

Chapter Two

Fraternity

As his consciousness flicked back on from a dreamless sleep Auri struggled to comprehend the sensations he was feeling. Slowly he realized that the intruding presence was indeed daylight. The muslin curtains swayed in the breeze of the ceiling fan and Auri cursed the severity of his inebriation for robbing him of the basic capacity to remember to close the drapes. He then allowed himself a few minutes to contemplate how to bring his plan for songbird genocide to fruition. While the berry fields brought out the magic of fireflies at night, they also summoned a Hitchcockian army of birds in the morning. He finally settled on a flamethrower. Yes, he would destroy his crops, the house, and perhaps a few innocent squirrels and rabbits, but it was a price he was willing to pay to silence the cacophony.

He felt as if he had not had a drink of water for a week and he was certain that his cranial blood vessels were playing the first few bars of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* on repeat. He was drenched in sweat. Not only did he forget the drapes, but apparently, simply making it to his bed taxed the limit of his drunken capacity and he did not even remove the purple velvet smoking jacket. He attempted to summon his water bottle on the nightstand telepathically but failing that, he gathered the motivation to move.

A half hour later he trundled downstairs in a ball cap, t-shirt, and jeans. He told Lily and Jude to be ready early so he had to get moving. Since he was a child his father took him to Buddy's Diner in Hendersonville on the first Saturday of the month. Buddy was one of his father's oldest friends and was the one who encouraged him to dance with the smokin' hot Colombian girl on that mission trip to Medellin. Now in his seventies, Buddy still worked the counter at his diner and Auri was not going to let him down.

Fortunately, the Strauss symphony in his head had diminished to a chamber orchestra and Auri was somewhat functional again. Despite the fucking bird opera outside, the house itself was quiet and Auri was attempting to keep his popping joints in check and to step softly lest the creaking floorboards prematurely visit his agony on the blissfully sleeping bastards responsible for his condition.

As he reached the foot of the stairs on the first floor, he came upon Lily looking in the hall mirror to check whether she had successfully concealed the dark circles under her eyes. Her dark brown hair was put up in an intricate do. She was wearing a blush pink, sleeveless, fit and flare dress with a matching pink hair band, matching pink heels, and pearls. Fucking pearls. He was amazed that she decided to forego the evening gloves.

"Are we going to church?" Auri replied with facetious confusion.

She pointed her finger at him before averting her attention from the mirror, "piss off. I had to shave my legs for this and I'm too hungover to tolerate much this morning." She then went back to her work.

"Is Jude up?" Auri asked.

"Is he. I fell asleep on the firepit couch last night. As I was trundling back to the house feeling like a cigarette butt in a dive bar urinal, he was heading out toward the cow pasture with a yoga mat."

"Ah. You're making amends?"

"Fuck right I am. Now, I'm gonna go clean out the truck. God, there's probably goats there. This is going to be unpleasant," Lily replied.

Preparing to face the daylight, Auri patted the pocket of his shirt, and the front and back pockets of his jeans looking for his sunglasses before Lily took them off the top of his head and handed them to him. "I'll go fetch him," he said.

Lily pulled a pair of Audrey Hepburn sunglasses out of the small purse laying on the hallway side table and said, "for the love of god, Auri, take your time."

As Auri stepped out the door to the rear pavilion he felt like a volcano researcher in a fire suit stepping to the brim of a lava flow. However, after a few moments he equalized and started to enjoy the soft mountain breeze clinging on to the very last of the spring chill. This portion of the property was kept up for pollinators and the field of wildflowers had started to come into bloom.

As Auri came to the crest of the first small hill, he looked across the meadow and watched the breeze blow waves through the grass and flowers. Past the pollinator meadow, on a lone hill overlooking the cow pasture there was a large poplar tree and Auri saw Jude sitting there motionless. As he approached Auri saw Jude sitting in the lotus position with his eyes closed, breathing rhythmically. He did not want to intrude on Jude's meditation, but his presence had already been detected. Jude opened his eyes and turned in his direction, "good morning, Auri. How are you feeling?"

"Fair to middling," was the reply. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Jude. I can come back later if you'd like."

"No, no, please," and Jude gestured to the other side of his yoga mat as he scooted over. "I was actually waiting for you."

"This is a lovely spot you've found. It feels like this place was made for you," Auri replied.

"This is your creation, Auri. All of this," Jude said.

"Even I'm not arrogant enough to take credit for the wildflowers and sunshine, Jude," Auri said with a smile.

Jude shifted his attention from the pasture to Auri, "it's not the breeze or mountains in the distance that make this a great place for meditation. Can you not feel it? There are hundreds of people on this property generating so much positivity. All of them are happy and, more than that, their lives have purpose. They don't live to acquire. They live for each other. Auri, everyone deserves to live that life."

"I hated my life until Lily and I came up with the idea for this place. I saw no ambition beyond trying to acquire more than my father. There was nothing to create. There was nothing to discover. This place saved me too," Auri said grabbing a long, seeding blade of grass just to have something to fiddle with as they talked.

Jude had no intention of shifting to pleasantries though. "So, what is next?"

"Well, I want to expand our financial services to be able to offer targeted micro loans for..."

Jude cut him off. "That's not what I'm talking about, Auri. Where is the next Evervine?"

"Jude, billionaire's estates don't exactly grow on trees. This isn't something I can recreate in other places," Auri said.

"Why? Auri, don't you see that you started with the house, but it's grown too much more than that. You have built a model for a sustainable community. The people who live and work here don't look at this place as a charity. This is a way of life for them," Jude replied.

Auri had mentally prepared his stock modesty speech for what he presumed would be polite praise but he suddenly found himself on the defensive. Unrealistic expectations are not uncommon in the non-profit world. Usually, the dissention comes from someone new to the organization who sees compromise or resignation to a situation to be capitulation so they rage about a lack of enthusiasm and commitment. The rage is usually followed by a brief flurry of activity. Just enough to project righteous indignation at the next board meeting so they can storm off and become an agitator somewhere else. Auri was prepared for that, he dealt with it often. However, Jude was not projecting the comforting histrionics. On top of that, Strauss was back.

