

Reparations

THE COMPLETE SERIES

(Omnibus Edition)

by Philip Wyeth

3 Sample Chapters from:
Reparations USA

1. THE PROGRAM

The studio audience responded to the producer's waving arms by cheering loudly. When the theme music began to fade out, they quieted down. A camera dolly crept toward the bright stage where two women sat opposite one another on red felt chairs.

“Welcome back to *Tina Talk!*”

The host was a lively woman of forty, whose sculpted brown mane flowed onto a bright yellow dress which hugged her curves and showed off much of her long legs, right down to the matching high heels.

“Our guest this segment is Kate Donohugh, and she works at the Historical Reparations Administration megabranch in Newark. Welcome, how are you?”

“Hi, Tina! Thank you so much for having me on.”

Kate, who was in her thirties, wore clothing more appropriate for someone speaking on behalf of the government, but was put together in a way that showed she had enough style sense to make any outfit work.

“Now,” Tina began, “it says here that you are an Assistant Regional Manager, but isn't it true that you really have to be a jack-of-all-trades considering the kind of work that goes on over at the HRA?”

“That's right. What we do tends to be cross-disciplinary, but at the same time you've got to have the right people skills to interact with the public.”

Tina looked down at a pad in her lap and spun a pen in her fingers.

“I'm quite fascinated by all the fields of expertise that came together to make this project even possible. I mean, five-hundred-plus years, that's a lot of people and events to account for!”

“Oh yes, the HRA is an incredible undertaking! In fact, a whole new college career track called Reparology was recently designed to give students a rigorous background in such areas as

history—of course, haha—but also accounting, social work, law enforcement, archaeology, genealogy, and—should I keep going?”

Kate gave a smile and the audience responded with a healthy round of applause.

“Hahahahaha, that's remarkable,” Tina laughed. “Now, the administration officially launched just two-and-a-half years ago ___”

“After nearly a decade of planning, mind you.”

“Of course. So you rolled it out across the country, opening field offices for customer service, document submission, appeals... You're a veritable DMV of sorts, hahahaha...”

“Oh yes, the HRA was unprecedented in its goal of righting all the wrongs that piled up ever since that first European ship landed on Tribal American shores. We understood the importance of engaging with the public on a practical level to work toward that goal, because it is an ongoing, perpetually adapting program. At the end of each month our supercomputer network—”

“MARVIN.”

“Haha, yes, which stands for Macro Aggregating Restitution Vector Input Navigator. He—it—MARVIN, conducts a rolling audit as new documents come to light, which ensures that those who owe historical debts pay their fair share.”

“Fascinating. Now, this can all seem a bit abstract so why don't you give our audience some hard numbers about the results you and the HRA are achieving.”

A graphic appeared and Kate began to walk viewers through the charts.

“In just a couple of years we have been able to assist one-hundred-sixty-million Historically Wronged Americans, who fall into our Beneficiary class, by recapturing seven trillion dollars from Legacy Violators, members of the Debtor class which consists of approximately two-hundred-seventy-five-million citizens.”

“Is that not amazing, folks?” Tina implored the audience to stand up and clap. “A dot-GOV agency really doing its job, all right!”

After the crowd settled down, Kate continued. “The program has been such a success that—while I can't divulge any specifics

—let me just say that we are in negotiations with certain well-known international bodies to roll out sister agencies in Europe and its former colonies. This won't happen overnight, however, because compared to the rest of the world, the United States is a fairly small and well-documented country. Can you imagine the amount of work it will take to just get organized in huge landmasses like Brazil, Africa, and India?"

"Kids watching at home," Tina cackled, "if you're looking for long stable careers where you get to see the world—learn a second language now and get on the HRA career track!"

"Haha, yes, exactly..."

"Tell me, having made so much progress already, can you predict when the program might achieve its goal here at home?"

"I'd say still quite a while. New documents from the distant past are being discovered every day. These have to be uploaded into the system, processed, and then authenticated. Debit Scores adjust in each monthly spreadsheet to reflect the latest data.

"But beyond redistribution," Kate continued, "our deeper goal is for Beneficiaries to achieve competence and self-sufficiency. And I can report that a small but respectable percentage of them have been using their newfound capital to restore crumbling neighborhoods and start new businesses. Shout out to the HRA jobs training program!"

"Absolutely! Now," Tina said as she furrowed her brow, "one unfortunate by-product of these historical documents taking such a prominent role in our everyday affairs, is the rise of an underground resistance campaign by so-called debt protesters, who make no bones about destroying inconvenient archives."

"Yes, unfortunately the descendants of KKK members who once rode through the night to lynch Afrigro-Americans, now go to great lengths to shirk their responsibilities in this modern-day version of book burning. It is a crime. And not only that, it is a violation of human rights."

The audience rumbled in a low cascade of boos.

"Now, Kate," Tina said. "Let me change gears here to talk about one of the more innovative ways the HRA is spreading its message. They call it Direct Descendant Match—DDM, for short—and it's actually modeled after game shows. Can you please explain?"

"Of course. As your audience knows, our supercomputers are

constantly reanalyzing the vast historical database and making new connections. On average, for every thirty billion Certified Historical Events that MARVIN processes, it matches up two living citizens where at least ten Domination Events—DEs—have taken place between their bloodlines in the past five hundred years.”

“Can more than one DE within a single lifetime count toward the total?”

“No, and that's what makes DDM so significant. We're talking about ten of Person A's ancestors involved in DEs with ten of Person B's ancestors. Usually the domination is always one-sided, but in rare cases it isn't and MARVIN takes these details into account.

“Anyway, the HRA believes that such heavily weighted bad karma should be redirected in a public forum to help cleanse our national palate. So these two people appear on the show, *DDM TV Live*, to explore the dark and violent path that led them to this dramatic moment.”

“Sounds fascinating! Then what happens?”

“Well, MARVIN never stops calculating, and just before he passes assessment, he processes documents from the contestants' own lifetimes.”

“Nooooo!”

“Hahaha, yes, it's amazing, I know!”

“And then what?”

“The two join hands, and as they face the screen their assessment is read.”

“And it just so happens that you brought us a clip from a recent episode of the show. Let's take a look!”

A video began, showing a skinny white man in a striped v-neck t-shirt holding hands with a short woman of Northern Tribal features. A deeply suntanned host said, “Jonathan Wibble. Your blood has affronted the blood of Agnes Yazzie sixteen times. No slivers from your bank account could hope to make up for these crimes. In the name of justice and fostering goodwill, so that we can finally stop this cycle of abuse, you are remanded to HRA Garden 2-F in Champaign, Illinois, where you will grow food with Mrs. Yazzie for a period of one year. And afterward, your reduced Debit Score will reflect this honorable service.”

The studio audience went wild with applause. Tina leaned

forward onto her crossed legs and brought a hand to her heart.

“My goodness,” she gushed. “Is that not proof that the HRA is about more than money, and also helping to move humanity forward?”

More applause. Kate mouthed “thank you” to the crowd.

Tina sat back and said, “Kate, it’s been a thrill having you here, but before I let you go, one last question. Have any love connections ever blossomed during a DDM assignment? Seems like all those months together, things could get *very* intimate!”

“Well,” Kate began with a sigh, “such liaisons are discouraged—because in fact a certain percentage of DDM conflicts do involve family feuds over romantic affairs—but I am happy to report that there are three married couples out there right now thanks to the program.”

“How about that, ladies and gentlemen? Kate Donohugh, thank you so much for coming on *Tina Talk*...”

After the show, Kate stepped into the brisk, overcast Manhattan streets with a jump in her step, feeling proud that she’d given the HRA a good showing. She was in no way a trained PR spokesperson, but between her genuine smile and high school theater background, the administration felt confident in sending her out for the occasional media puff piece.

Aside from a few smaller news programs and prerecorded web spots, however, most of her previous media placements had only been quotes in press releases and news stories. This *Tina* show was by far her biggest appearance, and perhaps normally out of her league, but the HRA was celebrating the latest trillion-dollar milestone by sending out anyone who wasn’t a total buffoon to tout the administration’s success.

What had started nearly ten years earlier as a disorganized rabble of idealistic left-wing activist groups had tapped into a growing sentiment that beyond merely throwing government money at problems—War on Poverty, War on Drugs—the similarly abstract War for Equity required not only an organized, systematic approach but also an adaptive component. Because when holding history’s conquerors to account over such a long timeline, a rigid set of rules would only hamstring the executive body and set the program up for abuse and failure.

This all coincided with the reliable political pendulum swing

back to the left after nearly a decade of populist-fueled conservative rule, so that when the reinvigorated Dramacrats won a majority in both houses of Congress, their new president quickly signed into law the establishment of the Historical Reparations Administration. And contrary to the Rebellicans' snide predictions of economic doom, it turned into a jobs bonanza because so many different professions were required for the whole plan to work.

Eileen Jeffries-Lao, the ceiling-shattering candidate who became both the first female and first Chinese-American president, was called a modern-day FDR as an army of document experts, historians, social workers, and accountants all moved in to the administration's seven hundred new field offices, which had employed another thirty-eight-thousand people during construction.

