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THE END

1

A moth ate words. That seemed to me a curious happening, when I heard about that wonder, that the worm, a thief in the darkness, swallowed a certain man's song, a glory -fast speech and its strong foundation. The stealing guest was not at all the wiser for that, for those words which he swallowed.

Tom tracked the moth's progress with interest as the insect traced a diagonal path across the inside of his visor. It was interfering with his vision. He batted his eyelashes but the moth stubbornly remained affixed to the underside of the handsfree display. There was nothing left to say, he was going to have to kill the damn thing.

Tom ripped the visor from his face and flung it hard across the room, where presently it skidded to a dull stop. Now fully blind, he realized with a start that he could no longer see to kill the moth. His situation would appear to have degraded. In fact, it had both degraded and improved. On the one hand he no longer had to contend with the moth fucking up his display. On the other hand

now he couldn't see at all.

Tom pressed the button on his belt that called for his secretary.

Would no one help the widow's son?

Too much of his time lately was spent in this fashion. Grasping in confusion. Tom longed for the smell of battle. It had been... too long since he'd savored the rhinal delicacy firsthand. His weapons. 2018 already seemed like such a long time ago.

"That's because it was," Piro said, responding to Tom's unspoken lament.

Tom hung up on him.

2

Tom regarded his silver hair in the mirror. The coke had all turned black. Here was an opportunity for a joke, but Tom demurred. He was doing that a lot lately. Demurring. It was not like him to stand around and reflect. But, well, he was just so damn pretty.

Tom touched his fingers to his lips and then he touched the mirror. Planting a little kiss, like in the old days.

The pink triangle badge on his polo shirt illuminated. It was time for the conference call. He finished up at the sink and made his way over to the neutral backdrop. Joined the call.

It was more of the same. He hated to micro-manage but he couldn't help himself. His employees were just so stupid. Stupid enough to work for him, anyway, which he figured entitled them to his abuse.

Nearly thirty years had passed since he had taken over.

He found it impossible to respect any of them.

3

Of course the silver was fake. It had been years since he'd aged. If it were up to him he'd skip the pantomime, but his employees expected a certain bogus *gravitas* . These days, he dressed like a high school coach working weekends at a car dealership.

Grisham's Formula always worked. He smeared the questionable paste across his forehead and kneaded it into his hair. Instant stature. They'd think of him as a dad.

For the conference calls it probably didn't matter. Nobody he'd be speaking with much cared how he carried himself. But for the sake of consistency he kept himself on model. He found it easier to keep track of himself this way.

Now, where was he?

Thirty-six employees were being let go. It was time to make the announcement.

4

It went about as well as could be expected. Nobody wanted to be laid off. They turned on him instantly.

Dimension Man: "I just don't see why we're cutting headcount in a record profit year."

Sonic Boom: "We've been speculating about this all day, and boy are my arms tired."

Eva: "I can't believe I'm even still sitting here."

Super Sonic: [Glancing at Eva] "Let's go."

They exit.

Raven: "Ha ha. All this because the coke turned black?"

No, that wasn't it.

Nobody had gotten laid off. You're confusing it with that other time.

Tom slapped himself.

Snap out of it, idiot.

He tried again.

It went about as well as could be expected. Nobody said anything rash. He was heartened by their expression of absolute support.

Dimension Man: "I figure, they're not going to cut headcount in a record profit year."

Sonic Boom: "The suits are picking up the bill!"

Eva: "I was sure we were all fired."

Super Sonic: [Snoring]

Raven: "Ha ha. So what do we do with all the black coke?"

And so on, in this vein.

5

That moth had made his escape with auspicious timing.

It transpired that nobody's job was at risk that day. Nobody had even come in to work. Wrong memory. Tom played it back several times but the details kept changing. in aggregate, though, everybody kept their jobs.

He was a good boss.

He'd kept them all in the Chrysler Building Classic when the New Chrysler Building had gone up, supplanting the original building's cultural status. (Seventy-seven stories weren't what they used to be.) Some had grumbled, but he figured eventually the vintage geolocation would come back into style.

They were all still waiting.

Which kept the rents low.

6

Either the sound had changed or he had changed. Nothing sounded the same. He spun the dial up and down the spectrum. So far, 1987 was diminishing returns.

"Tom, you're senile." Piro laid a hand on his shoulder. The gesture had always annoyed him.

"You're too familiar," Tom said, and shrugged his hand away.