"Jude..." Auri struggled to put his existential ennui into words. "This place isn't real. Okay? I took this house, this stupid, empty, giant fucking castle filled with nothing but trophies and delusion and I filled it with people to love me. I did it because that's what I didn't have. I didn't have anyone who loved me. I had tons of people who pretended to love me because I hit the DNA lottery, but no one loved *me*. So, I built a fantasyland with my money for people to love me. Alright? This, all of this, is selfish. That's

why there is no *next* Evervine. And, yes, it's gotten bigger, but I didn't plan that... I act like I did. But, I didn't." Auri stopped and considered the words that came out instinctually and felt disappointed in himself both for his limitation and his nakedness.

"So, you commoditized community?" Jude paused for a moment, "is that not something you can sell?"

Auri was indignant, "no. Fuck no, man." He took an exasperated sigh and said "you cannot fall into that trap. Naivety is the death of anyone who tries to help anyone else. You do realize that everyone here, everyone, is broken. Most of the staff used to be residents. They're either ex-cons with no job prospects, ex-addicts who are scared that if they leave this bubble they'll go right back to using, or people who are too young to know any better. Then we sprinkle in volunteers whose employers donate them to us for a couple of days a month. They're here because they don't have anything to lose."

"Auri, I think there are more broken people out *there* than you realize. I think there are more broken people out there than *they* realize," Jude responded.

"But that's the whole problem, Jude. They don't realize it because you cannot let yourself realize that you're broken and continue to function. They have 401ks and copper pots and weekend motorcycles and, I don't know, fucking boats. Then they have kids and think that they're going to pass on their copper pots and boats and shit to them. Then their kids don't want their parents worn out old shit so they drop it off at a thrift store and the cycle continues. But they do it because if they didn't there would be nothing but darkness. Just the inevitable, fucking darkness and they want to do something so they don't have to think about it. You know, and when they've got too much fucking money, they build pyramids or carve their names in stone on the side of a building they donated, or build giant stupid fucking castle houses."

"So, the entirety of economics and society is built on fear?" Jude asked.

Auri, had a quick half laugh, "yeah, yeah I guess it is."

"And, throughout history that fear has been exploited by the powerful. Just enough is given to the masses to make them afraid to lose what they have so they don't demand more. So, how do we break that cycle?" Jude asked the in tone of an instructor.

Auri was ready for this, "ah so Marxism? Yeah, that worked out great. In the grandest experiments with it the love of one's community got replaced with nationalism *really* quickly. It was the only practical way to keep millions of people engaged in it. Then people quickly forget about their commonality and start focusing on their superiority. They turn to internal corruption and external aggression. That is not the answer."

"So, maybe you don't need to change the whole system of government. Is it possible to just change the way people interact with each other without coercing the change through the force of law?" Jude continued.

"Oh, come on Jude? Seriously, how would that ever happen?"

"You tell me." When Auri turned away ready to bag this conversation Jude put his hand up and said, "no seriously, Auri, you tell me. I know you have thought about this."

Auri had indeed thought about this, but he did not know how to express his thoughts without sounding like a nihilist. "Well, I think it would either take a miracle or a catastrophe, both of epic proportions. If technology advanced to the point where acquiring not just the basic needs of living, but the basic needs of comfort became easy and people were not so afraid of destitution, then maybe they would start living for something bigger. Or, conversely, if there was a catastrophe of epic proportions and everything collapsed so that people would have to cooperate or utterly perish, maybe that would work. But, I do not see any other realistic way it could occur otherwise."

"Both of those options are not impossible, Auri," Jude replied.

With utter sincerity Auri responded, "God, I fucking hope they are. Jude, think about it. I don't know that we would survive either one."

Matching his tone Jude said, “they will if someone shows them there’s something to live for after they’ve lost everything. Or, gained everything.”

Both men were then silent for a few minutes. Auri watched the drone bees humming through the wildflowers and down to the pasture. Indifferent mothers watched their spring calves dance around them and Auri took a moment to quiet his mind. Then it was Jude’s turn to interrupt, “I guess we should go get that starter now. Also, you really look like you need some coffee.”

“Oh god, yes please.” And with that Auri hopped to his feet and started a brisk walk back toward the house while Jude took a minute to roll and strap his mat and take stock of the next steps.

Lily had finished frantically clearing out the truck and was now attempting to casually stand against it while she checked the messages on her phone. When she looked up to see Auri coming toward her, she could see how distracted he was. He reached her before he realized that sufficient time had passed for the short walk and looked at her as if she had just jumped out from the bushes. Realizing that his quick flight might have been a little rude to Jude he quickly did an about face without saying a word to Lily and made a trot to the edge of the hill. He was relieved to see Jude cresting it shortly behind him.

He jumped into the small rear seat of the extended cab truck to give Jude the front seat. As Lily put the truck in gear, she did a fast one hundred eighty degree turn whipping up a cloud of dust on the dirt and gravel drive before tearing off down the path. A casual observer would have thought she was furious about something, but that was just how she drove. It became a right of passage at Evervine. You were truly a member of the community once you had either dived out of Lily’s path or been baptized in her dust.

Jude was not easily rattled but had a firm grasp of the handle above the passenger window and frequently stomped the floorboard in front of him as if his magic brake would somehow save them all from a fiery death. The trip down the Evervine drive that was so casual and peaceful the night before seemed to take about ten seconds now and felt like they were in a rally car rather than a fifteen-year-old F150.

As Lily peeled out onto the main road without even pausing, much less stopping at the end of the drive Auri said, “Fuck Lily! Shit or vomit. Take your pick because your backseat is about to be covered in one of them!”

Looking in the rearview mirror to make eye contact with Auri for a grossly unsafe amount of time Lily responded, “you were the one who made me wait this long for coffee so shut it or I can pull over and you can hoof it you giant child.” Of course, she let off the accelerator as she said it.

Whether exhausted or merely thankful for the opportunity to continue to exist, the occupants of the truck fell silent for a good while taking in the pastoral scene of the late spring valley landscape. As they drew closer to town, they came up to a massive campaign billboard depicting a man with a broad smile and red power tie giving two thumbs up under the words, “Vamos José!”

“Gaw, look at the shit-eatin’ grin on this one! What an absolute muppet!”

“Lils, come on, can we please not?” Auri pleaded from the backseat.

Jude sensed there was more they were not saying about this man. “Who is José?” he asked.

Lily took the initiative. “He’s a massive plastic asshole with *major* daddy issues and a serious case of...”

Auri piped up, “seriously Lily, I’m too hungover for this.”

“Wha? I didn’t even say nothing about his tiny prick yet.”