Kate Donohugh's life dovetailed with all of this beautifully. Whereas so many idealistic young people find that the pull of the world's demands slowly suffocates their desire to make a difference, Kate had been among this new breed of digitally empowered activists who had never tasted the good-times wealth that the Boomers and older Gen Xers enjoyed. Children of successive economic avalanches, these late-stage Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z visionaries used their tech savvy to circumvent the ossified policies of the status quo and mold all the disparate groups that were yelling in the streets into a legitimate political force effecting tectonic policy changes on a national level.

It was not all some hippie fantasy, however. For so many Caucmericans to willingly transform the amorphous concept of "white guilt" into an actionable platform required ruthless introspection so as not to patronize the very Minoricans they sought to help. To do so, they channeled life opportunities stemming from their privileged backgrounds toward a goal which was bigger and more noble than merely helping a homeless person or even one's local community—because the HRA, dollar by dollar, was making a rigorous public accounting of half a millennium of oppression and exploitation, both by clearing the balance sheet for the living as well as setting a tone for how business would be done moving forward. In short, equitably.

Whenever Kate felt the weight of colonialism bearing down on her shoulders, or in moments of prideful weakness, she recited a prayer from the Book of Reparations, the inspirational tome compiled during the years that this political crusade unfolded. “Although I was born into this white vessel,” she would whisper, “we all bleed red. No matter how privileged I find my station in life, I extend a hand down so that one day we may all stand side by side.”

These words helped Kate keep perspective whenever she felt a pang of guilt about her comfortable life: nice apartment in gentrified Brooklyn, her white husband Chris, and their two Corgis. At least they’d decided not to have kids—that was easy penance for two middle-class Caucs in their early thirties to pay.

Back to reality, Kate mused as she breezed past the retinal scanner at an employee entrance of her HRA field office across the water in Newark. She took an elevator up to the second floor and headed to her desk.

“Great job today,” a voice said from below a nearby cubicle wall.

Kate shifted in mid-stride to enter the workspace and received a warm smile from TJ, a plump bearded coworker whom she also considered a friend. He was a reparatician highly skilled in document analysis, particularly in detecting pixel flaws deep within flattened forgeries. This work both reduced MARVIN’s workload and kept the payments flowing.

“Everyone’s got to pitch in,” she said and reached to meet his high-five.

“You’re telling me,” TJ sighed. “I’ve been asked to do three radio segments and you know I *never* do these promo things—but at least one’s NPR, my fave!”

“Well, it’s an election year, and we’ve got a lot to celebrate, right?”

“On the surface, absolutely. But between you and me, I think the Old Debt Boy Network has finally started to shake off their hangover and get a bit more organized.”

“Whaaaaat?” Kate leaned in so they could speak discreetly—they were surrounded by wall-mounted cameras that could enable someone reviewing the footage to read their lips, as well as dozens of employee tablets that were equipped to record audio.

TJ lowered his voice and said, “You know that I ran away from the South as fast as my hiney could take me, but I still check in with my folks every so often (Lord knows they're getting up there in age). So anyway, the last time I spoke to my dad... I don't know... Just something about the tone of his voice, it sounded less down in the dumps. And some of the things he said made it seem like he'd even made his peace with me—for being gay *and* working for an organization that he once said was stealing my inheritance.

“So I asked him if he was sick and he clucked, 'No! Doc says I'm fine,' so I said, 'Well, what *is* it, Dad? Don't leave me in the dark.' And he just blew it off, 'No, no. Everything's fine. Seems like this country's headed back on the right track again, that's all.' And I was like, 'Okay, I guess...?' ”

Kate made a face. “Weird.”

“I know, right? So I jumped online and started poking around for negative chatter about the HRA—at home on a private browser via proxy server, of course; God forbid I did that here—and I've got to tell you, not only are the hate sites saying the usual nasty things, but vandalism on scanners and field offices is up twenty percent in the last six months alone.”

“Really? I haven't heard anything about that.”

“Wouldn't surprise me if they're trying to keep it all hush-hush. And you know, some people are just up and leaving. They'd rather live off the grid than pay—”

“Ah, here's our big morning show star!” an approaching voice beamed from outside the cubicle.

It was Jan, a regional manager and Kate's direct supervisor—an eighteenth-generation Afrigo-American who donated her benefits to fund summer camping trips for inner city kids who otherwise might never see the countryside.

Jan patted Kate on the back, smiled at TJ, then said, “But as great as you were out there, the trenches beckon. Got the usual drama over in disbursements: lady brought in her kids, wants more money, you know the drill. Asked for a supervisor but honestly, DC scheduled a last-minute conference call that I've got to sit in on. You're senior enough, Ms. *Tina Talk*, think you can handle that for me?”

“But of course,” Kate said with a nod and twirl of her hand, smiling at TJ as she drifted away.

No time for lunch today, she thought, her stomach grumbling at each turn down the winding hallway. An elevator ride took her down to the ground floor, then she went out one security door, scanned her key card at the reception entrance, and walked past a dozen cubicles before finally turning right into a small room with a table and four chairs.

Inside, a young black woman was tending to a baby stroller while a boy explored the room.

“Hello there! I'm Kate Donohugh, I hear you asked for a supervisor?”

“Yes, thank you. I'm Myra Jenkins.”

“Why don't you take a seat and let's see if I can help you.”

As they sat down on opposite sides of the table, Myra pulled a folder out of her bag and began spreading papers over nearly the entire surface.

“Okay, this is the family tree that I got from y'all.” She held up a printout which bore the HRA seal, then picked up a second sheet with her other hand. “Says right here I'm only entitled to six hundred dollars each month for past crimes against my people. But that just ain't enough and we used to get more. I got two little ones. Can you do anything to help us?”

While Ms. Jenkins was saying all this, Kate had removed her laptop from her work bag and opened the lid. As she booted up and logged into the HRA system, she said, “Let me just access your file—”

“The man I talked to at the counter already did that.”

“Yes, well, I'd like to get up to speed before answering any of your questions.”

As Kate cycled between tabs on the screen—which displayed details about Ms. Jenkins such as her age and address, ancestry, and finances—she felt something hit her foot. She looked down to see a six-year-old boy with a race car in his hand smiling from beneath the table.

“Oh, hello there, young man!”

“Tyrell,” Myra sighed, “is that you under there? Please get up and let this woman do her job.”

The boy crawled out and she motioned for him to sit next to her.

Kate turned her attention back to the file, which included certain tabs only visible to higher ranking employees—the first

case worker did not have access to this information. She tapped a nail on the screen and looked up.

“Okay, I think I see the problem. Earlier this year the MARVIN mainframe accepted two new documents certifying that in 1822, an ancestor on your mother's side purchased two slaves.”

“But what's that got to do with me?”

“While black-on-black ownership was uncommon, and oftentimes the result of freed slaves buying their own relatives—*although... actually...* that purchaser was a white farmer named Colin Evers. So it looks like you are, in fact, one-two-hundred-and-fifty-sixth Caucmerican!”

“Wow. Um... So nothing about *my* life has changed—except I had a baby last year—but you found some old piece of paper and now I get less?”

“You've done quite well under the program so far.”

Myra looked down into her hands. “I know, but it's hard out there, even with your money.”

“It's not *our* money—it's yours!”

“I'm just sayin', couple months back, the landlord started charging a new fee on top of the rent. Called it 'lurf' or something.”

“Yes,” Kate sighed, “that's the Lower Income Retainer Fee, unfortunately. Property owners have lobbyists too, and they were able to convince the legislature to collect that from many Beneficiaries who rent.”

“I see.”

“Oh, there's one other thing I should bring to your attention. Informally, of course.”

“And what's that?”

Kate rotated her laptop and a small video player showed a black teenager spraying graffiti.

“That's your cousin Alex outside a Shell gas station two weeks ago.”

“Why are you showing me this?”

“Because,” Kate began, “the Joint Telecom & Penal Bureaus want to implement a new policy where all petty crimes caught on camera with definitive ID—and here we have scans of both Alex's face and eyes—they would bypass our overcrowded court system, and instead fines would be imposed automatically.”

“Which means what, exactly?”

“Reduced payments, for one. And the possibility of being placed under Microscopic Protocol.”

“What's that, like probation?”

“Precisely,” Kate said with as friendly a smile as she could muster. “But the HRA has *begged* these bureaus not to move forward because it will disproportionately affect the people we're trying to help here. But I've heard that they're compiling a large body of evidence they want to present before Congress to try and force it through.”

“When's all that gonna happen?”

“If we're lucky we'll hold them off until the beginning of next year. But maybe you can give Alex a little heads-up to be more careful out there.”

“So you got these cameras everywhere and you're just watching everything people do?”

Kate pointed to a camera mounted in a protective box up in the corner of the room and winked.

“This ain't right,” Myra said as she stood up and gathered her papers in a mash. “I thought the whole point of these agencies was to *help* people. C'mon, Tee, let's get out of here...”

She wheeled the stroller out through the door and Tyrell followed.

