a hand-out, I guess."

"-you don't have to say another word, Ken."

"I just wanted to say, when you and what's-her-face, funny marketing gal- Suzi- when she handed me that cash and gave me a hug, then when you texted me just to say hi- it saved my ass, thank you. I never considered it a hand-out, but a hand-up during hard times."

Ken's frown reduces a slight bit in severity.

"Yeah, it was all pretty fucked, the work-from-home, masks, job layoffs-" Ken's voice sort of trails off, his mind torments him with tauntingly happier memories.

"So buddy, listen," Bob is serious again. "I'm in a good enough place for the time being that I can hook you up with a u-haul and help you pack in the morning, but then I gotta bounce over to my physio. When those fucks pushed me off my bike, it tore my rotator cuff- but I had to keep working, so I hurt it over and over. I still can barely use my right arm."

"Yeah, that blows-" Ken grumbles.

"We all have our trials and tribulations to go through, buddy. Sometimes the path seems easy, and it's like a stroll through the park on a sunny day, sunshine and lollipops, or more like beers and babes, am I right, uh-huh?!"

Bob chuckles.

"Sure," says Ken.

"Then, then you can have those moments where- if you're not careful, you can lose the idea of who you even are. Like- how did I become out-of-work, fat, old, and getting beat up by street punks. Never thought my life would look like this. Going out there, bustin' my hump to deliver some rich asshole some food while making another rich asshole even more money at GrubSlug!?"

Ken tries not to chuckle but does.

"Ho-lee-shit bud, I was so done- hitting a new low, then rolling over and falling and hitting another new low." Bob laughs, "-but even through thick and thin, I always remember, God had my back."

Ken rolls his eyes.

"Through moments where I caught myself back on the bottle, choosing to gorge myself on fast food- that devil's lettuce- hitting up some skin on the interwebs. I knew that voice inside me, telling me these things were bad for me. I knew I would be lead back to a path to God."

"So uh, can you tell me more about this suite? You said your sister-in-law or-"

"Ken, Jesus Christ carried me through the darkest times!" Bob raises his voice on the phone, "I just needed to acknowledge our lord and saviour, and I will pray for you, Ken."

"Yeah, prayer," Ken scoffs, his face scrunching up in disgust, "-about as useful as looking at internet porn there Bob, at least porn will give you a thrill, prayer does jack shit-"

"Ken, man, I'm glad to help you, but please, can you show some respect- I only held on through the worst times through God, and I'm just trying to offer you that same rebirth that saved me."

Ken gets up from his couch, looking on the floor for some clothes and his shoes.

"Uh-huh, sure-"

"I'll send you some pics of the building; you'll have to go into the local welfare office to sign a couple of forms and show some identification. Just text me in the morning and let me know when that's done, and I'll bring the u-haul by and help you pack. I'll book the u-haul for two days so you can even sleep in it if you have to be out tomorrow night. But now, I'm going to read you this one prayer, okay? Are you listening?"

"Uh-huh," Ken grumbles, having thrown on some clothes and slipping on some old, dirty running shoes, grabbing his keys; he leaves out his backdoor.

Bob clears his throat.

"Lord, I pray that you would teach me to yield myself to your spirit-"

Ken lowers the phone from his ear to hop over the fence and into his alley, turning the direction towards the closest liquor store, holding the phone down by his side.

...I long to see a demonstration of your power in my life just as the Apostle Paul did...

Walking down Cambie street and turning onto Broadway, a few people give Ken dirty looks for not wearing a mask, and he gives dagger eyes right back at them.

...I thank you that the darkness vanishes as I pray for the lost. Thank you for convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. I pray that you will soften the heart of Ken. Remove the spiritual blindness from their eyes...

Ken looks at his phone, and he's still connected to the call

with Bob.

"Fuck is he still going off?"

He looks up at the neon sign of the liquor store and puts the phone to his ear.

"Help me to be your light in their lives," Bob speaks with fervour, "-help me to let my light shine before men, that they may see my good deeds and glorify my father in heaven. Show me how to be your witness and how to show acts of love to them. I believe that you are working in their lives even as I pray, In Jesus' name, amen!"

Bob breathes heavily.

"Whew! Doesn't that feel good, Ken?"

"Uh-huh, yep-" Ken taps his foot.