“LILY!” Auri exclaimed in exasperation.

With that Lily pulled her sunglasses down the brim of her nose and looked at Jude. She held up her right hand and curled her pinky finger down to the extreme to emphasize her point and Auri gave another deep sigh. Lily just popped her sunglasses into place and did a little shimmy to music that was not playing.

The billboard was just the start. There were José signs in nearly every yard and business and red, white, and blue “Vamos” signs lining the road. Jude saw them flash before him in a blur as Lily pulled into

the parking lot of the auto parts store at full speed and the truck violently jerked forward as they came to an abrupt stop.

Auri popped out quickly. "I'll be right back. Just chill here for a bit." Lily had absolutely no intention of going into the store with him and had already pulled out her phone. Jude made a vague acknowledging head nod as he attempted to master his nausea.

A few moments after Auri left Lily put down her phone and asked Jude "so, what do you think?"

"I think I'm going to be sick." Jude was deadly serious.

"I wouldn't have figured you to have a queasy stomach, but I meant what do you think of us, of Evervine?" she replied.

"It's a mustard seed Lily. It really is."

Lily had a small chuckle to herself at the analogy, but she could not agree more. Then she realized that she should take advantage of Auri's absence. "Listen, I ought to tell you about Joe, err, José," she said with an eye roll. However, Auri completed his errand with uncommon rapidity and the opportunity passed.

As Auri plopped back into the seat his perspicacity utterly failed him. "Go Lily. Go that way to coffee," and he vaguely gestured in the direction of Buddy's. For her part Lily did not need the instruction and had already hit the gas before he got the bumbling words out of his mouth.

Lily whipped around the next two blocks in a heartbeat and they were both struck by the sight of Buddy's as they pulled into the parking lot. The place looked like the propaganda fairy had taken a giant shit all over it. Every window had "Vamos" signs in alternating blue and red. There was red, white, and blue bunting hanging from the eaves, and there were red and blue streamers running from the corners and center of the roof down to the giant "Vamos José!" sign in the front of the parking lot.

"So much for neutral territory," Lily said.

"Something tells me that he didn't have much of a choice," Auri replied and hopped out of the truck.

As they opened the diner door ringing the bell hanging in its pathway, they heard a cry from behind the register at the counter, "hey, hey, there he is!" With that Buddy dropped what he was doing and walked up to greet them. "Hey sport model! How are you Mr. A?" Buddy had on lycra slacks and a white polo shirt with stripes. His voice was peppered with genuine joy and a gentile southern accent. He immediately took Auri in his arms with a big bear hug.

"And who is this? Lily, Lily, Lovely Lily! My English rose. You are an absolute vision my dear." He took her hand primly offered, bowed, and kissed it as Lily performed a curtsy fit for the queen. Spotting the new face Buddy turned to him warmly taking him by the hand and said, "well, hello there friend. Welcome, welcome, come on in. My name is Buddy, who might you be?"

"Jude. Very pleased to meet you sir."

Buddy was delighted with Jude's simple display of courtesy, which he took to be a rapidly disappearing commodity and instantly decided he liked this new face. However, given Buddy's nature, he would have searched for something to like about Jude even if the warm greeting had not been extended.

He then showed them to Auri's favorite booth and started chatting about the new berry crop, the weather, and Betty (Mrs. Buddy's) new blackberry jelly. Jude lingered at the entrance to look at the various newspaper clippings and photos Buddy had hanging on the wall. There were photos with him and Dean Smith, Mike Krzyzewski, and Michael Jordan, but the rest of the of the wall was dedicated to Auri. There were photos of Auri with various celebrities and politicians at Evervine events along with clippings reporting each new Evervine milestone. In the place of honor behind the register was a large, framed newspaper article with the headline, "BILLIONAIRE HEIR GIVES ENTIRE FORTUNE TO NEW CHARITY".

As Jude approached the table it appeared that Auri was right about Buddy's lack of choice with the political decoration. Buddy explained, "first thing this morning all these college kids piled out of a van and they were very nice, very polite mind you and, they said that Mr. Joe said that it was okay with me if they put all this stuff up. Well, you know me Auri, I don't like telling people *no* and I didn't want them to get in trouble with Joe, so I just let them go ahead. I do think it's a little over-the-top though."

"I think it looks like Uncle Sam just came all over your face and split without even throwing you a towel." As soon as the words came out, Lily immediately clapped both hands on her mouth and turned beet red. She felt like she just cursed in front of her grandmother in church. "Oh Buddy" she pleaded, "I'm such a nasty slag. Please forgive me love."

For his part, Buddy just felt bad for the embarrassment he knew Lily felt. Plus, she knew English slang always completely disarmed him. He was not sure what a "slag" was but assumed it must have been a wretched form of self-flagellation and did not like his dear Lily referring to herself like that.

"Well now Miss Lily, I think we can let it slide, but just this one time" he said with a quick wink which permitted Lily to replace her self-imposed gag with a broad smile and her most adorable shoulder shrug.

At that point, Buddy realized that he was blocking Jude's path to his seat and stepped aside saying, "oh, here you go Mr. Jude. Have a seat now. There you are. I can tell that these two are overdue for coffee. Would you like some or would you care for something else?"

"Coffee would be great, thank you," Jude replied.

With that Buddy headed off and returned with three hot mugs of coffee. Auri handed Jude a menu and said, "Buddy's Pecan Praline Waffles are legendary. The menu says it comes with sausage or bacon, but he's got turkey..."

At that moment the front door of the restaurant opened and perimeter security guards entered to conduct a quick visual sweep in advance of a film crew with a boom mic and steady cam walking in front of a man in a crisp white dress shirt, red power tie, and rolled up sleeves. His hair was styled without a strand out of place and he warmly greeted everyone as he walked in the door. Notably, he stopped to chat with the group of people all wearing "Vamos José" campaign merchandise and red ballcaps bearing a white ichthys symbol.

At that moment Lily let out a long "fuuuuuuuuuck!" She did not even have to turn around. The look on Auri's face told her everything she needed to know. She quickly sipped her coffee and seriously contemplated slipping under the table and combat crawling out the back door.