Kate eased her laptop shut, walked to the door and quietly closed it, then wedged herself into the corner directly under the camera, trying to be in as little of the frame as possible. She closed her eyes and rubbed circles around her temples while taking slow even breaths through her mouth, then began reciting the Mantra of Atonement. “Although I was born into this white vessel...”

Stressful encounters like these were the biggest cause of burnout on any HRA staff. A platoon of therapists had been trained to specifically address this pressure point, and with soothing words they attempted to reinforce the core idea that the HRA sought an incredibly lofty goal in trying to repair over five hundred years of ugly history, but human nature doesn't simply change overnight. Therefore employees were encouraged to view their role as holy humans leading pilgrims across dangerous and unfamiliar territory into the Promised Land.

A few minutes into the calming routine, Kate heard her work

phone ping from inside her bag. It was a text from Jan's assistant which said: "Boss still on conference call. Asked if you'd head over to Debts and help out. Room 114."

Kate wrote back, "Sure thing. Challenges on both sides of the spreadsheet today, what can you do?"

In addition to secure employee-only areas, the public sections of all HRA field offices had separate wings to serve Beneficiaries and Debtors. Smart scanners granted appropriate entry to each side, and armed guards posted throughout the facility helped prevent or break up any conflicts between the two groups.

For Kate to reach the Debtor wing, she had to walk through an exit-only door, wind her way down several bright corridors, then scan herself through an interior employee entrance. This side of the facility had a bit more security on hand, and Kate always felt a slight chill in the air here. Everyone understood that this was not the happiest of places, because even though the dual-purpose field offices had been set up to encourage dialogue with the public, Debtors rarely brought in authentic documents that reduced their obligations or at least warranted an extension.

Not that in-person pleas were the only or most effective means of reducing one's debt load. Legal and accounting firms had virtually tap danced with glee at the immaculate conception of a whole new revenue stream when the HRA was created. Perhaps the most opportunistic company of all was the tax firm H&R Block, which poetically rebranded itself as working to "block" historical reparations from being collected.

Between these scoundrels trying to put the brakes on one of mankind's most noble projects and several legal cases working their way up the court system hierarchy, HRA employees felt enough trepidation below the surface to keep motivated and working on an aggressive timeline. There were so many past examples of ambitious programs that had been derailed by judges or bureaucratic incompetence, that there was simply no room for hubris or believing that the righteousness of one's cause guaranteed the inevitability of its success.

For each day that passed without an injunction granted by some bench that was stacked with Rebellicans during the past two presidential terms, it meant that millions of deserving Americans had been served another small taste of justice.

With these conflicting sensations of apprehension and purpose, Kate smoothed her blouse then stepped resolutely in her pump shoes across the threshold into a room that very much resembled the one she had just left in the opposite wing of the field office. Inside sat a Caumerican in his sixties with stringy, stark white hair and heavy eyelids over blue-gray eyes. She extended her hand.

“Kate Donohugh, how do you do?”

“Miss, my name is James. I got a bum knee, my truck needs new tires, and my job at the hardware store—which I suspect just keeps me on because I been there for so long—they cut my hours back to just twelve a week.”

“I'm sorry to hear all that.”

“So how do you expect me to pay?” he asked, letting the last word slowly trail off.

“Well, if you could just tell me your last name,” she said while her hands automatically reached for her laptop, “I'll review your account and see what I can do.”

The man leaned away and slung an arm over the back of his chair. “Here we go again.”

“Full name, please?”

“It's James William Haggerston. I already went through all this. The lady outside scanned my eye with her tablet and everything.”

“I know, I know, just give me a second. Yes, there you are. Hmm. It says here you only owe a hundred and thirty dollars per month, that's not so high—especially considering that your great-great-great-uncle killed three Choctaw Indians.”

“But my actual father managed a furniture factory that hired dozens of Minoricans, as you call them, over the twenty-odd years that he was in charge there. Surely that's got to offset something a distant relative did in the 1850s.”

“Thirties, actually. The 1830s.”

Silence.

“And yes,” Kate continued, “your father's biographical data points have all been uploaded and factored in to your cumulative Debit Score. But there's so much more: at least two ancestors worked on slave ships—granted, they only delivered human cargo to the West Indies, and I don't think the HRA has an extraction treaty there yet—but moving on, I also see theft of

indigenous land, and even a case of arson against an Afrigo-American man's tractor.”

“My god, are you talking about my cousin Luke? He and Albertson were friends! They used to get drunk together all the time. It was his damn wife that pressed the charges—no one really knows what actually happened!”

“The court documents in my system are pretty unambiguous.”

“He said, she said, I don't know what to tell you. He had to pay them damages at the time, right?”

“The point, Mr. Haggerston, is that you felt compelled to come down here to plead your case, and so far you haven't given me much of a reason to even offer you a grace period.”

He pulled out a kerchief and wiped his forehead, then said calmly, “I am tired from working my fingers to the bone just trying to survive. First they closed the factories and moved them overseas. Then they let illegal labor come in and undercut my wage. I tried to adapt by learning computers but they change faster than I can keep up. And hell, Burger Citizen started using kiosks to take your order so I can't even work there now.

“It's enough to break any man down, I don't care *what color* he is or who his second cousin, ten times removed, fought a duel with. But *you* care. Hard as it is to live in the here and now, I got the HRA with its teeth latched into my shoulder like a damned zombie on the TV. So what I'm asking for is some sort of mercy or understanding, because I cannot win by fighting this administration all by myself.”

After a frozen moment, Kate turned back to her computer and clicked around. Her eyes narrowed and when she had locked onto what she was looking for, she tapped a nail onto the screen.

“Mr. Haggerston, I've got two options for you. First, I see your son Morgan earns a nice salary remodeling homes for environmental compliance, and due to several impressive maternal deductions—that being on your wife's ancestral timeline—he barely owes more than you do each month. I could request to have, say, two-thirds of your debt rotated onto his bill if you think that might be agreeable to him?”

“What's my other option?”

“That four acres of undeveloped land you own in Pennsylvania, I could put a temporary lien on it. Secured by the HRA's long-term trust, to be released when you get back on your

feet.”

“That’s family land. Before permits and paperwork turned construction into a bureaucratic decathlon, that property was very much developed. A lot of love and memories floating above the wild grass out there.”

He rose to leave and trudged to the door, looking back as he said, “No, I’ll find a way to handle this business myself. Because I will *not* place another old man’s burden on my son’s shoulders. You have already done quite enough of that.”

It was only 2 pm but Kate felt like she had worked a twelve-hour shift. Another common symptom of working at the HRA, and internal policy made generous allowances for leaving the office early. CalmTime was seen as more than a fair trade-off if it aided in employee retention, plus there was a long list of on-call temps, fully trained and ready to fill in during these minor emergencies.

Kate saw her hands moving across the laptop keyboard. The employee app opened, the mouse scrolled onto and clicked the TapOut icon, and a green capital *R* spun as the system sent pulses to alert some central computer that she was done for the day. She felt herself numbly moving down the hallway toward the exit, then she was on the HRA shuttle bus to the subway, somehow found herself on the right train home, and nearly crawled through the front door of her apartment.

No one was home. Chris was across town helping a client set up a new server and the dogs were at day care—was she supposed to pick them up? She’d figure that out later.

Kate moved absently into the bathroom and started to fill the tub. She closed the door and slowly peeled off her work clothes. She saw herself nude in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the door and began to sob. When her breath caught, she leaned her head against a forearm high on the door and closed her eyes, bringing the other arm across her chest in a sort of hug. The wave of self-pity that had washed over her subsided just as quickly and was replaced by a sudden hyper-awareness.

Her left hand, which was draped across her right breast, had touched on something. She looked down but saw nothing there. She felt again—there, under the surface, something dense about the size of a pebble. Unmistakable. Terrifying. Too much to deal with on top of everything else. She climbed into the bath, draped

a washcloth over her face, and went to sleep.

“Hon?” a voiced called from down the hall. “Are you home?”

The sound of dogs barking, clawing outside the bathroom door. Kate pulled the washcloth from her eyes and squinted around the room. A knock at the door.

“Hellooooo?” Chris called out playfully. “Kay, are you in there?”

Mechanically, Kate climbed out of the water and put on her bathrobe. She opened the door and before Chris could say a word, she wrapped him in a wet embrace and wept.

2. THE WORKAROUND

The scanner spit out a piece of paper onto the right side collection tray. A black boy about ten years old held it up under the streetlight and inspected the top right corner. In small red letters was the printed message: “Rejected. Level 9 forgery. Please do not resubmit this document. This scanner is under surveillance. Thank you.”

The boy crumpled up the paper and tossed it away, then turned to his friends and said, “Here, give me another one.”

A second boy reached into his backpack, poked around, then pulled out a more weathered looking sheet. “Try this,” he said. “I spent an hour putting in the wrinkles, then I dripped some soda around the edges.”

The first boy took it carefully and held it up to the receiving port on the scanner's left side. The machine sucked it in and the boys waited anxiously as it made little fidgeting noises. When it gave a chirp, the second boy said, “That's good, right?”