"Ken, don't forget the paperwork tomorrow at the office you gotta sign- and to text me after, okay? Have a good night, buddy, and God bless you!"

"Thanks, Bob, I- I do appreciate it," Ken mumbles.

"Text you tomorrow- bye."

Ken hangs up the phone, walks into the liquor store, grabs a bottle of rum and a six-pack of tropical seltzer. He casually walks right back out the door and towards his house.

Back up Cambie and through the side streets near his place, a loud din of music is heard before Ken reaches his garage. Using his keys to get through the door and into the backyard, the new upstairs neighbours have a party going.

A small crowd of people are vaping and drinking on the upstairs' patio just above Ken's door. A couple people spot him and file into the house; a drunken, maskless woman on the sundeck spots Ken.

"Oooh, who's this muscly man?"

A man walks up to the woman and whispers something in

her ear. She turns around and scoots into the house; the patio door closes behind them with a thud.

Ken can still hear the music thumping as his key opens the door into his messy place, the seltzer being tossed into the fridge, opening the bottle of rum.

Finding a few loose cigarettes and putting on a coat, Ken opens the back door, sitting on his concrete stairs, taking swigs of rum as he chain-smokes. In a blur, half the bottle is already gone.

The music catches his attention for a moment.

...bootie so thicc u need a bowl...

Boom goes the bass from upstairs, boom boom, for hours now, boom boom.

...come lick my creami drippin' b-hole...

Ken frowns and begins to gulp down the other half of the bottle.



Ken is outside the run-down, dingy Government building for over an hour; a pounding hangover makes his morning the opposite of nice. It is his turn to be let in where the actual lineup starts.

The stone-faced security guard opens the door to the welfare office; Ken steps inside while wearing a blue disposable mask. Everyone in a face covering, some wearing full-face shields. Several sanitation stations and virus warnings plastered all over the walls has Ken feeling uneasy. Many bulletin boards cover the rest of the space, including numerous slogans and official-looking posters with previously common-sense life advice. Don't drink while pregnant, don't beat your partner.

"Fuck me," Ken whispers, sitting down next to a slumped-over man who reeks of booze and piss. The crowd of people in the waiting room sits spaced out for social distancing. Everyone eyes each other up with suspicion.

Ken stares forward for the first hour, his ears pick up chatter around him.

"-so you were in jail when?"

"-your second baby momma's cousin-"

"-grandma's handyman stole your rent money?"

Another hour goes by, his hangover worse than ever, Ken's turn is finally next. Approaching one of the social worker booths, giving his name and case number to a masked woman behind a castle made of plexiglass.

"So, you're reporting that you are moving tomorrow and would like to request a damage deposit-"

"Yes, please-" Ken speaks softly.

"Okay, hold on-" the lady walks away and disappears among the back of the office somewhere.

Ken stands, leaning against the counter as a hedge against alcohol withdrawal-induced vertigo. A motley crew of characters parade in and out of the office as he waits, nearly all vocalizing their problems to all around them.

The worker strolls back over with some documents.

"Oh yes, Ken, you're approved-"

Taking the papers, he smiles, the woman says they will arrange for the damage deposit and rent. With a bit of luck, the dishwashing gig Bob mentions the other day is the type of temporary job that he needs right now. It will only be a short while before he's back on his feet; it's not the end of the world. Besides, the finale has already happened, at least. Already at rock-bottom, there's nowhere left to go.

Standing as tall as he can outside the welfare office, Ken walks down the street with a plan to win back some pride again. He carefully opens his trashed phone and texts Bob. He refuses to give up; with two hands and a strong back, he'll find something to keep a roof over his head, even if he needs someone else to give him shelter and a survival job in the meantime.

Making a stop at the supermarket, he takes his time to budget out a treat. Buying some of his favourite meats on sale,

a loaf of bread, and some sticks of butter, he takes a jaunt down a couple more blocks to a nearby park. Finding a bare spot on a glassy hill, he spreads out his little picnic-for-one.

"Ya know, om nom-nom," as Ken stuffs his face, "this- this ain't so bad," he says to himself, sitting on the lawn and looking out over Vancouver on this sunny but chilly, clear fall day.

Feeling full, he begins the trip back towards his old home and feels *almost* upbeat about the move. Sure, the place is half the size, in a worse neighbourhood, and he has no car anymore, but that is fine- no included underground parking anyways. Ken doesn't know anyone living nearby his new place and has no idea how to wash dishes- or if he can stand 8 hours per day of it. But- he learns fast, has his bike, a strong back, and will carry on.