As the candidate approached their table he feigned surprise, "Auri! Hey!" He went to give Auri a hug for the cameras only to be met with Auri's outstretched hand forcing him to do an awkward pirouette where he tried to simultaneously take the hand and perform a unilateral embrace. Feeling that this moment did not go at all as he had hoped, he asked camera crew to give them a minute as he forced himself down next to Auri in the booth. At that, the staffer in charge of the shoot realized that the tardiness of the volunteers coming in to fill the booths left them with no time to have food and coffee in the shot. He frantically barked, half plaintively, to Buddy to remedy the situation. He hoped he could get more shots of José chatting with the same people again on the way out and could edit the footage so that no one would notice the faux pax.

After they left, Joe turned to Auri and said, "I didn't know you would be here. How are you?"

"Oh yeah. It's a total shock that I would come to a restaurant at the same time and same day as I have for the past thirty years," Auri said calling out the thinly veiled lie. He then moved on to finally clarify the situation for Jude's benefit, "Jude, allow me to introduce my brother, Joe. Joe, this is my friend Jude."

Joe instantly extended a campaign shake to this new potential voter, "José. José Hughes. Pleased to meet you, Jude."

"Ah, José Arcadio?" Jude asked tilting a head toward Auri. Auri met the inquiry with a small nod.

Joe laughed nervously, “ah, yeah, only my mom called me that. You know I had to shorten it.” Joe then put his hand to the side of his mouth to jokingly tell a secret in full voice “wouldn’t fit on a campaign poster” and then he began laughing although he was the only one. Jude just politely kept eye contact with a slight smile and nod.

Joe then looked for a change of subject and noticed Lily shrunk as small as she could get in the corner of the booth having taken the opportunity to down as much coffee as she could in the few moments Jude’s introduction bought her. “Lily! My goodness. It’s been ages. How are you?”

Lily dropped the mug with a thud and then with fake ebullience replied in her best Spanish accent, “José! Como estás?”

Cluelessly, and with a most foul Southern accent, “bien y tú?”

Lily dropped her sunglasses from her forehead and then pushed them up the bridge of her nose using only her middle finger.

Jude was struck by the dichotomy of the brothers. Auri sat there taking his turn to consume as much of his coffee as possible while feeling like an animal caught in a trap. He was wearing a worn-out blue t-shirt with the faded lettering of Piketty’s Inequality formula on it. His knock off Ray-Ban aviators acted as a hairband to hold back his sun lightened auburn hair which was a bit overdue for a wash. In contrast, his brother’s appearance was clearly carefully cultivated by a team of people. His well-tailored dress shirt did a great job of concealing the fact that he was a good deal chubbier than his brother, a by-product of constant catered campaign dinners. And although Joe was clean shaven with a slightly detectable amount of makeup concealing the dark circles that prominently sat under his brother’s eyes, they looked remarkably similar. They had the same eyes, the same high cheekbones, and the same cleft chin.

Lily sensed that it was time to let Auri get this over with. Joe had gone through a great deal of planning to bring about this moment and this insufferable small talk was only delaying the inevitable. “Come on Jude. I need some fresh air. Come with?” Lily ushered Jude out with sufficient rapidity to duck under the most unwelcome hug Joe intended to bestow on her as he rose with her.

Joe put his arms down and then slipped into the booth opposite his brother. At that moment, Saint Buddy came up and put a cup of coffee in front of Joe, a fresh mug in front of Auri, and gave him a quick reassuring grasp of his shoulder as he returned to the kitchen.

After the two sat there for a moment in silence while Joe filled his cup with a substantial quantity of cream and sugar, Auri broke the silence, “what the fuck man? Seriously, you had to pull this shit at Buddy’s?”

“I know Auri. I’m sorry, but what else was I supposed to do? Why won’t you return my calls?” Joe replied.

“Because you’re fucking awful. You get that right? The shit you’re saying is vicious and just savagely cruel. You and I never saw eye-to-eye, but I don’t even know who you are any more man.”

Joe looked around the restaurant more concerned about Auri’s raised voice than what he was actually saying. Although it was clear that everyone heard the outburst, they were all politely pretending that they did not.

Joe was currently the leading candidate in the upcoming primary seeking a seat for the United States Senate. After a Christian college education, a marriage to the right, politically connected woman, and a generous family endowment for his ministry, Joe rose to prominence as the leader of the largest Christian organization in the country. That organization, Agape, whose symbol of the ichthys adorned his campaign supporters, was more than a church. Joe formed a hybrid church/political organization to take the next step in promoting his vision of traditional Christian values through the force of law.

“Auri, I don’t want to fight with you. I didn’t come here to do that. I’m your brother and I love you and I want there to be peace between us,” Joe replied with genuine magnanimity.

Auri was not buying this for a second. “Come on Joe. Don’t shit on my plate and tell me it’s pudding. You’re here because you think I’m gonna spout off to the press, spill all your tea, and tank your campaign.” Joe looked incredulous as Auri continued, “you don’t have to worry. Honestly, Joe, I don’t give a fuck what you’re doing. I have too much to do to spend my time plotting against you. Have I ever done that? I don’t use what I do to advance myself and I sure as shit don’t do it to settle some petty fraternal score. You don’t have to worry about me or Evervine as long as you just leave me alone.”

Joe felt encouraged that Auri had misread the situation so dramatically. “Wait. Hang on little brother. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Then enlighten me,” Auri replied.

He gestured to the clipping behind Buddy’s register and said, “I’m here because I am proud of you. I’m so proud of you.” Auri raised a skeptical eyebrow at his brother’s profession. “I’m here because I want to help and I’m now really in a position to help. If we combine the resources of Agape and Evervine, can you imagine what we could do?”

Auri slumped down and took a deep breath, “well that’s a thousand times worse than I expected.”

“Just hear me out man. Look, my people have worked out some projections. Jenny!” He then looked over his shoulder and a young assistant patiently waiting with a hair trigger response this whole time and came running over to their table bearing two binders, then silently retreated like she was a ball catcher at Wimbledon.

Joe opened up the folder and drew Auri’s attention to the color graphs a few pages into the report. “I have spoken to the Board and this is the level of cash we can infuse into Evervine immediately. If we focus this capital investment into development along with opening our donor sources up to you, these are our projections of revenue generation for the first five years, but then the long-term...”

“So, you want to buy Evervine?” Auri said interrupting.

Joe tried to engage in damage control. “No, no, no. No, it’s not that simple.” At that point, Auri stood up. “Auri, wait, please. We’ve been working on this really hard for quite some time. Please hear me out. Please?” Joe pleaded.