“It didn't like the first two, spat 'em right out. It must be thinking on this one.”

“Good. I put that the governor's granddaddy stole a car from us. So maybe we can get us a sweet ride.”

The three other younger boys tagging along with them liked this idea, and they all crowded close to the scanner as it finished analyzing the homemade document. When the paper eased out onto the cast-iron collection tray—these machines were built

tough—they nearly destroyed it fighting each other to be the one who read the verdict.

The first older boy shoutsed them down and took the sheet. “Durn,” he said. “Still no good.” He mashed the paper and tossed it into a pile of similar trash that surrounded the scanner. The second boy dove onto the ground and retrieved his creation, unbunching it and studying the rejection message.

“Only a level 8 fake!” he said happily. “Means I’m getting better at this. One day I’m gonna fool it and y’all be asking me for money.”

But the other boys were already walking away so he stuffed the paper back into his bag and ran after them. The scanner remained stoic and inscrutable in their wake, even a few minutes later when someone ran up and spray-painted “out of order” onto its dark chrome body.

A boy in his mid-teens approached the group and called out, “Hey Tyrell, yo mama wants you back.”

One of the younger boys reluctantly peeled off and said, “Hi, Clyde. Whatchu been doin’?”

“Gettin’ everything ready for the Pigeon Man. He says I keep bringing him these drones, he’ll let me use a few for my video.”

The younger boy made a silly dance move. “DJ Clydoscope, what-what!”

“Don’t you make fun now! I got skills. And eyes. I see what’s goin’ on up in here. Come on.”

Clyde softly grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and they walked a few blocks to a rundown apartment building, then climbed up to the third floor. He pushed open the front door which was cracked, and they walked inside.

“I went in there the other day like you wanted,” Myra said, facing a well-built man in white tank undershirt and matching skull cap. “But they wouldn’t raise it. Maybe next month we get more.”

“Man, but I need to get some of that HRA cheese,” he said.

“Hold on.” She walked over to the younger boy. “Tyrell, why you ain’t answer your phone? Can’t be out at night like this, you too young.”

Clyde stepped in. “He aight. I look out for you. Right, boy?”

“Yeah,” Tyrell said softly. He picked up an open bag of chips from the dining room table. “You da man, Uncle Clyde.”

Myra turned back to the man and said, “Wish you'd come over here for more than just money, Octavius. Your baby sleepin' in the other room, if you even care.”

“At least I'm here,” he snorted. “I ain't seen Tyrell daddy face in years.”

“Whateva.”

“Yeah, whateva's right. Anyway, I gotta head out, handle some business. Yo, Clyde! You wanna do a little job tonight?”

“Aight,” Clyde said.

“Well, come on then. Show these hoes how we do.”

Myra put a hand on Clyde's shoulder. “You be careful. You know what I told you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don't get no girl pregnant. Don't get in trouble.”

“You just got no idea. Tell Mama I said hi when you get home.”

Clyde and Octavius put on their coats and walked outside. Octavius pulled out his phone and typed into it while they walked to his car. It was a speckled crimson early '10s Buick outfitted with custom throwback fins and gold-plated rims imprinted with dollar signs. As they entered traffic, he turned on the stereo and loud music started blasting. Clyde asked who was singing.

“DJ Above Ground,” Octavius said. “The king of Bayou Rage-Hop.”

“Tight.”

“Hell yeah. How you doin' with the music? Got any new beats?”

Clyde looked out the window into the street. “Nah. Working on some ideas though.”

“You keep at it. 'Cause you never know. But until then, let's go make some real money now!”

They parked on a side street then walked into a liquor store. Octavius waved to the Korean clerk and said, “Sup, Mr. Joon?” as they passed through to the back. He pushed open a door into the stockroom and they walked past stacks of cardboard boxes all the way to the rear exit, which opened onto an alley. Octavius checked to make sure that the slide-lock was secure.

He set up two folding chairs near the door and said, “You thirsty? Go grab us some Lectrolades.”

Clyde walked back into the store and browsed in front of the

beverage fridges. He picked out two neon plastic bottles and walked toward the counter, but the clerk waved a hand, saying, "It's okay, it's okay," so he turned back, grabbing a bag of pretzels as he passed into the stockroom.

About fifteen minutes later, while he and Octavius were snacking, a brisk three knocks came at the exit door. Octavius looked through the peephole and then opened the door. A lanky young black man walked in carrying a case of beer.

"You just set that on the floor," Octavius said. "You got the receipt?"

The other man put the case down and handed Octavius a sliver of curled white paper.

"You got your card?"

The man held up a credit card. Octavius glanced between it and the receipt a few times, then grabbed a pen from his ear and made a mark on the receipt. "Aight, we cool." He unzipped a pouch inside his jacket and pulled out a small plastic baggie, handing it and the receipt to the customer.

"My man! Say, you mind if I—?" He pointed at the case of beers.

"All good," Octavius said. "Clyde, get this man a chaser."

Clyde opened the box and pulled out a tall-boy of Noble Gent malt liquor, then handed it over. He heard a crisp crack outside the door just before it closed behind the customer.

"And that's how we do," Octavius said. "Full-service station."

Over the next few hours they did business with twenty other customers. Beer cases stacked up high next to the chairs. A little after 1 am, the store clerk came to the back and had a discussion with Octavius that Clyde had trouble following. He saw them count all the cases of beer, then the clerk made some notes on a small pad before pulling a zip-wallet from his back pocket. He removed several white credit cards and handed them to Octavius.

"Yo, Clyde. Grab a dolly and help this man."

The Korean brought over two dollies from a side wall, and together he and Clyde loaded up all the cases of beer and rolled them back into the front of the store, which was now mostly dark. As they put the beer back into the fridges, the clerk set aside the cases which had been opened and replaced the missing bottles and cans with matching loose beers that he pulled from the refrigerator shelves. He resealed each box with a small glue

gun before sliding it across the floor to Clyde.

Octavius came in from the back and said, “Aight, Mr. Joon. See you tomorrow night.”

“Okay, see you!”

On the drive back to the neighborhood, Octavius said, “Nice work tonight.”

“Cool. I had a good time.”

Octavius reached into his pocket and handed Clyde one of the credit cards. “Here ya go. HRA card, all loaded up!”

Clyde took the card and put it into his wallet.

A few minutes later Octavius said, “Drop you at your mom's?”

“Yeah.”

“You got my number?”

“Think so.”

“Okay. Maybe we do this again.”

“Yeah.”

When he got out of the car, Clyde turned back and said, “You going back over to my sister's?”

“Nah. Got somewhere to be.”

“Oh, okay. Later.”

Clyde watched as Octavius gunned the souped-up Buick around the corner and out of sight. Then he heard the buzz of a mini-drone zipping past, tracking it with his eyes by the green light casting downward as it maneuvered through the streets.

These cylindrical HRA drones were about the size of the average city bird, and equipped to record audio and video as well as summon emergency personnel. They bore a capital *R* underneath, which sent an assuring green glow down onto the residents they served in dangerous neighborhoods densely populated with Beneficiaries.

Clyde thought back to when the HRA had first been signed into law. People danced in the streets in celebration. White HRA reps ran around the neighborhood with questionnaires asking how they could help the residents improve their lives.

Over time these workers slowly disappeared, and in proportion the drones began to appear zipping through the streets. While Clyde could remember in his early childhood seeing cameras mounted high above some of the larger intersections, now you couldn't even walk down an alley without

wondering if one of these “birds” wasn't secretly watching from a charging station—which were now installed more discreetly than at the beginning, because kids being kids, they had made a game out of smashing this gear.

A couple of the more enterprising older guys approached the boys and suggested that rather than destroy the drones and chargers, they could earn HRA cards loaded with twenty dollars for every intact item they brought over.

So Clyde spent the afternoons of his adolescent years after school with like-minded mercenaries trying to crack the code on how to bring down the HRA mini-drones without causing damage. It had been relatively easy—and thrilling fun—to destroy them in combat, but to knock them out of the air without breaking their fragile components was a new challenge.

First they had to figure out how to slow them down, preferably getting them to hover in place. They understood that these drones, being an auxiliary of the HRA's mission to improve Beneficiaries' lives, were programmed to respond to sensory data that indicated possible crime, danger, or injury. So Clyde and his friends began simulating robberies and bicycle accidents to get their attention. But once they appeared, the drones never dropped below twenty feet—and simply throwing objects at them wasn't any good now. The boys started to get frustrated knowing that money was sitting on the table if they could just think of a solution.

One day when they were killing time, they saw a real emergency up on someone's balcony. An old woman was screaming for help because her husband was having a heart attack. The boys watched as a mini-drone appeared at her eye level, then hovered for fifteen minutes until the paramedics arrived to take her husband away.

Clyde and his friends, in a moment of glorious abstract clarity, realized that if you targeted a drone from *above* it wouldn't see you coming—then all you had to do was control the way it came down. They started staging their own health panics—best to avoid fake assaults in case the cops actually showed up—on balconies and other places where you could get up onto the roof, and while the drone observed the situation, one of the boys standing above would cast a large blanket over top of it. Then the clump fell down softly onto a large piece of foam that

another boy had rolled out to pad the landing. And just like that, they were in business.