That sweet 1991 Craggy Peak Shockwave sneaks back into his mind, the last time he rode, the titillating sensation of being with an old flame. Everything is in the right place; after straightening the bent back wheel from the night he rescued it, it is perfectly balanced again. Ken smiles as he walks, wondering where he will ride next, thinking of packing up a backpack and leaving for the open road.

"No, no-" he mutters, shaking his head at those thoughts.

So many late summer evening rides to see Allie when they first started dating. The best times. So many seawall cruises, nights at the drum circle, and kissing her for the first time under the full moon at 3rd beach.

"All this," Ken sighs in anguish, "b-because I- I- couldn't just let go. God-damn, fucking sentimental bullshit!"

"Iz more den dat," the shamanic telepathy of Badrick invades again, "-yuh fight gainst da doghearts ah babylon bi uphill bredren, Jah bless you, lion."

Ken's feet carry him quickly, maybe trying to outrun worry- or ghosts; he's already walking through his alley and nearly home. Music with heavy bass getting louder, Ken opens the door to the garage and passes through to the backyard. His new upstairs neighbours are avoiding the backyard, probably because of him. Hanging his head low and unlocking his basement suite door, taped on it is a yellow 24-hour eviction notice; Ken shuffles to his couch and falls on it with a thud. After a short nap, the slightly less horrible hangover still sucks, and Bob will be by soon with the u-haul to help with the packing. On the corners of his lips is the slightest hint of a pull upwards.

It is 4 PM, and with Bob's help, Ken packs most of his things in boxes and stacks them by the door. The truck containing his couch already, and the garage is clear of his junk. His bicycle leans up against the living wall next to his mattress—all ready to go tomorrow.

It is going to be a long day. He'll wake up early, have to clean the place, load the u-haul parked out back with the boxes, mattress, and bike, then drive across the city to unload and begin his new life. Before leaving, Bob gives him a hug; Ken feels better but gets hit with wave after wave of misery. Not sure if it's fatigue or something else; maybe being surrounded by the reminders of his failures isn't the healthiest thing.

A knock at the door- Ken goes to look. It's the landlord- seen through the window wearing a mask and holding a tray; Timmy Ho's coffees and some sugar-coated donuts. He also brings an apology.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to antagonize you about the dog," he says, unable to maintain eye contact. He shiftily looks around

the trashed basement suite, equally appalled by Ken's bedraggled appearance and many wounds.

Ken nods, enjoying the java and sweets, wondering how bad Worldwide news doxxed him. How deep is Liza driving the knife?

Feeling the chaos inside, he sighs and tries to forget it all, throwing himself on the floor next to his boxes, grunting in response to the landlord asking if he can look around.

The landlord begins to tour the unit, surveying the damage. Bathroom mirror smashed, water-damaged floor, clogged drains, insect clouds and cigarette butt swarms. His jaw agape the entire inspection; there is almost nowhere he steps without crunching a seltzer can or kicking a vodka bottle. He tells Ken not to worry; he'll be back tomorrow morning to help Ken clean up. They can arrange a small payment each month for Ken to cover the damage, whatever the total ends up being.

Seems fair to him.

Ken looks him in the eyes and nods.

After the handshake, the landlord beelines for the door.

With the landlord gone, Ken sits down where his couch used to be.

All that's leftover is a couple of stacks of empty boxes and bags of his clothing, old photos, some books, and scattered paperwork. It litters his living room to the point of overwhelming anxiety. None of his mental exercises work to calm him down. His hands shake, and he can't tape up another box.

"Ah- fuck it, good enough!" Ken shouts, throwing the tape gun across the room.

Collecting his things and a coat, Ken hastens for the door and steps out in a hurry. His fingers tap away on his cracked

phone screen, texting estranged friends while walking through the side streets of Vancouver. In the fall evenings, staring up at the red leaves- they look magical against the deep sapphire sky during blue hour. It brings the slightest in joy to Ken's otherwise bleak outing.