Auri lost his nerve. With resignation he said, “okay. Okay. I’ve just had a bunch of coffee and I need to go to the restroom.” Joe was skeptical about letting his quarry out of the trap.

“Just... I’ll be right back,” Auri replied in response to the look and Joe sat back down in the booth and returned to leafing through the report on his own.

When Lily and Jude walked out of the restaurant, they were met with a half a dozen Agape security volunteers. Most of them were deliberately disheveled with bushy beards and all of them were heavily armed with long guns and pistols. Each of them had patches from various militia groups which were vaguely military looking matched with hats, scarfs, or patches with the Agape ichthys. In addition to their regalia, they all had mismatched items of tactical gear. Some were acquired from military surplus, but most were mass produced by feudal laborers in countries these men would consider to be enemies. Consequentially, the foreign producers did not match the upper limit of available sizes they produced to the upper limit of American girth. Most of these men looked like children playing soldier trying to slip back into an army costume they grew out of two years ago.

Having lived the common experience of every woman, everywhere, throughout the entire expanse of human history, Lily knew this pack of involuntary celibates would be unable to cling on to a shred decorum when confronted with the sight of a woman’s bare arms and legs. With sunglasses firmly in place to avoid eye contact she put her head down and made a circuitous route to her truck.

In the closest thing to an actual military tactic these men would see, Jude decided to cover his comrade’s retreat by engaging the enemy. He instantly felt their skeptical examination. With pulled back long hair, linen shirt, jeans, trimmed facial hair, and no symbols displayed to broadcast his allegiance, Jude set off their Libdar instantly.

These men were used to college students, gays, and other losers plucking up the courage to give them shit and their response was reflexive. They stopped their conversation, drew the pack closer, dropped their smiles, put on their most fierce stares, and shifted their rifles from their shoulders to their hands with their fingers in the “home position” outside the trigger guard. For firearms enthusiasts this grip is a basic tenant of range safety, but they all knew damn well that it seriously unnerved the unarmed. They drew great delight in seeing the fear in the eyes of the uninitiated at this gesture legitimized by gun owners in the know.

They saw no such fear in Jude’s eyes, which created a minute of confusion given the strong blip of libtard detection. Without hesitation Jude walked up to a man slightly apart from the main pack. Instead of tactical gear this man was wearing a red polo shirt with stripes across the chest tucked into jeans pulled up over his extended belly with a braided belt and white sneakers. He had a ruddy complexion and wire frame glasses sitting on top of an upturned nose. However, unlike his companions attempting their best approximation of a thousand-yard stare, this man had his best, broad Sunday morning smile. To fit in with the group he was wearing the red Agape ballcap and wore a large 9mm pistol in a paddle holster affixed to his pulled-up waistband.

“Mornin’ gentlemen” was Jude’s opening calculated to determine which member of the group was most amenable to conversation as opposed to marking his territory.

As expected, the man in the red polo initiated his Sunday School manners. “Mornin’! John L., Nice to meet you!” he said enthusiastically as he extended his hand.

Jude took it warmly and said, “pleased to meet you, John L. I’m Jude.” He then scanned the others hoping for introductions. Annoyed at John L.’s poser breach of decorum, each in turn chose to engage in his best Clint Eastwood strong silent type impersonation.

“Ben” the first man said with an indifferent hand waive.

“Jake” the next man said upping the disdain dumb show with a simple head nod. The others followed suit, “Trey,” “Dan,” “Eric” and so on until they got to the most morbidly obese one of the group who shifted his rifle to his shoulder so he could slowly fold his arms across his chest while he looked Jude up and down with his best “fuck you” expression before he said, “Austin.”

In reality Austin was crippled by self-loathing born out of his obesity. Secretly he was humiliated that he could barely fasten the straps on his size XXL tactical vest even after extending them to their full limit. Hanging out with the militia buddies helped him pretend that he enjoyed nicknames like “Biggun” with which he had been bestowed. Here he felt like the biggest bull elephant admired by the herd instead of the fat kid who could feel the girls’ giggles behind his back every time he had to wedge himself in and out of his desk in high school.

Jude was ready for the challenge.

Inside Buddy’s restroom as Auri splashed water on his face, he cursed himself for cowardice. Joe had no power over him anymore. There was nothing preventing him from telling his brother to fuck himself and go goosestep off with his gaggle of hateful mouthbreathers. As much as Auri had built through love, Joe had constructed through fear.

Perhaps it was a sociological inevitability. The firstborn son and heir was groomed to assume control of the family’s wealth and expand it. However, by the time Joe and Auri came of age there was no longer a family business to take over. Instead their father, Michael, had political aspirations for his sons. The Hughes family established itself as major donors to Christian universities, numerous projects for new church development, and every conceivable conservative political interest so long as the candidate or cause first appropriately bent the knee to the power of the church.

Michael knew that to truly exert power over the long term, he needed to build a base for control. He realized that while he had the resources to mount a campaign of his own for almost any political office and, more importantly, win that office, but such power was tenuous. The minute the political winds

changed, the other hyenas would eat him. However, with enough churches and politicians reliant upon his beneficence he would hold the strings from the shadows.

Michael happened into the right moment in history for his plan. As America became more secularized the nation's politics mirrored this shift. When the numbers of practicing Christians in the country began to dwindle, they started to abandon the minor doctrinal and liturgical differences that had separated the denominations for centuries and began to grow into mega churches taking great strength in numbers. Conservative politicians saw the opportunity to exploit this growing division and allied themselves with the coalescing Christians who became increasingly tribal under the single banner of evangelism rather than the numerous denominations that separated them previously. The financial engine behind the scenes for this growth was Michael Hughes.

However, despite his best laid plans, his children did not easily follow the path their father laid out for them. Auri was the obvious disappointment. His father was impressed with his intellect but dismayed by the double dose of sarcasm and flippancy he inherited from his mother and paternal grandfather. Of course, Michael failed to realize that his focus on his firstborn son resulted in neglect of Auri, which wholly guaranteed his son's rebellion even if Auri were not inclined to that end on his own.

Auri filled that time learning from his mother. She loved his father, but over time that love faded into duty, and then slowly into protecting her sons. Michael said the right things on the surface, but ultimately, he treated the boys' mother, Estella, like a princess that had been saved from a dungeon. He never understood how his princess still had an affinity for the dungeon.