You had to be careful handling the drones once captured—their tiny hyperblades could take your fingertip right off if you weren't careful—and some of the newer models had speakers that barked a warning message too. To secure their fresh capture, one boy slowly pulled the blanket back while another—wearing long sleeves, padded gloves, and a clear face shield—placed it into a homemade box equipped with a stolen charging station fed by battery power. Once in its “nest,” the drone stopped talking and the blades shut off.

They had the free night classes to thank for this last bit of technical prowess. The HRA, for all its flaws, was at least serious about its “hand up” philosophy, and had established a new vocational program in town which offered complimentary courses to anyone who was interested in learning blue collar skills, such as engine repair, AC installation, and the fine details of working with electronics.

Among the group of student poachers, Clyde's friend Damon had a real aptitude for signal flow and soldering wires, and it was he who designed these mobile charging stations—“bird cages”—which enabled them to discreetly deliver captured drones to their customers.

The most prolific among them was a guy in his thirties they called the Pigeon Man, because he kept his fleet up on the roof of his apartment building. A military veteran who had spent more of his time in the service tinkering rather than fighting, he now reprogrammed the HRA drones to serve the needs of a poor neighborhood's underground economy. Pickup and delivery of drugs, running the numbers, and his own brand of surveillance which he called “private security.”

So Clyde only got a few hours of sleep after Octavius dropped him off, because he and Damon were supposed to meet the Pigeon Man and deliver two drones they'd recently captured. They took an early morning bus a few miles down to his building—the innocuously painted plywood boxes resting on their laps—and rode the elevator up to the penthouse before walking up the last flight of stairs to the roof.

The Pigeon Man, whose real name was Nolan, sat in his work shack with sparks flying all around as he modified something.

When Clyde and Damon knocked and walked in, he lifted his welding mask and said, “Poachmaster C, Poachmaster D! Good morning.”

They set the boxes down and exchanged semi-elaborate handshakes with Nolan, who couldn't contain his excitement about the new delivery and immediately opened the boxes.

“Very nice!” he said. “Newer model. Mm-hmm. Pristine. Excellent work, guys.”

He opened a drawer and pulled out two HRA debit cards, slapping one into each of their hands.

“Come on,” Nolan said, “let me show you something.”

They walked out onto the roof, where the rising sun was shining majestically over the whole city. Nolan went to a long row of tall planter boxes and pushed one aside with his hand, sliding it over like a keyboard shelf. Hidden underneath was part of his fleet, charging silently in the dark until needed. He reached inside, grabbed a wireless controller, and said, “Watch this.”

With a flick of a switch, four mini-drones slowly rose, then darted away in formation before swooping back in a swirling dance of synchronized beauty.

“You see,” Nolan said over the whir of the blades, “I control all four with the same device, but each one can improv freely inside the radius that I set.”

Clyde and Damon nodded their heads.

“Here, Damon. Come give it a try.”

Damon took the controller and did as Nolan instructed. The birds rose and dove around them in a graceful mechanical ballet.

“You boys are getting too old to be playing in the streets, stealing these birds. Damon, you've got potential with what that trade school taught you. Probably time you started working for me for real. Serious responsibility, serious money.”

While Nolan talked and Damon flew the squadron, Clyde looked out over the city that was now bathed in a soft orange light, the drones passing through his field of vision every few seconds. All this gritty work and talk about big money didn't really interest him. He had poetry inside. Still, every time he tried to open his mouth and say something, he felt like he couldn't breathe. But up here—up here on the roof was where he saw what could be. The clear sky, the endless horizon, a straight

shot forward into the unknown—and nothing like the human insects fighting each other in the dingy streets below.

He wanted to say all this and more with his music. Tell the world that his neighborhood was still waist deep in shit. That the HRA was maybe a nice idea but all the Beneficiaries—himself included—had found every way to use, abuse, and milk the program, but not in any way that brought about long-term improvement. They had workarounds for the cashless system and ended up spending their stipends on the usual waste. And so once again it was only the hustlers, liquor stores, and rim shops that got ahead.

He had come into awareness of the world alongside the birth of the HRA, watching as its bubbly workers left the hood each night back to the safety of their own world. And he came of age under the shadow of the administration's high hopes succumbing to the greed and self-destructiveness that only seemed to have increased with all this newfound money floating around.

If he could make something happen with the music, it wouldn't be just so he could get rich and run away. While a lot of his favorite rappers and singers talked about making it big—living the dream life and traveling around—Clyde didn't want to leave his family or his neighbors behind in misery while he posed for pictures wearing diamonds. He wanted to see his hometown become the safe, clean, less tense place that the HRA had probably set out to make it.

But who was he? Just another kid with no dad around, committing petty crimes that no one pursued. Because the HRA couldn't very well go after the “oppressed people” it was created to help.

He'd have to do something though. Maybe finish that new song which had slowly taken shape over the past few months and was about ready now. Try to capture a snapshot of the suffering that he saw in his world each day, and which the HRA's little scouts seemed to miss as they flew by.

“Guess they got the wrong kind of sensors,” he said to himself, watching as Nolan's drones soared and tumbled through the air, their green bulbs removed long ago.

3. CRIMINALS

Shortly after sunset, the family gathered around a campfire that two of the men had built up while the other members unloaded the vehicles. In addition to tents, hiker's packs, and coolers, they also removed a dozen bankers boxes which they placed near the fire pit.

Two school-aged children worked together to carry an old footlocker over to the fire. One of the men patted them on the head, then placed his foot on top of the locker and looked into the flames.

A short while later, after the tents had been assembled and some food cooked over the fire, everyone sat around the pit and began to hum softly. One of the women removed a box lid, tapped it with her fingers affectionately, then began dropping its contents into the fire.

Papers, folders, photos all went in and the flames devoured this easy fuel. When the box was empty, the woman simulated wiping a tear from her eye and bowed toward the fire. A man opened the next box, motioned for a boy to join him, then handed him a folder and nodded. The boy opened the folder and let the contents slide out to be consumed.

The humming grew more soulful as each empty box was tossed away into the darkness. When all that remained was the footlocker, a tall man wearing a plaid shirt tucked into dark jeans rose and stood beside it.

“For three hundred years our family has called this land home. From the cold shores of Massachusetts to the fertile soil of the Plains, out to the pitiless heat of the Southwestern deserts, and back again to these beautiful, tree-capped Pennsylvania hills. The adventurers, the farmers, the craftsmen, and so many more. And like any other American lineage, they rode the ups and downs of life in their time, both decent and flawed, with only God to answer to for their reckoning.

“We kept these papers and relics to remember our heritage,

the good and the bad. Whoever could have imagined that programs like the Ancestry Project would come back to bite us all so hard?

“Well, we've done what we had to do to give our children a chance to live without a millstone around their neck. The Haggerstons are survivors, so let's keep our emotions in check and get this last bit over with.”

He opened the locker and removed a thick folded cloth which he unfurled in the firelight. A large felt Washington Redskins tapestry rippled in the smoky air as the family's song hit a fever pitch.

Just as the man dipped one end of the tapestry into the fire, three spotlights converged on the group. Everyone went silent and the air was filled with the buzz of three orb-shaped drones which approached, one immediately dropping to just above the fire pit and blasting a mist downward that almost instantly extinguished the flames.

The campers leaped up and scattered, some heading toward the vehicles, others aiming for the woods surrounding the small clearing, and the two other drones split up and zipped after them in pursuit.

Official tools of the History Patrol, these large but agile drones—menacing black orbs made of a durable, textured composite material—were terrorizing enforcers affectionately nicknamed S'more Stoppers by the HRA teams which served alongside and maintained them. These document preservation assets came into heavy use after the President Jeffries-Lao executive order which mandated the installation of SafePlace devices in homes nationwide—similar to smoke detectors, these cutting-edge sensors took high resolution scans of documents before they were burned in fireplaces.

People with something to hide adapted and soon found creative ways to destroy documents. Simulated camping trips were a common ruse employed by these scofflaws with large caches of incriminating data to unload. While financial penalties were harsh if caught, the gambit was seen as worth the risk if one could eliminate thousands of dollars of annual debt per family.

The drone that had put out the fire next secured the contents of the footlocker, then sifted through the ashes for any surviving fragments that could be scanned. The other S'more Stoppers

were off chasing down the nine suspects. One darted to the vehicles and quickly punctured a tire on each, then retracted its pointed metallic arm and assessed the scene: there were four adults, all unarmed, scurrying around the cars.

The drone first tasered a man who had picked up a dead branch and swung it, then after he fell in a writhing mass, the orb zipped a few feet away and squirted a glowing blue gel at two of the others—this substance contained the same ingredients as pepper spray—and each only ran a dozen steps before also falling to the ground in agony.

The fourth suspect had crawled under one of the cars and was covering herself with leaves to protect against any gel that might be sprayed. The drone placed a flashing red beacon onto the car's roof and then zoomed off into the woods in pursuit of the other suspects.