Contrary to expectation, plugging in the balanced cable had *reduced* apparent bass response. Subjectively, another hundred bucks down the drain. He didn't really understand what he was doing, but this didn't make any sense. He diddled with the connectors to no effect.

"I hate music," he said, to no one.

"It's not all bad," said the Chrysler Building Classic.

But what if it were?

Tom muted his visor.

It was time to dye his hair again.

Tom kneaded the Grisham's Formula into his scalp and waited for it to take effect. The inevitable sales boost.

Was this stuff affecting him?

Could anything affect him?

Being born had been traumatic enough. now he had to contend with efficiency stats, human resources, public relations, labor boards, local agreements, office politics, quarterly budgets, and the fact that the hair dye recalcitrantly refused to turn his hair completely silver. He looked like a young man wearing an old man costume.

And he wasn't going deaf. He thought. If anything, his superpowers had intensified as he aged. He was stronger. He was faster. And he was pretty sure his hearing had actually improved. Therefore, he could only conclude that *sound itself* had degraded.

His reverie was disrupted by yet another call from Piro.

Which was curious, since Piro had been dead for thirty years.

8

The concept of this stable inner core is ancient and tenacious, but it is an illusion.

They all died. As much as he could remember, he was aware there was much (or more) that he had forgotten. Whole people. Entire eras. The continuity was by now completely muddled. No editors.

Piro was gone, he was pretty sure, but his memory of the pirate persisted. Tom found that it helped keep things straight if he p[retended at conversations with his dead brother. He could write him in his sleep, for whatever that was worth.

Tom wrote some stories. His pen was dying. He didn't really sleep last night. His coworkers were useless idiots. No speakers had enough bass. Nobody was buying his silver hair, except for the people who would agree reflexively with anything he said. His legs hurt.

Shut up.

The last time Tom spoke with Piro he was interrupted. When the conversation finally turned back to Tom's subject, Piro asked him to repeat what he had been trying to say. Tom shouted, "I don't care!" and stomped out of the room.

That wasn't quite how Tom remembered it, but nevertheless that was how it happened.

Nowadays Tom was marooned in an isolation cell, solitary confinement, transporting himself to DET86 aboard a miniaturized RAGNAROK shuttle. He'd booked the flight himself, bereft beyond believe at his current status, re: dead relatives.

What did he imagine was waiting for him at the other end of this journey?

Unknown.

He pressed the button on his cell door and opened the tiny observation window. Snaked his arm through the hole, fishing for the exterior door handle.

Let himself out.

The craft was small. No galley. He rummaged under the seats for snacks. Found his stash.

It was going to be a long trip, and he had forgotten to pack entertainment. The shuttle refused to activate his visor, so he was effectively blind. But this wouldn't stop him from eating chips.

His mind wandered.

This time there was no reprieve. Tom closed his eyes and opened his eyes but he was still aboard the ship. He was still thinking about being on the ship.

He was pretty sure.

It was hard to tell with the dead visor. He'd lost the little wrench he used to remove it. Nothing to be done, then, until the ship docked at DET86.

Mars.

It was going to be a long trip. He'd purposely locked the ship into a slow transit. Voice commands disabled, without his visor there was no way to alter his course. It figured. It was very much like him to change his mind only after it was too late to do anything about it.

Space, at this speed, was pretty boring. Forward in time, one click after another. Not quite lateral movement, but it was not at all apparent from riding in the cabin that any advancement was being made towards the secret Martian base. He was

boring himself speechless. It was a dead–endsentence.

It couldn't have been this bad back when he was in charge.

11

"I'm an idiot," Tom said.

There was no argument from the crew, who were not aboard and thus had no way to respond to his remark.

Tom slumped in his chair. Then he opened another bag of chips. The pattern had become apparent even to him. He watched himself eat the chips and then he watched himself wipe his hands across the front of his shirt.

What was he doing?

Well, there was no one to ask.

His eyes drew to a slit beneath his ruined visor.

Waitamminute.

It was at this moment that Thomas suddenly recalled his childhood. The whole shape of it, a smearing quicksilver ellipsoid, entered and exited his mind like a tadpole shooting across a pond. Yes, like a bullet through his brain.

However, no ripple, no impression registered in Tom's consciousness.

Unaware of the momentary disturbance, he returned automatically to his chips.

Program continues.

12

Thomas hummed along with the slow whine and drummed his gloved fingers absentmindedly on the console. He accompanied the irregular rhythm for some time before he became consciously aware of the low sound in the cabin. it seemed he had a visitor.