Despite the Hughes' resources and clear ability to ensure safety, Michael never permitted Estella to travel to Colombia. His stated rationale was that the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia would stop at nothing to seize the family of a billionaire and hold them for a king's ransom. He arranged to transport her relatives to her, ostensibly, as often as they liked. In reality, it devolved into Easter visits (his Latin in-laws were an entertaining addition to Easter morning for the other members of the church who liked to pretend they were not monolithic for a day) and what Michael came to refer to as "Colombian Christmas" which was always the week after real Christmas, which he reserved just for the immediate family... and *his* parents, Southern aunts and uncles (i.e. his parent's close friends), and a few "cousins."

Despite the indignities, Estella's siblings and her real cousins made annual trips to visit her. Michael could not help himself from making constant condescending comments. "Oh, I know you don't have vichyssoise in Colombia, but it is actually supposed to served cold," he would say as if the concept of cold potato soup was beyond their imagination.

Michael never bothered to learn Spanish and did not want to. He just presumed these ungrateful peasants were saying vicious things about him to his face and decided to let them exercise this ingratitude as they took his money for their biannual all expenses paid trip out of the hell hole in which they resided.

In actuality, Estella's relatives were only worried about her. They knew Estella was not a princess rescued from a dungeon. She was a princess locked in a tower. Gilded as it may be this house was no different from a cage. They offered to take her home many times, but they knew she would never abandon her children.

Throughout this entire time, Estella's mother could not make these trips. Her first visit was disastrous. Four different times during the stay various visiting Hughes associates handed her garbage, or laundry, or requested that she clean up some mess. Each time she carried out the command without correcting the offending party. Particularly after her health started to fail in the following year, Estella would not ask her mother to suffer that indignity again.

But they wrote long letters to each other each week. While José Arcadio was off hunting or golfing with his father, Estella would translate his grandmother's letters for Aureliano. She always asked how his education was progressing and about all of his interests. Auri noted that her interest in Joe was polite, but not as much as her interest in him. He longed to really get to know his Abuela, who he had only met once

in his life. He often pulled out the simple rosary she gave him on that visit. Seeing his father's cocked eye at this Catholic ornament, he wisely hid it and guarded it lest it mysteriously disappear.

When Auri was seven years old, his grandmother died. His father purportedly made extensive plans to ensure Estella's safety for her trip to the funeral, but the day before she was scheduled to leave, Michael found an article in a news magazine discussing growing violence between the FARC and members of the capitalist regime and determined that it was too risky for his wife to travel. He showed her the article, but as Estella never recalled him reading this particular magazine and it clearly appeared to be a successful research project conducted by some highly motivated staffer rather than happenstance. She never forgave him.

Nor did Auri. Five years later, his mother died giving birth to a baby girl. Auri was devastated beyond comprehension. Yet again, his mother's pregnancy was not something that interested his older brother who was firmly rooted in early adolescence and had no time to think about a baby sibling. Auri never forgot the day his mother came home filled with joy at learning she was having a baby girl. She told him that she already had a name picked out for his sister, Remedios.

He expected to be coming to the hospital to meet his new baby sister. Instead, his heartbroken grandfather was tasked with breaking the news to him that both his mother and the baby had died. Days later, Auri found himself getting drenched at a graveside service sitting under an awning that was designed to protect from the sun, not the rain. The boys were provided with an umbrella, which Joe held mostly over himself. Auri sat there trying to match the stoic expression on his father's face. He assumed that was what he was supposed to do. But then he looked down at the bronze plaque at the head of his mother's grave. Next to *Estella Hurtado Hughes* was a smaller marker, *Baby Girl Rachel Hughes*.

Auri fell into an uncontrollable mass of sobbing. His grandfather put his arms around him, but Auri's father shot him a look of disgust. That was the moment Auri became done with all of it. He would not become another Hughes to pass on his father's cruelty and elitism.

Joe held no reservations about following the path his father laid out for him. What he lacked was capacity. Much to his father's delight, Joe was an excellent athlete. He was on the baseball and basketball teams, but his crowning achievement was being quarterback and captain of his high school football team. Unfortunately, Joe's academic acumen was far below his athletic ability. Despite an army of tutors, Joe barely graduated on schedule. Michael contemplated donating an entire hospital, but not even that would be sufficient to get Joe into an Ivy League school, much less keep him there long enough to graduate.

The one area of study in which Joe expressed some interest came to be known as biblical archaeology. Joe was fascinated with the prospect of trying to find proof of Noah's ark on Mount Parnassas. When Auri suggested that he search Mount Nisir first, Joe became resolute (after a long search and learning about the Epic of Gilgamesh first, of course). Unfortunately, Joe had absolutely no interest in learning Greek or Hebrew, thus the traditional route for study in classical era Mediterranean archeology was foreclosed to him.

He was then influenced by church members who suggested that the Bible itself is the only primary source needed for the type of archaeological research he wished to engage in. Accordingly, in a move that surprised absolutely no one, the rapidly growing nearby Christian university, endowed with an enormous contribution from the Hughes Family Trust, decided that they should offer a major in "biblical archaeology." Joe received his bachelor's degree in the field and before going on to acquire a Master's degree and a doctorate from the Hughes School for Biblical Archaeology. Joe's Master's thesis was focused on proving that the scrolls discovered at Nag Hammadi were faked by Muslim extremists in Egypt. His doctoral thesis proved that the Dead Sea Scrolls were faked by Palestinian separatists.

After Auri's mother died, his grandfather followed the next year. After that, Michael became completely focused on empire building. During this time he gave millions to dozens of new start up non-denominational churches which were founded by dissidents who demanded that their churches take hard

line positions on social issues and actively support political candidates. He gave even more to former large churches, of any denomination, to save them from folding so long as they were willing to accept the thirty pieces of silver and become politically active. Michael's formula was a massive success from the conservative Christian point of view. Whereas they were coping with their faith fading out over the next generation or two, now they saw huge new churches springing up so long as they took a firm position on political issues.

In time, Dr. José A. Hughes became the perfect face for their burgeoning political and religious awakening. What he lacked in intellect Joe made up for in charisma. He was an excellent public speaker and the infusion of his mother's DNA gave him rugged good looks that his father did not possess. However, he was wise enough not to disregard his father's counsel. Michael helped him establish Agape, a pan-evangelical network that was ostensibly a ministry but functioned like a political action committee. Hughes Memorial Baptist Church was reformed into Agape Ministries and Joe and his new wife, Ashley, were established as co-senior pastors by lay acclamation.