At the same time, the human members of this History Patrol unit were moving in now that the drones' video feeds had established the size of the party and their, in this case, lack of firepower. While the drones were equipped with a variety of tools and non-lethal weapons, their human counterparts all carried real firearms.

Two agents—playfully called Graham Cracker and Cracker Jack—were assigned to each S'more Stopper, and now these six men dressed in dark camouflage fanned out through the clearing, the flashlights mounted on their rifles sweeping across the suddenly darkened campsite. One agent ran up to the footlocker and slammed the top shut, yelled into the radio mounted on his wrist, and watched as the drone which had secured the campfire rose and flew off in the direction of the pursuit.

Moments later a boxy black truck pulled up beside the suspects' vehicles. A passenger leaped out and ran over to the fire pit, then dragged the footlocker to the rear of the truck and hoisted it in. He ran back to the pit but was waved away by the other man, who nudged the empty bankers boxes with his boot.

Two other members of the tactical unit had meanwhile dragged the woman under the car out from her hiding place and zip-tied her hands and feet. Then they cuffed the other three who had been taken down—also applying neon yellow balm to the two suffering the effects of the blue gel, until the mixture turned green. One by one they were led into the back of the armored

truck.

The pursuit in the wooded area was quickly coming to an end. Three of these five suspects were children who had scrambled behind bushes not far from the clearing, and red beacons were dropped in their vicinity. As the two other drones entered the trees, the full force of the S'more Stoppers stalked their prey, scanning and sending data packets back and forth until they had triangulated upon the two remaining adult fugitives.

Each drone was now pulsing a red light as it crept between the tree trunks. Catching a glimpse of one of the suspects through its heat and motion sensors, the first drone that had entered the woods squirted a burst of the glowing blue gel into the woman's eyes, then moved on when she howled in pain and dropped to her knees.

The last suspect had climbed a tree and now all of the drones converged, hovering around him with their spotlights shining. One drone shot a stream of gel but it had no effect because the man had put on gloves and a ski mask, and hid his face close against the bark.

Down below, several of the tactical agents surrounded the base of the tree and aimed their weapons up at him.

"You'd better come down on your own," one of the agents said. "I don't want to kill you, and if these drones taser you, you're gonna land pretty hard."

The man put out a hand in a gesture of surrender, then slowly eased himself down to the ground. Two officers came up and sprayed the parts of him that were blue with the neutralizing gel, then the team leader yanked off his ski mask and held a scanner up to his eye.

"Good evening, Mr. Morgan Haggerston. Ready to take a ride?"

The suspects were loaded into the back of the armored vehicle, which as it left the scene of the raid was joined by three black SUVs, each transporting a S'more Stopper and its human team.

The Haggerston family members sat in various stages of discomfort, worst off being the man with wild hair who had been tasered. Those who had been gelled still suffered minor irritation which was slowly subsiding. The children were frightened, as much by the raid itself as by seeing their parents so shaken. Only

Morgan seemed no worse for wear, and despite the trauma to his family, was in decent spirits.

“Say, Dad,” he said. “How you doing?”

The tasered man put a hand to his forehead. “Feels like the arthritis in my knee spread through my whole body.”

“It’ll be worth it in the long run. Maybe a couple days in jail, higher Debit Score for a while, but the most important thing is that all those documents are gone forever.”

“What about the stuff in the locker?” the older man asked, nodding at a steel mesh cage toward the front of this rear compartment, where their footlocker had been secured.

“Mostly symbolic stuff. Still allowed to own a Revolutionary War reenactor’s uniform, right?”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

An hour later the truck came to a stop. It was the middle of the night. The double-doors opened and four armed guards escorted the suspects into an HRA facility, which was a closed police station that had been converted for use by the administration’s law enforcement wing. The group staggered into a brightly lit lobby, the adults’ hands still zip tied, and the children hugging their legs as they moved along.

The four men watched helplessly as the women and children were then taken out of the room, presumably to a washroom and sleeping quarters. The men did not anticipate getting any such rest tonight.

They were told to sit on a bench in the middle of the room, then a junior officer walked past and scanned each man’s right eye with a small device. One by one their Citizen Profiles were projected onto the white wall behind a front counter where two other officers were typing into computers. One of these officers pushed a button on the center of the console and a door in the back of the room buzzed open.

The lead agent from the raid stepped in front of the bench and cracked open a tall soda can, taking a long swig and smacking his lips.

“God, I love the taste of carbonated shit after a camping trip.” He laughed and the sound bounced around the room’s high walls. “Takes the edge off not being at home with my family. But hey, for every one of you that I catch, it shaves a little bit more off my own Debit Score. Call it an employee stock option, if you will.”

He paced slowly in front of the men, two of whom had dropped their heads.

“What's the matter, gentlemen? Starting to regret our latest crimes against humanity?”

“Hey, boss,” Morgan said, “I hate to interrupt your big moment, but these men might need some medical attention. And besides, you didn't get a damn thing tonight.”

“But I got youuuuuu,” the agent said, pointing a finger.

“Then do what the law says you can do. This sad performance of yours has nothing to do with the HRA.”

“Me, sad? No, no, no. It's you who's gonna be crying. Because it's off to prison for you, and say bye-bye to the kids because your wives, who acted as accomplices tonight, will be deemed unfit as mothers. I just hope the foster parents teach your children better respect for the law than you have.”

“You son of a—”

“Agent Essex,” the man said as he strutted away, “process, pack, and ship 'em out.”

In a manner of minutes, the men were stood up, had their faces wiped clean and their hair brushed, then lined up in a tight bunch directly in front of the counter. A husky Latiza in her fifties wearing a black robe entered the room and sat on an elevated central chair behind the counter.

“All rise,” a junior officer said, “the Honorable Judge Hortencia Rosales presiding.”

“Good morning, gentlemen,” she said. “Since you seem perplexed, let me explain what's going on. I'm one of the night magistrates. I was just awoken from a wonderful dream having something to do with water skiing—and now we are here. Bailiff, what are the charges?”

“Your Honor, these men stand accused of destroying twelve boxes of historical data, as well as possessing Stigmatized Relics and resisting arrest.”

“My, my, my. Accused, what do you say to these charges?”

Morgan took a step forward. “With all due respect, Your Honor, don't we have a right to counsel?”

“Ohhh, I forgot.” She pressed a button on the center console and an aqua-tinted hologram appeared beside the men. “This is your lawyer, Mr.—” She consulted her tablet. “—Lawbotov.”

“What the hell is this?” Morgan said.

“Like I said, he's your counsel.”

“A pastel hologram?”

“A SADA, to be precise. State Appointed Digital Attorney.”

“You expect us to win this case with a fake lawyer we've never met before?”

“No, I expect to be back in bed in half an hour.”

“But if our lawyer isn't real, why do we have a live judge?”

“Because I'm getting paid! 'My people, my people,' you know.”

Morgan shook his head and waved a hand.

The men were found guilty of destruction of historical data, but acquitted on the other charges—their CGI lawyer had at least been competent enough to cast doubt on those allegations. But document destruction was seen as a growing threat across the nation—and the HRA wanted to send a preemptive warning to would-be arsonists living in other former colonial countries—so judges were now throwing the book at offenders.

First, the patriarchal line of the Haggerston family was added to the National Doc Offender Registry, meaning that in the future they could not so much as throw out the paper wrapper of a fast food sandwich without handing it over to an authorized Shred-It agent—this being another company forced to rebrand to survive—who would securely transport it and other documents for inspection by HRA scanners before disposal.

First-time offenders were normally put on probation, which involved enhanced home monitoring by the similarly retooled ADT, as well as weekly sensitivity training meetings. But the volume of documents the Haggerstons had destroyed, which was proven beyond a reasonable doubt by the number of empty bankers boxes found at the scene, as well as one drone's Sift n' Scan of the ashes, compelled Judge Rosales to adhere to the tougher sentencing laws dubbed “One Match Strike and You're Out.”

Their punishment was to each serve a year at a former FEMA facility near the Berkshire Mountains, where they would repay their now incalculable debts to society “in a variety of creative ways,” Judge Rosales said with a wink.

Before they were led away to wait for the midday transport bus, James found enough strength to ask, “Will I get to see my grandkids before we go?”

The judge laughed and said, “Did Africans who were kidnapped and bound for the plantation get to give their babies a kiss goodbye? I don't think so! Good night, gentlemen.”

While it was happily back to dreamland for the judge, each of the four Haggerston men spent the few remaining hours of darkness alone in a cell, sleepless, with tears welling in their eyes. By late morning they were all shackled and loaded onto a bus that had arrived half full, and it meandered through miles of beautiful country roads, stopping twice to pick up more inmates, before arriving in late afternoon at a facility surrounded by chain-link fence topped with razor wire. Two guard towers loomed at the edges, and as the bus approached the entry booth, a large sign came into view that said:

Pennsylvania Debtors' Prison
Rehabilitation Today, Reparations Every Day

After the bus pulled through the gates, the Haggerstons could see that the prison looked more like a work camp, with a handful of narrow, one-story dormitories, two larger administration-type buildings, and ample open space peppered with a number of square concrete plots whose purpose was hard to distinguish in the fading light. A couple dozen inmates were idling around the doors of the living quarters, while others seemed to be flowing into one of the larger structures which cast bright light out of its windows and open double-doors.