Nina never answers his messages anymore, he's sure she knows who he became after that first night, and Aussie Mike is back in the land of giant spiders and scary cassowary birds- Ken misses him the most and sent him a few messages telling him he thinks about their drinking shenanigans a lot. He apologizes for being such a shitty friend and not spending much time with him before he jetted back home. Rehab confiscated his phone- his life righteously fucked and his friendships fading as a result. Ken laughs, hoping the Aussie would understand the Vancouver flake by now. Jeff is still friendly- but cold. A bit scared of the social and professional backlash of knowing a supposed incel terrorist online cult member. Ken understands why he can't drink with him anymore; being seen in public with Ken would be a career death sentence.

Walking across the Cambie street bridge and continuing into the city's heart, Ken soon finds himself at his favourite pub again. It's under new management, like half the restaurants out there, and since he doesn't have the vaccine for the coof yet, he has to sit in a particular corner, mask on, with nobody to talk to.

Ken sips his beer, finishing a second, then a third; he reaches in his pocket and feels around. He only has two twenties in cash, maybe a few dollars in change, and he needs to make it last.

"Excuse me, uh, this is my third beer. Do you know what my tab is at?"

"Oh ya, which are those, oh- you're having the organic triple hopped Alaskan gold rush spirit-moose lager, those are fifteen fifty a pint."

Ken hopes his eyes don't slinky out of his head, almost spitting up some of his drink.

"Do you want a fourth?"

Ken pauses.

His eyes go from bugging out, transitioning to relaxed, half-closed apathy.

"Sure, please," he replies, the waitress walking away.

"...besides, what's one fuckin' more when you can't pay anyways."

In a few minutes, the waitress brings over the fourth pint of beer.

Ken sighs, pulling his mask up to drink and pulling it back down. He takes his time, enjoying his last sip, waiting for another customer to tie up the waitress. Standing up from the booth, Ken tilts his head down, sauntering for the exit inconspicuously. Outside the pub, he wanders into the light crowd of people mingling about, disappearing into the night. His phone has been quiet all evening; nobody gets back to him; only Aussie Mike sending him a few words of encouragement.

Mate, I felt so bad once I ran over a joey n crashed my ute when I was straight piss-fucked in college, nearly killed my girlfriend she was in the hospital for a month and I got a driving ban for 5 years and 6 months in the boob but the worst my dad took me out back and whapped me good, everyone knew, and my life just took the piss mate, I redeemed myself by touring skools and speaking out against drinking and driving I survived and learned from it to help others, look how awesome I am today, just hang in there bro when this is all over and done with

we'll go for beers in Bondi and ill teach ya how to surf :)

Unable to force a smile, his feet sore from the long walk and his head aching, Ken can feel his willpower sapping. Each step weighing double, no, triple a standard step. This time he doesn't have Allie to power him up with her surprise kisses and tickle attacks; he misses her hugs dearly, misses making her smile with his dumb jokes.

Looking at his phone, the last message from her is from three days ago.

where are u

Sighing, Ken looks up at the ramp to the Cambie street bridge, the same walk he's done countless times, only now everything is so hollow. There will be no stops for selfies, just slow marching back to his evicted home in his soggy, uncomfortable shoes, a throbbing headache, and a belly full of ill-gotten beer.



A red, yellow and pink sunset lights the sky above.

With his head tilting down, Ken pushes against an overstuffed cart. Struggling with the weight and channelling his inner Sisyphus- his legs burst forth with the power to control the formidable load. Rolling it carefully down the shiny, bouncy aluminum ramp, he only has one or two more trips to finish his move. Sweat rolls off his forehead; using the corners of his shirt to wipe does nothing to abate the feeling of tiny stinging needles poking his eyeballs. Blinking rapidly, tears help to clear his sight, his nose now acting up with a tingle. A scent anyone who has lived downtown would recognize; the street reeks of an open sewer.

Fast food wrappers, unscooped turds, unkempt lawns. Buckled in places, the concrete sidewalk wanders like an old gnarled root. Ken's heavy cart comes to rest against the back of the u-haul truck. Closing the cargo door and looking around cautiously, he padlocks it shut, but not before his cynical hands give it a second and third yank.

Crossing the street with his stuff, his new home looms in front of him. The brown low-rise building has a patina of peeling green paint, and the entire lawn is dead grass brown,

giving a smidgen of personality. This is it, he thinks, noticing more cigarette butts and litter everywhere.

Behind him is a park, a field full of orange and blue tents extend out into the horizon. Ken often camping as a youth in similar gear; the hot enclosed spaces can breed bad moods and short tempers.