For his part, Auri wanted nothing to do with any of these schemes. He barely saw, much less spoke to his father after his mother's death. Michael wrote him off as a black sheep. The kid was always ruining every family dinner with his liberal pessimism. Michael came to the conclusion that Auri had taken up his mother's penchant for Latin American communism just to spite him. He ignored the talent Auri demonstrated for organization and leadership. When Auri started a food bank, soup kitchen, and an after-school tutoring program as a high schooler he chalked these things up to that goal. He knew this to be true because Auri refused to take any Hughes money or give any attribution to any Hughes approved organization.

But, during their teenage years in their father's absence following their mother's death, Auri and Joe grew close. Joe's elder sibling bullying gave way to brotherly protection. Any of his orbit who wanted to bully Auri for his liberal delusions would have to go through Joe first. Joe supported Auri in everything he did and he recognized Auri's intellect. He had no jealousy for his brother's talents, but true admiration.

Joe determined that his brother's problem was the atheism he must have learned from the German philosophers he started reading sophomore year of high school. Despite his father's position, Joe was not going to write his brother off. More importantly, Joe realized that he was destined to devote his life to saving souls by spreading the love of Jesus Christ. If he was ever going to be truly successful in this mission, he could not permit his baby brother to be condemned to hell. Joe sincerely believed that he would be able to save Auri one day and the brothers would change the world together.

But that was not Auri's plan. He graduated from high school with honors and went off to New England to a small, prestigious liberal arts college. He racked up a ton of student debt because his father refused to pay for his socialist indoctrination, but he studied English and philosophy and he was happy. The brothers stayed in touch through social media, but inevitably drifted apart.

Joe continued unconsciously following the path his father laid out for him. While on a trip to the holy land in support of his doctoral thesis, Joe met a girl. Unlike his father's experience, the girl Joe met on his foreign adventure was a fellow member of his church tour group. Her name was Ashley Merchant and Joe refused to believe his brother's admonition that her presence on the trip was anything more than serendipity. She was beautiful, buxom, ebullient, and just as filled with ambition as Joe. The fact that her family were Texas energy tycoons and staunch evangelicals was undoubtedly a matter of divine providence as far as Joe was concerned.

After Joe's marriage to Ashley the brothers began to completely lose touch. Afterwards, Ashley was deferential to her father-in-law as family patriarch in all matters. She completely agreed that Auri was a lost cause and he was not worth the expense of energy. She tried to reassure Joe that one-day Auri would inevitably become destitute as a result of his sinful choices, realize the error of his ways, and then return to the family as a prodigal son. She said, "let's keep his room the way he left it. When he comes back, we'll

put a robe on him, a ring on his finger, and kill the fatted calf. But, for now, let's not fight about it." Once Ashley spoke on the subject, Joe realized it was best not to push back. After this, Michael realized that Ashley was the glue that bound his plans for Joe together and he was well-pleased.

But, before Michael reached the age of sixty, he had a massive heart attack and died. Although this turn of events was sudden, Ashley was prepared for a war with Auri. She had a team of estate lawyers ready to go when it was announced that Auri would be getting the house, but that she and Joe would be inheriting far more of the family's assets. She was surprised when Auri agreed to this arrangement without any resistance. She was not surprised when he turned the once grand house into a socialist commune open to riffraff from all over the world. To this day she was convinced that his naïve experiment would collapse at any day. Of course, Evervine was rarely in her thoughts anymore.

Her husband on the other hand never underestimated his brother. He knew Auri's talents and never gave up on his dreams of reconciliation. Of course, necessity compelled it to be a reconciliation on Joe's terms. But a few weeks ago, a young staffer on his campaign came up with a unique financing scheme that would allow Auri to maintain independence and secular status, but nonetheless give them a pathway to combine their forces. That is why even in the midst of his campaign for U.S. Senate, Joe decided to take this time to ambush Auri at Buddy's. He sat at the booth reviewing the proposal for the eightieth time and doing the best he could to prepare for a joust with this little brother.

Auri realized that it was his brother's turn to be naïve. He would never agree to Joe's proposal in the first place, but he had no power to even if he would. Joe grew up in his father's universe. Organizations existed as window dressings for the decision of the person in charge. Joe had no concept of what it was like to work in an environment where one is accountable to others. Auri not only had to answer to the board of directors, but the hundreds of people who worked for Evervine as well. He did not want to have to explain this to his brother. He did not want to be in any campaign propaganda. And, overall, he was too hungover to find a diplomatic solution to the problem.

So, Auri decided to bail.

There was no way he would be able to sneak out of the front of the restaurant with Joe standing guard outside. Auri's only option was the bathroom window, but there were two problems. First, the window was of antique design and after being unlatched was operated by a metal crank at the base of the opening that extended an arm to open and close the window. Auri was astonished that it was still operable, but Buddy took great pride in his restaurant and made sure that everything worked as it did when it was first installed. After fully extending it, Auri realized it would be tight, but thought that he could squeeze through it.

The second problem was that the restaurant was built on top of a basement and this window was about eight feet off the ground. As such, Auri would have to slip out of the window feet first, hang from the windowsill to reduce the height of the fall by the length of his arms and then drop the final few inches.

He thought about this plan for too long and realized that if he was going to do it, he had to do it now. Auri shimmied his leg through the window opening and as he was about to drop, he realized that his belt was caught on the latch of the window. In a panic he scrambled to shift his weight back up to free himself from the snare and then hugged his hips closer to the side of the building to avoid being caught again. He then began his decent, but this time the latch caught on the back of his t-shirt.

By the time he realized what was happening, it was too late. As he shifted his weight down, his intention to grab and dangle from the windowsill was thwarted by his t-shirt unexpectedly being pulled up over his head. He slipped and fell to the ground landing on his ass with a thud. He sat up trying to take stock of the situation and while he was relieved to be uninjured, he was extremely dismayed to see his shirt hanging from the window above him. He made a few vain attempts to jump up and grab it, but reality soon set in.

He was going to have to make this escape shirtless. After a few moments of panic, he realized that Lily had a plastic crate of excess Evervine t-shirts in the bed of her truck after their springtime picnic event. However, he also realized that event was over a month ago and panic re-entered his mind. Lily's untidiness was his only option for deliverance though so he began his route to her truck. His intention was to sneak around the front of the parked vehicles to shield himself from the view of people in the parking lot and then come up from the back of the truck unseen.