The bus stopped in a cul-de-sac near the other administration building, and after the door was opened, the thirty new arrivals shuffled and clanked their way from their seats out into the cool evening air, then through the building's front entrance. None of them spoke or made any shows of bravado—they were not career criminals (not in this lifetime, at least), and it didn't occur to them that they would be watched when approaching a prison yard for the first time.

The processing area was a long open room with various desks, cabinets, and other tools for admitting new inmates. Guards maneuvered the mass of bodies into neat rows, then one by one the men were called up to the front table for the obligatory retinal scan. Each was then escorted to one of the screened off sections in the far corner, where they exchanged their street clothes for prison garb, which consisted of navy blue twill shirt and pants, each bearing a white spray-painted stencil

with the letters “PDP.”

When admitting was complete and the men were taken over to housing, the Haggerstons found that each had been assigned to a different dormitory. Besides James and his son Morgan, there was also James's younger brother Ed, and Morgan's brother-in-law Gary (whose last name was Olsen, so technically not a Haggerston, but most definitely in the same troubled boat with them). They all passed another restless night, this time among rows of army cots that were alive with the sound of snoring.

Wake-up call was at 6 am, and the prisoners drowsily made their way to the mess hall, which was the other large building that the new arrivals had seen people entering the previous night. The food was tolerably horrible, but the Haggerston clan was at least able to sit together and acclimate to their new surroundings in relative safety. Here they took stock of the prison population: about 250 in all, they were almost exclusively white men except for a few of mixed-race. Judging by appearances, the inmates ranged across all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, with members of similar classes seeming to stick together. There wasn't any noticeable tension between or hierarchy within these groups either—everyone looked like they were enduring this time away from home in as familiar company as possible.

After breakfast the prisoners went out into the open yard, splitting up and gathering at the many paved squares that the Haggerstons assumed were work stations having something to do with their rehabilitation. Stepping onto the concrete edge of one, they were startled to see a group of men sitting around a table where each was intently focused on a coloring book. Brown and red crayons of various shades were littered across the tabletop, and the prisoners carefully selected each new implement before returning to their work.

James leaned over one man's shoulder and made an admiring remark, then asked, “May I?” The other man smiled and proudly handed over his book. James held it up and flipped through, and the Haggerstons saw page after page of dark brown men driving, red women dancing, milk chocolate children swimming, and crimson boys playing baseball.

James absently handed the coloring book back to the man and then the four stumbled over to another assembly nearby. Here stood a replica Aztec pyramid, about four feet in height, made out

of wood and painted charcoal gray. A handful of prisoners sat cross-legged near the base, while two others stood just behind the pyramid, each holding a white and brown Ken doll in their hands.

“Oh, great sky gods of justice,” the man on the left proclaimed while shaking his brown Ken, “today we honor your thirst for punishment. Commence the sacrifice!”

The other man placed his white Ken down on top of the altar, then together the two brown Kens did a violent dance which sent the doomed white doll tumbling down the front steps and clattering onto the concrete below. The men who were sitting scrambled forward and fought over the body, while the executioners above made ritual pronouncements that did not bode well for the second white doll.

The Haggerstons turned away without a word, separating as each walked over to another cluster of prisoners. Twenty minutes later they found each other and stared around in bewilderment. A voice came at them from behind.

“Don't tell me you're already shell-shocked! You haven't even heard your first sermon yet.”

A muscular man of medium height with slicked-back dark hair approached, holding his hands up to indicate he was not a threat, because there were four of them and this *was* still a prison.

“My name's Aaron, but people call me Brick. I'm guessing this is your first time in rehab?”

“Morgan. How you doing? We're still stunned by what's happened in the past two days. Separated from our families, put in these prison clothes—”

“And now this,” Brick said, jerking his thumb toward a group of prisoners.

“Yeah. I just saw three grown men crawl into a tepee together.”

“Jesus H. Christ,” James said.

“Well, gents,” Brick said as he put his hands in his pockets, “that's just the appetizer. I'll look for you after the sermon to find out if you haven't seen the light.” He slowly walked away on the heels of his boots.

Ed took James by the sleeve. “What the hell do you think he's talking about? Is this a prison or a loony bin?”

“Looks like we're about to find out,” Gary said, pointing to the middle of the open yard.

They could see a tall flatbed cart with large wagon wheels being pulled by a team of four white men in leather harnesses and chains. All the prisoners had dropped their work and were streaming toward it. Standing atop the cart was a rotund black man holding a giant object with some sort of pointed shape.

The Haggerstons looked at each other, took a breath, then walked over to see what would happen next. By the time the cart stopped and they'd caught up to the edge of the large crowd, the black man had set down his prop and was milling around the makeshift stage, which stood about five feet above the ground. He rubbed his hands together and flexed his facial muscles back and forth. Several prisoners up front were so excited that they pretended to box with each other.

Finally the man slid his hands back across the sparse long hairs on his head, toyed with his wisp of a goatee, then commenced.

"Oh, Lord. A prison yard full of white men. Ain't that a beautiful sight?"

"Amen, yes it is, brother!" shouted one of the prisoners near the cart.

"I *had* a dream—and now it has come true! For the love of God, are *any* of you really surprised to find yourselves locked up in here?"

"No, sir!"

"For four hundred years your families have been kickin', cheatin', sellin', and killin' my people. But *you* thought you was different. 'Those are sins of the past, pal. That's not who we are.' That's what you said. No, no, no!"

He was working up into a sweaty lather of emotion and indignation, stalking around the cart surrounded by a sea of navy blue.

"Something *has* changed though. But it wasn't you, no sir. Know what it was? The law! The law is what changed. And now you are behind bars because you're just like your daddy and his daddy and his daddy before him."

"So what can we do?" another man called out.

"It's a loooooong road to Reparations, my friends. But you can start by taking this first step."

"What is it? Tell us!"

The man bent over and hoisted up his prop, swinging it

around to reveal a giant check mark. He smiled.

“Check this out. You got to check it, baby. Keep yourself in check. Don't write any bad checks. But most of all, you've got to check your privileeeeeeeeeeege!!!”

This brought a roar from much of the audience.

“Come on, now! Let me see it. Show me how you check your privilege, prisoners!”

The men responded by swarming into a crowded line that extended in front of the cart. The speaker yelled, “Acolytes, forward!” and his team of human horses began to pull ahead. As the cart approached, many of the men stuck out a foot or placed their fingers in the path of the wagon wheels. One by one they turned away hobbling or squeezing their hands with a grimace. Some prisoners who had been blocked when it rolled by now ran up behind and bonked their foreheads against the cart's metal frame, staggering away with mad smiles on their faces.

The Haggerston quartet stood in silent horror as the mob chased after the cart until it reached the main gate, where armed guards stepped forward to disperse the prisoners before letting the black man roll off the property.

Brick slid into view and whistled.

“It's been *quite* a day for you boys. Anybody want to play Barbie?”

“What in the holy hell?” was all that Morgan could muster.

“You just witnessed the soul-saving spectacle of the Reverend Matthias G. Witherspoon, leader of the Foundation for Healing Colonial Guilt.”

“And he comes here every day as part of our rehab?”

“My god,” Gary added, “they're trying to brainwash us!”

“Depends how tough you are mentally,” Brick said. “But no, he only comes here once every couple weeks. He speaks at the other HRA Debtor prisons in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana.”

“Tell me this,” Morgan said. “If everyone else in here has lost their mind, why not you?”

Brick gave a little smile. “Because I'm one-thirty-second Navajo? Nah. Maybe some of the guys you see are just playing it up for the yard cameras hoping Rehabilitation Officers will let them out of here early. But hey, meet me and my crew over by the pyramid tonight after dinner.” He wandered off in the

direction of some of the other new arrivals.

As the day wore on, the Haggerstons fell into a daze watching the bizarre scenes unfolding out in the yard, as prisoners politely rotated from station to station every half hour. A number of inmates emerged from the processing center's side door with white bandages around their injured hands and feet, then rejoined the group activities.

Morgan and Gary took a walk while James and Ed sat down in the grass shaking their heads in disbelief. Gary wanted to talk to a few of the guards and see what their attitude was, because if they were going to live in this madhouse for a year it would be best to get the full lay of the land now.

They found a guard standing next to a water fountain who appeared to be descended from First India.

"Excuse me," Morgan said, "but do you mind if we ask you a few questions?"

"Most certainly, sir," the guard said in an upper-crust British accent.

"Wait a second, you're not American? Is that even legal, for you to work at a federal prison?"

"Funny that a man in your position would be so concerned about legalities. But to answer your query, I was brought to the States several months ago on an H-1R visa in anticipation of a similar Reparations program launching in my home country."

"Oh my god," Gary said, "they're taking this thing worldwide."