Yooouuuu refuse to talk, but you think like mad

K.A.R.L. slowly whirred to life, seemingly annoyed at the effrontery of mere existence. He killed the canned soundtrack.

"What are you doing to yourself?" he finally said.

Thomas hadn't known a K.A.R.L. was installed. Just what he needed: simulated companionship. A perfunctory dose of what ailed him. Well, this could be just what the doctor ordered. A little bump, if you will.

"The coke's all turned black," K.A.R.L. complained. "No criticism of you, of course, but I can't work this way. What am I supposed to do?"

So, no.

"I don't care what you do, but you're going to do it off this ship," Thomas snapped. He reached for the assisted egress, but mistakenly pushed the wrong button, and the cabin was once again flattened by K.A.R.L.'s animatronic soundtrack.

And even your eyes are new

Thomas' visor steamed over. Fingers in his ears, he couldn't push any more buttons.

K.A.R.L.'s assembly clicked, popped, and whirred as he worked through his program. Thomas regarded the choreography as corny. Routine finally completed, K.A.R.L. returned to his original complaint.

"Just can't score any relief," he said.

Tom was sympathetic, if ultimately unable to help.

"We've all had it hard."

Both entities reclined and contemplated the silence of space.

13

The route between Earth and Mars was the same one Tom had traveled a million times during his childhood. He reviewed the highlights with K.A.R.L.

"Sometimes I just count," Thomas said. "It's a pretty long trip, so sometimes I get up to a pretty high number."

K.A.R.L. couldn't see the appeal.

"I guess I just don't have the imagination," he said.

"Hm," Thomas allowed. "Anyway, during the war, Dad wouldn't let me talk during the flight, so I had to come up with my own entertainment. Counting was novel."

Tom wasn't sure if K.A.R.L. was asleep or awake. He nudged the entity, who, presently, started to life.

"Uh huh, yes, do go on."

"You could say I taught myself."

"Uh huh, uh huh," K.A.R.L. said.

K.A.R.L. had gone into sleep mode. At last, the cabin was quiet. Thomas climbed back into his isolation cell and engaged the locks. With both observation windows open, he could reach through and touch both sides of the cabin. The cell fit him like a straitjacket. The scope of his imprisonment was limited only by the size of his craft.

He sighed.

Back and forth. how many times had he made this trip?

He whistled to himself.

Presently, K.A.R.L. resumed.

"I *hate* Indiana," he said.

Thomas ignored the *non sequitur*. Indiana, its existence, whether or not it sucked, had never significantly registered in his awareness. If not for Woody on CHEERS, he wouldn't even remember having heard of it.

"So what," Thomas said. "Pass the chips."

15

K.A.R.L. had broken down.

Reader, he was out of warranty. There was nothing Thomas could do but complain.

Which he proceeded to do.

"What a piece of junk."

he kicked the defective equipment. K.A.R.L. just sat there and took it. Thomas considered it endemic to his kind. Accept any amount of abuse from a recognized authority figure. He couldn't relate.

Pause for firmware update.

The shuttle resumed its journey.

Thomas counted to one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, and beyond. When he finally finished he had lost his place.

So, he started over.

One thought continued to surface: who was the voice counting in his head?

16

It was nothing.

The incrementing had stopped. Thomas didn't remember deciding to stop counting, but there were no more numbers piling up in his mind. The ticker tape had been cut off and tossed on the floor.

He decided to turn on the humidifier.

After a few minutes he realized that he had not been thinking. What had he been doing? What had he not been thinking about?

Humidity in the shuttle's cabin was approaching a level he could live with. He flipped the locks on his cell and climbed once again into the pilot's seat.

Someone had left him a note.

He couldn't read it.

There's space and then there's space. The space between Earth and Mars is not especially desolate. Especially since the late '80s. Thomas didn't normally get angry in traffic, but this was getting ridiculous.

No way to change course, or otherwise abort the journey.

He decided to read a book.

Let's see...

From the pile he pulled a biographical treatment of his father, prepared by an Agency historian. He'd asked for it at the last minute before setting off on his trip. Now he figured he'd have time to read the whole thing.

First of all, they had spelled his family name wrong.

"Is there any part of you that isn't just a reaction to some perceived slight?" K.A.R.L. spun back to life without warning.

"No," Thomas said, and switched him back off again.