As he snuck up on the far side of the truck, he approached the passenger side and was startled to find Lily leaning there, slumped out of view, staring off into space, and smoking a cigarette.

"LILY!" he exclaimed.

"Aaayyee!" Lily screamed. "What the FUCK is wrong with you? Are you mental? Are you seriously mental? You scared the shit out of me! And where is your shirt?"

"Seriously? You worked so hard to quit and now I catch you out here smoking?!?" Auri replied ignoring her question.

Lily just rolled her eyes at him while she took another drag.

"I'm the one who got abandoned in there. I don't know why you're so stressed," he continued.

Lily responded, "yeah, well he never tried to motorboat your tits now did he?" and she took another deep drag.

"Well..." (Auri had been a pudgy adolescent.)

Auri did not have to say what he was thinking, but merely shot her a resigned look. Lily took pity on him. She handed him a cigarette, followed by the lighter, and then anticipating his next request she said, "yes, they're still there. Check the gray crate," and motioned to the bed of the truck.

Auri shuffled the items in the truck bed until he found the crate. His color choices of the leavings were either dayglow yellow or a pretty hideous aquamarine. He reckoned the aquamarine would be less conspicuous and quickly slipped it on. He then joined Lily and lit up a smoke. As he took the smoke in, it choked him and he coughed in a short violent spurt. "It's been a minute" Auri said.

"How bad was it?" Lily asked.

"I think he was trying to buy Evervine," Auri replied.

Lily started to laugh but saw that this event had unnerved Auri so she checked herself.

"He had a fancy printed folder with charts and everything," Auri said concluding the scene.

With that Auri slumped against the side of the truck. Lily just put her head on his shoulder as they smoked. After a while she tossed the butt and said, "come on, let's find Jude and get outta here." She then suddenly remembered where she was and opened the truck. A few seconds later she produced a Ziploc bag and picked up her cigarette butts. Auri appreciated her desire to avoid even a minor act of littering on Buddy's property, stubbed his cigarette out on the ground halfway finished, and handed it to her.

They went around to the front of the truck and started scanning the parking lot looking for Jude. To their astonishment they saw him sitting on a truck bed surrounded by the Agape security volunteers. Notably, the pack of six paramilitary cosplayers had doubled in size. Oddly, they were not threatening Jude, but rather sitting in rapt attention.

In response to a question they did not hear as they approached, they heard Jude say, "then what does the Bible have to say on that subject? Does anyone know Proverbs 18:2?" Jude looked around for a moment not really expecting anyone to answer before he continued. "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing an opinion."

As they approached the fringe of the group, Auri turned to Lily and asked, "what's going on?" Lily just shrugged without taking her attention off of Jude.

Jude continued, "so, if you are going to make the commitment to make the Bible the cornerstone of your life and convince others to do the same, does it not make sense to learn as much as possible about how it came into being?"

John L. started to raise his hand, but caught himself and said, “but don’t we know that? The disciples wrote it, right?”

Jude replied, “it’s not that simple. The first part of the New Testament that was written was Paul’s letters to the early Christian churches.” Meeting confused looks Jude continued, “the epistles. The synoptic gospels were written about forty to fifty years after that. John’s gospel was first seen about a hundred years after that. So it is safe to assume that these were probably an oral traditions that had been handed down over the years by the people in the churches that they started.”

Then big Austin said, “so, what, are you saying? That the Bible is just bullshit?”

Jude responded with patience saying, “no. Not at all. What I am telling you is that before you condemn someone for some point being against what the Bible says that it would be a good idea to learn *why* the Bible says it. Ask yourself if the verse you are quoting is in line with those core principles of the faith. Forgiveness, mercy, which are not the same thing, charity, non-violence, and unconditional love... you know those beliefs under the term as agape.” At that Jude was met with a lot of nodding heads yet again.

He then noticed Auri and Lily standing on the periphery and told the group, “I really enjoyed talking to you all, but it’s time for me to head out with my friends.” As he passed, these men all extended handshakes, pats on the shoulder, and some variation of “bless you brother.”

As he reached his friends and they started walking to Lily’s truck Auri asked him, “what’s with the Bible study?”

“It was not Bible study,” Jude said, “it was a history lesson. I just had to use a language they could understand.”

Auri raised an eyebrow and said, “hmm” contemplating Jude’s point doubtfully.

Jude continued, “these men grew up believing what they believe because they were told to believe it. Their parents and grandparents trusted it and passed on a reverence for what their pastors told them. Then, of course, they would run the pastor out of town on a rail if they heard something they did not want to hear. But, if these guys listened a bit and start asking a few more questions, that is a good thing.”

Auri patted Jude on the shoulder and opened the door of the truck for him.

Inside the restaurant, Joe had assumed the coffee went to Auri’s bowels, not just his bladder. Before he had a chance to think about it, Buddy brought an enormous omelet, hash browns, and a plate of hot biscuits to Joe’s table.

“Hey Buddy. Is this... oh, I didn’t order yet,” Joe said trying to hide his pleasure.

Buddy helped himself into the seat opposite Joe and said, “You’ve been coming here since you were a kid, Joe. I think I know what you want by now. Chorizo omelet, sautéed onions, no bell pepper, topped with bacon. Oh, and Betty made a batch of blackberry jam for the biscuits.”

“From Evervine?” Joe asked.

“Of course,” Buddy responded. When he saw Joe hang his head and pretend to look at his report again Buddy said, “you know it’s still your home too Joe.”

Joe looked up and said, “you’re a good friend Buddy. You always have been. But it’s Auri’s home now.” He then gestured over Buddy’s head to the restroom. “He’s not coming back, is he?”

“Well, I hope my cooking isn’t that bad.” With a smile Buddy then said, “eat you breakfast before it gets cold sport. You’ve earned it today.”

“Oh, Buddy, actually you know I’m really focusing on watching what I eat these days. I was actually thinking about getting the poached eggs and avocado toast with...”

Buddy just got up with a broader smile, bent down to Joe’s ear, and said, “I won’t tell Ashley if you don’t.” With a small wink and a reassuring pat on Joe’s shoulder, Buddy went back to entertaining his guests. Joe took a quick look to see the film crew on a break. Realizing that he had a minute alone, he tucked into his breakfast heartily.