"Yes," the guard added, "and India has over one-and-a-half-billion people. The task of getting organized would be overwhelming if not for the excellent training that I and nearly three hundred other Indian team leaders are receiving in the States right now. Next month I shall be transferred to St. Louis to learn how field offices operate. I am very excited!"

"How many of the guards here are in training like you?"

"Only one or two. The rest are real-deal, American-born law enforcement personnel."

"Okay then."

Morgan and Gary made their way to a white guard and said hello. They noticed that he, like about half the other guards, was not armed with a weapon but wore a bulky gunmetal contraption on his right wrist.

“Sir,” Morgan said while nodding downward, “is that some sort of weapon?”

“You got it, and then some. Taser, pepper spray, radio, panic button. And it counts my steps. Right now I'm up to... thirty-five hundred for the day.”

“You worked here long?”

“This place opened up about eight months ago. I've been here since the beginning. Got my Debit Score down fifteen percent already. I figure another year and my daughter might be allowed to go to college.”

Morgan and Gary exchanged a quizzical look.

“What does that mean?” Morgan asked. “I thought some states already gave free tuition to residents—and that was even before this president.”

“Sir, that used to be the case, but they did a study to find out why forty percent more women go to college than men. Turns out it was *white* women who made all that difference. So now it's mandatory to fill more spaces with women of color—foreign *and* domestic.”

“Well, damn. What's your daughter gonna do if she can't go?”

“Probably follow in her cousin Tammy's footsteps and join the RETC—Reparations Evading Tactical Collectors. We're talking paramilitary, JAG, boots-on-the-ground asset seizure and document preservation kind of stuff. I gotta say, the HRA is turning into a growth industry for us military types. So maybe it'll be better for her. Hell, like the posters say: See the world, save the past, and kick some ass!”

“What do you mean, 'see the world'?” Morgan said. “Don't tell me the HRA already launched overseas!”

“Nah, but you don't think the old colonies don't see it coming? Tammy told us how back in training the instructor showed them satellite temperature data from up in Canada. Buddy—fires everywhere. They're burning documents like crazy trying to protect the Queen. But not anymore. RETC is dropping in like Chuck Norris. Docu Force and shit! Yeah, Tammy!”

He raised his forearm to give a bump, but when neither Morgan nor Gary responded, he said, “C'mon guys, don't leave me hanging...”

Gary reluctantly raised his arm. The guard was so fired up that he slammed their arms together with such power that it

triggered his wristband to shoot a taser blast back into his face. He fell to the ground twitching and writhing in pain, which then caused the wristband to send out a distress call to the prison's central computer system. A loud alarm sounded throughout the yard, and a robotic voice blared through speakers up on telephone poles, "Officer down! Disperse and secure!"

The other prisoners began to scatter in panic as the guards who had previously been lounging inside the administration building spread out into riot-containing formation. Several drones also fell in to assist the officers who were already in the yard. With over two hundred prisoners to contend with, their priority was to first rescue the fallen guard, and only then try to herd the men back into the dorms.

Morgan and Gary had immediately backed away from the self-taser guard, and moments later Brick ran up to them with five other prisoners. "Quick," he said, "find your other guys and follow me. We're getting out of here!"

As they ran toward the mess hall, Morgan turned back and saw his father and uncle coming toward them as fast as they could. Behind them was a mass of men kicking up dust as they swarmed around the yard, with drones and officers trying to steer them far away from the wounded guard. "Hurry up!" he called.

The older men caught up to the group as it slowly crept around the corner of the mess hall. They froze when they reached the back of the building and saw two guards with a menacing black orb hovering between them. Brick gave them a wave.

"You told us you wanted to wait until it was dark," one of the guards said.

"Hell, an opportunity came up. We had to go for it. You ready?"

"Unlock and unload!"

The group ran toward the perimeter fence a hundred feet behind the mess hall. The drone was moving alongside them and fired something toward the barrier. The object landed a few feet short then popped and hissed, quickly filling the area with gray smoke. The men poured into the expanding cloud then watched as the drone approached the fence, lowered itself, and shot out two arms which began shredding the chain links. A few seconds later there was a hole large enough for a man to crawl through.

"Off you go," one of the guards said through the mist. "Take

care of business!”

“Damn the HRA,” Brick grunted.

The Haggerston men kept their mouths shut and just tried to keep pace with the other escapees, who were in shape and seemed to be coordinating silently—as if this moment had been in the works for some time. First they ran into the nearest thicket of trees before swinging around to one side, running almost parallel to the prison for a few hundred yards, before reaching a thin dirt path that was mostly overgrown.

Leading the way, Brick began to sprint down this path and the others followed rapidly one by one. After a quarter mile, it opened up onto a clearing which revealed a rocky descent, and without a word the men all began to climb down the jagged terrain, steadily working to the bottom a hundred feet below.

Once they reached flat ground, they ran another two hundred yards towards an old beige-and-wood-grain Winnebago that was parked in the shade. Brick banged on the side of the camper. Seconds later a man's head popped out of the driver's window, along with a hand aiming a pistol.

“Holy shit, you guys are way early!” he said, lowering the gun.

Brick gave a grin. “Couple of the newbies unleashed hell out on the yard. We didn't even have to set the fires.”

“Good thing you told me to get a big camper. Looks like there's more than five here with you.”

“Hell, I couldn't leave 'em behind, right?” Brick gave Morgan a nod.

The escapees piled into the Winnebago and fell upon a case of water bottles that was on the dining nook table. Then, as the driver pulled onto a dirt road that snaked through the valley, the men swapped out their prison uniforms for street clothes packed into suitcases. Now they began to smile and relax, lounging on couch cushions and on the floor.

Brick, who hadn't yet changed outfits, was hunkered low up front talking to the driver for the first few minutes. He sauntered to the back with a huge grin and let out a whoop. The other men responded with applause.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “we did it!”

“Yeah!” they roared.

“Got out of that madhouse. But this was the easy part. Now

we're onto the real work of getting rid of the HRA!"

"Hell yeah! Woool!"

"But," he said, turning to the Haggerstons, "there's just one question I have for the newcomers. Do you enlist?"

Morgan stood up and said, "Two days ago my wife and children were taken from me. If that's the endgame of this whole program, then the government can kiss my ass!"

The group yelled approvingly and Brick met Morgan with a high-five-forearm-handshake that ended in a chest bump.

"Let me fill you in on what you've just gotten yourselves into."

After Brick distributed several laptops to the others in back, he sat down around the nook with Morgan, James, Ed, and Gary, and told them about the underground protest movement which had been growing over the past year.

"Once everyday people started to realize that this wasn't some temporary thing like they sold it to us—you know, 'We just want to make sure everybody's water bottle is full before we keep hiking,' " he said in a nasally voice, "—and especially when the HRA itself started dropping hints that they were setting their sights on England, Spain, France... You know, where does it end? Should we really let a computer tell a guy who was born in Canada, and his ancestors came from Europe, that he owes money to people of a different skin color—even though their own families maybe didn't leave the Caribbean until fifteen years ago? It's crazy."

James spoke up. "I've tried to talk to these HRA types. For people so obsessed with small details, as individuals they're incapable of putting down the script."

"Well, you know, it's gonna fall apart and it's their own damn fault. Because there's policy, and then there's reality."

"They seem pretty confident to me. What's their weakness?"

"Law enforcement, man. The people in the big cities who cook up all this shit, they think the cops are all dumb, order-taking robots. A lot of them, yeah—but enough are awake! They've got kids, bills, and dangerous responsibilities—do that for a while and pretty soon you'll know what's what. So I'm telling you, on the surface the HRA folks are feeling pretty good—watching everything expand, they think they've never been stronger. But they're hollow inside! Got no real support where it

matters, and one day—” He jabbed a finger sideways. “—pop. It'll just stop.”

Gary leaned in on his elbows and said, “But won't that just leave things worse than before? The Bennies ain't ready to have their stipends cut off. And us Debtors, well, let's just say *pissed* is a nice way of describing how we feel.”

“You're right. And that's why this hasn't turned into a shooting war already. If we can end this thing, we've got to replace it with something better. Which is the reason we need your help now. Because they screwed up not consulting salt-of-the-earth people the last time, and slowly all their theories are turning into a tangled up mess. Do you think seven, eight years ago these Reparations kids envisioned that they'd be sending fellow Americans to prison camps? Hell no! They thought they were just carefully arranging pillows on the couch to make everything look nice and neat.”

“Amazing how much damage people who act so friendly to your face can do,” Gary said.

“Ain't that the truth. People who've never done a day of manual labor in their lives, let alone had a fist fight to work something out—*they* put *you* in jail! Think about that! But like I said, enough of the good guys ain't stupid. Right now they're just biding their time, all around the country. It's almost game time and we've got a great squad.”

Ed pounded his fist on the table. “Put me in, coach!”

The Winnebago moved from country roads to two-lane highways. As the fugitives lay down to sleep, Morgan Haggerston looked at the ceiling and pictured his children's faces. Whatever the underground needed him to do, he would be up to the task if it meant holding them in his arms again.

END OF SAMPLE