Cars line the road in disrepair, hanging door handles, scuffs up the side, the parking situation utterly jam-packed in the neighbourhood. Seedy RVs and motorhomes every third or fourth vehicle; it stretches out as far as he can see, many looking like it has been ages since they moved. Flat tires with moss growing on them, garbage bags taped over the windows.

The new normal.

Rough ground underfoot digs harshly into the ball of his foot, worn shoes, and stubborn gravity resisting his solo move-in. Needing to use the wheelchair ramp for his cart, he's breathing heavy and strains to push the heavy load up the incline. It all may have been easier just to elbow-grease it up the curb; It doesn't matter, though, as cars form a wall with no room to squeeze through, parking close together mimicking sardines in a can.

The cart broadcasts Ken's arrival as it rolls up the block squeaking; he can sense the gaze of people locked down in their apartments for months. The news recently announcing more mandatory masks, more vaccines, travel bans. Sneezing, he stops pushing for a moment to scratch his face. The blue medical mask he wears prickles his nose, his breath gains a vile, sour moistness with every exhale. Anonymity is essential, lest any mask enforcers or Faceberg Karens alert to his presence. Some people sit at their windows and stare out; others peek from behind the zippers of tents; everyone itching to see

something, anything happen.

Red-faced, beads of sweat leave a trail on the sidewalk behind him- his gaze drifts to his feet while leaning against the heavy, stopped luggage. There must be people on the lookout for him, aware that he is moving into social housing. Due to Crunst's statements on Liza's tape being sold to the highest bidder, Worldwide news has doxxed him completely.

Ken sighs.

Bob tells Ken not to read any of it but confirms it is bad. Real bad. They paint him on the news as a far-right incel and anti-homeless extremist; at least with that narrative, it doesn't expose Allie to any abuse. It does put a giant bullseye on him, and all it will take is one upload of him to social media- and he's toast. If one tent city agitator lives in the neighbourhood and spots him, he's sure a mob will come seeking blood.

The tower of his possessions blocks just enough of the late evening sun to offer some respite. Deep in his lungs, a frothing tide of phlegm chokes up, a cough from his pack-a-day lungs rings out to greet any nosey neighbours.

Gritting his teeth, the rest of his journey begins with the first step. The wheels battle the pavement to the last ridge; each crack in the sidewalk is a steep hill to overcome.

At last, after fighting with the heavy cart and wheels getting stuck in the fissures of the broken walkway, he arrives. The front door of his building has graffiti scrawled on it, a rude welcome next to a crude sexual drawing. Swiping the fob to buzz in, two black-clad men with bicycles exit the lobby just as he is about to enter.

Holding the door open, Ken moves his buggy to the side to let them pass. Suddenly, one of the men lunges at Ken and makes him flinch, letting go of the door, and it bumps his cart.

The other man snickers, "fuckin' gooooo-f" -as if in on the joke. They push past and let the door slam so Ken can't grab it.

Inside his mind, a familiar voice shouts out.

"Pree out Ken, bad bwoy a everyweh yah."

Ken's head swivels around, and his eyes shift back and forth under the apartment awning, no Rastafari nearby.

Unnerving sensations wash over Ken as he lets himself back into the apartment building to hurry up his move. At least those guys don't stick around to find out which apartment is his; who knows, maybe they're his new neighbours.

Down the hallway and to his new ground-floor home, he opens the door with paint peeling off it to view his bachelor suite. With a worn floor, filthy walls, and coffin-sized shower, the wheels of his cart roll rough on the uneven, cracked hardwood. A single old kitchen table and chair sit under a naked lightbulb dangling from the ceiling, the wiring frayed and exposed. Gently setting his stuff down in the middle of the room, he goes to the window and peeks outside.

There, under the twilight sky's navy palette, is a silhouette of bolt cutters going to work. In what seems like a split second, the formerly-locked door to his u-haul flies up, and dozens of people rush in to loot.

"No! Fuck!" Ken screams, jumping to the door and locking it behind him, running down the hallway to the foyer; his shoes dig into the carpet as he rounds the corner in a frenzied sprint. Whipping open the front door and charging, he is back at the truck in a few shakes of a crackhead's leg.

"Fuck off!" Ken yells, the rage bursting forth again without any hesitation.