He was right, though. Thomas couldn't really read the biography of his father. He'd invented the detail about them spelling his family name wrong. He had no way of knowing, in fact, that he had even picked up the right book. His visor was still down.

So, reading was no good. He was jittery. What did he expect to happen next?

The cabin was so damn hot he was leaving an outline on the pilot's seat.

He gave up. He settled back into his chair and began, once again, to count.

It would be years before he ran out of numbers.

19

He was being tailgated.

Out here, on this route, that was rare. But the sensors didn't (so far as he knew) lie. Another craft had come up just behind him, external effects flaring, suspiciously close.

It was hailing him.

He made the effort to respond.

"TAB2, responding to suspicious tailgater," he sighed into his sleeve mic.

"Tom. Glad I caught you out here," said an unfamiliar voice. "I wanted to be the first to tell you the news."

Grant Morrison was taking over as writer on NEW X-MEN. Tom ran a quick search through his long term file storage. No, this was unprecedented.

He had to figured out how to turn his shuttle around.

Back at his desk, Thomas took off his visor and rubbed his ruined eyes. Everything was in its place: the framed picture of his family, the lucite block containing a laser etching of a Lockheed Martin F-35A, the news clippings and magazines photos he had pinned to the wall. He sipped his coffee and pressed the button to call his secretary.

"Eva, could you come in here please."

Chrysler Building Classic systems were on the fritz. Several minutes elapsed, and Thomas wasn't sure if she had got the message. Just as he was about to try again, the speaker squawked to life.

"I'm not your secretary," she finally said. It was true. She was his wife. "What do you want?"

"Have the comics been delivered yet?" he asked.

She had no idea. Why was he asking her?

"Oh. Well, okay. Sorry to bother you."

He sunk back in his chair. Was he really going to have to walk all the way down to the comic shop by himself?

Enter Piro, the pirate.

"Why don't you just download it?" he said.

"Down*what?*" Thomas asked, forever perplexed.

Piro couldn't answer because he wasn't really there. In fact he'd been dead for years. But his comment had set Thomas on a path that would culminate in a relapse into once again spending a significant amount of time reading super-hero comic books.

What else were brothers for?

The comic was okay. Actually, he liked it a lot. It reminded him of the way he felt about the X-Men back when he was a kid.

He guessed. He'd keep buying it, if only for the art. (The artist would leave the book inside of six months.)

Now... There was a lot of paperwork to catch up on. His abortive trip to mars had eaten three months. Nobody had bothered to steer the (ahem) ship while he was away. It was absolutely typical.

Chrysler Building Classic utilities were behind schedule. He saw here they were threatening to turn off the lights. What had these people even been *doing* while he was gone.

He jabbed the button on his desk.

"Eva, what the actual fuck?"

"Fuck off!" She clicked off.

And now he still had to deal with the black coke. They'd tried altering the formula. They'd tried different packaging. Nothing seemed to work. Nobody could understand why the powder kept turning black.

"Keep your powder dry," Piro whispered, helpfully.

"Fuck off!" Thomas shouted, to no one.

But the pirate had a point: moisture could be the culprit.

Thomas walked down the hallway to discuss the possibility with his wife.

No, that wasn't it either. Eva hadn't been there when he figured it out. Chrysler Building Classic was still a few years away. He couldn't keep the timeline straight.

What was happening to his memory?

He kept rubbing his eyes. He was weary of the strain. At some point he realized his visor was missing. Gone. But he could *see*. How could this be?

And then he remembered. Years ago. The moon. Piro's last warning. what was it he'd said about remembering?

Sharp rapping at his cell and the little door slid open. It was his lunch. A small tray breached the tiny slot.

Thomas hated mashed potatoes, but the peas were okay.

That's when he noticed the note from his dad.

Kid, don't crack on me now. Your government has invested a considerable amount in your future. Don't throw it all away just because you got a little itchy about your role in the arrangement. Hell, you knew this was coming. Isn't it what you signed up for? In any case, don't embarrass yourself. And give me a break. I'm only going to warn you once.

A message from *where?*

It was enough to put him off his peas. But something wasn't right. Aside from the string of disconnected clichés, the handwriting was definitely not his father's. And his father was dead.

Wasn't he?

Thomas tapped his tray, and noticed that it came unlatched. He removed the now dangling cover to reveal his father's real intended payload.

A pristine Timex Sinclair 1000, with 16 KB RAM pack.

He connected the device to the panel on his cell door.

The lights went out.

His cell door opened.

Stan fled.