The face of the first bandit he reaches receives a personal introduction to the truck's metal tailgate; the second is side-

kicked in the ribs and folds over like a broken taco. A fat hippy in a VanCity shirt takes a spinning back fist, busting his nose and knocking him out.

The crowd scatters, someone drops a lamp, and it breaks. The u-haul is empty except for Ken's stained couch and a few last suitcases of clothes that broke open in the melee.

His bicycle is gone.

"Fuck- OFF!" Ken shouts, punching a dent in the side of the truck, seething with ferocity, before stretching out his arms with balled fists and roaring- daring the thieves to come back.

An engine revving up behind him, Ken spins around. A black Mercedes with tinted windows, its tires chirping from heavy anti-lock braking, stopping suddenly right beside him. The driver's side rear window slides down quickly with a smooth whirr.

"Ken," says Grandpa Chang from the rear passenger side, "-please come for a ride."

A few moments later, Ken is riding in the backseat with Grandpa Chang. Climate control blasting cold air at him, pacifying his rage face from a deep red to a pinkish glow.

The Mercedes glides down Hastings towards the thick of the ghetto, past Knight street, Grandpa Chang speaks.

"Ken, there is a lot of work to do, work that I now know you are fully capable of."

He stares out the window, the ever-increasing open poverty outside tenses Ken's face into a scowl.

"What you did- what you committed to doing, it aligns with my values. I follow a strict code, for the advancement of all peoples-"

Glancing at the old man, Ken's eyes are red and his brow furrows deeply.

Grandpa Chang motions outside his window.

"Contemporary society believes this is life, this is living, so they say-"

The car stopping for a red light, Ken turns and spots a screaming old woman pushing a shopping cart across the street. She gives a rude gesture towards the driver and spits on the hood of the Mercedes. Her attention turns to Ken in the backseat, with wild sanpaku eyes, her face morphs between different chaotic expressions of pain. Wet black teeth revealing themselves like eels when she yells, open sores pock-mark her cheeks.

Shivering, he averts his gaze.

"When I was young, I took an oath," the old man's deep, monotonous voice caresses each word, "-an oath to uphold the values of Confucianism, but I did not have the resources, or the wisdom, to know what to do-"

"Here, Ken," Grandpa Chang shifts in his seat and looks into Ken's eyes.

"This is where we can make a difference. We turn the tide and lift all boats at once."

The light turns green, the car has to wait for a few stragglers to finish crossing, a hunching-over man groans loud and carries a dirty blanket.

Grandpa Chang shakes his head.

"The lowest quality of what passes for human existence."

Turning the corner, the car slows to a crawl, a man in a wheelchair stationary in the middle of the lane ahead.

"I want to show you, show you what we have done lately, how you have helped us."

Grandpa Chang taps the driver on the shoulder, pointing, the car swerves around the handicapped person, turns up

Cordova street to pass where the old police station used to be.

"Here, look-" he motions towards a blue construction fence lining the block.

Ken recognizes where he is. The Royale Suites building. Torn down.

"With the help of our asset, Mistress S, the first stage of our ultimate goal is complete."

Cruising along, the black Mercedes turns right and completes the tour of Ken's doing. Fencing lines the open excavation pit, bubble letter graffiti covers a giant white development sign, the corner suffers from an arson attempt.

"We chose this spot for several reasons, but one is- the foundation is perfect for building deep and wide, with approval for 70 stories above and at least as many below. But we may be able to squeeze the 100 we want above, provided that enough money ends up in the right pockets."

Ken shifts in his leather seat to look at Grandpa Chang again; his vision distorts, he looks beyond the old man and stares out the window; brief flashbacks fill his mind, wincing uncontrollably.

"You killed two men, I know- that will haunt you, it will never leave you-"

Ken grimaces, shuddering as he stares out at the passing blur of storefronts.

"-Know this, Ken, you have guaranteed that we will be able to help many, many more. The police? Defunded. The incompetent government next to fall, and rightly so. Bonus Escalation will provide happiness in a place of utter hopelessness. You know yourself, in a place of total corruption, a place so shrouded in darkness- any act that brings in the light is a moral one."

Ken sits still, the car slowing for another red light, his gaze focusing outside and his mind deep in rumination. A young man riding a skateboard, a girl pedals, a flower basket on the front of her bike next to him. She smiles as he does a kickflip, the thwack of the wheels on concrete, the happy couple casting long, reminiscent fall shadows. Looking toward his feet, Ken sighs. The car moves again; he watches out the window, the buildings getting a tad less dingy as the Mercedes escapes east from downtown.

Pulling up to Ken's new place near the border of Burnaby, Grandpa Chang motions to his driver to park at the end of the block; he walks with Ken to his building's front door.

"May I?" Grandpa Chang asks.

Ken nods.

The two men walk through the old, dank building, scents of old cigarettes, fishy stews filling their noses, the smell of mould and bleach greet the men when they enter Ken's slum apartment.

Walking to the ground-floor window, Ken pulls back the blinds, opening them for some fresh air. The sun has almost set; a fire rises from an old oil drum encircled by ratty tents in the park across the street.

Soft woodwind music is heard, a surprised Ken returns to the kitchen nook to find Grandpa Chang playing a mellow, hauntingly beautiful melody on a bamboo flute.

Ken alternates watching vigilantly for activity in the street outside and listening to the concert in his kitchen. After filling the place with sombre tootle-too notes, Grandpa Chang pulls the flute from his mouth, takes a deep breath, and opens his eyes, smiling at Ken.

"That, Ken, was a song that has guided my life, A Trail of

Angels, famous Chinese folk music-"

As the night falls, some unscrupulous campers have shuffled over to his u-haul again, spoiling for a fight. Drawing the curtain closed and turning on the lights inside, Ken heads to the small kitchen area, opens the fridge, and pours himself a glass of vodka.

Grandpa Chang appears next to him, taking his wrist gently but steadily, forcing his hand to let go of the cup.

Ken's face turns to a scowl, balling his fists, stomping into the living room, grabbing his head with both hands to scream.

"Fuuuuuccckkk!!!"

Grandpa Chang calmly pours the glass into the sink before sitting down again at the dilapidated table.

"Congratulations, Ken, you have the rest of your life to be alcohol-free."

"It's not that easy," whispers Ken, banging his head against the drywall.

"Anything you set your willpower to, Ken, you can accomplish. In my organization, you will have everything you need to thrive, but I cannot tolerate a drunkard."

Ken stands there, lost in thought, forehead pressing against the wall where it is now dented in.

"What about Allie, how-"

Grandpa Chang chuckles.

"Women are perhaps the greatest exception; even the wisest of men show the greatest imprudence when trying to predict the fairer sex- give her space and time."

"I-I miss her," Ken says softly.

"I know, Ken, I know, perhaps now you can find solace in work, in helping others."

Reaching into his coat, the old man pulls out a gun and

puts it on the table.

"The song I played on my flute is as a salient reminder. Everything we do is in the trail of angels. Life, beauty, youth, these are fleeting things- precious at the moment but lost to time- we are all lost to time, eventually, all of us. All we can do is try and do the right thing, follow in the path of the angels, as best we can."

Ken paces around the living room with his shoulders sagging and his hands on his hips, listening to the deep voice of Grandpa Chang.

"When we see injustice in the world, we can only tolerate so much. That limit is what separates good men from great. Is it because of some teaching, or your heart and the goodness within it, that moves us to act? Few possess the special gifts; a good heart, a determined spirit- these rare traits are unteachable, often faked- and rarely demonstrated. When witnessed through actions of another, they glow in the darkness- beacons of hope. And Ken, you have a good heart- and an unbreakable spirit- together, we can heal the soul of this broken city."

Ken walks over to Grandpa Chang sitting at the kitchen table; his broad, grinning face, warm, friendly eyes, and dapper clothing stick out among the grime and squalor.

Standing there, Ken stares at the firearm.

His hand touches the cold steel weapon- a quick flash in his mind of all the things he loves. His girlfriend. His bike. His job. Plans for the future they have together.

A carefree, regular life.

Gone.

Picking up the piece, he feels the weight and solid design in his hand.

It's loaded.

"Fucking glad one of us still has a moral compass," Ken snarls, holding the shiny, heavy pistol up in the light. His sneering, unshaven and scarred face reflects in the gun's mirror-like finish.

It makes a solid click-clack as he racks the slide, using the gun's barrel to have a gander from behind the closed curtain; an unfriendly-looking crowd gathers in the street at dusk. Some of them smash the front window of the u-haul; others brandish knives and slash the tires. A few more pointing at the window he's peeking out of.

Ken glares over his shoulder at Grandpa Chang.

"When can I start?"

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-J