

These Are the Words

The trouble began when he missed his appointment. He had a system in place for keeping track of obligations. Once it had been his hand, covered in blotchy reminders. Now he had a calendar in his phone that he tapped to update. The calendar was not really the issue. The appointment came at a regular time each week. It was so regular that it not appear in his calendar. There was a blank space there, from five p.m. to six p.m. on Monday. He scheduled around it. He always made sure that he could attend. Just not that time. That time he missed his appointment.

Normally, it was enough to apologize for the oversight. It had happened before. It happened one Tuesday evening in the middle of a hot August. Sirius blinked over the water tower on a Morningside Heights rooftop. The Israeli place on the ground floor sent up acrid smells of seared meat, and he found his way to the roof with Belinda. He had run into her outside of his advisor's office and she had followed him home to commiserate. They bought two cheap bottles of Portuguese wine at West End Liquors, grabbed glasses and a corkscrew from his kitchen, and went upstairs. They talked, he more than her. When they got hungry then went downstairs for shawarma. Later she spent the night. A simple apology for missing the appointment had sufficed. Mistakes happen. People forget. Not everything runs according to plan. An apology had always been enough.

This time, he knew that it was different. Part of the problem was that he had missed two appointments so close together. That made it look like a pattern. The first time had truly been due to forgetfulness, but he had screwed up the apology. Something in him had held back. The right words came out, but they bore a churlishness he had not consciously intended. He worried that the change in his tone had registered. Forgiveness came, as always, but he worried about its sincerity.

He had no reason not to go to the appointments. They only improved his life. He did not have to pay for them, not directly anyway, and they served his interest. Missing them was an irresponsibility. He knew that. He felt terrible about it.

He could not talk to anyone about the missed appointment. He could not bear to unload that burden onto someone else, a friend or a stranger. He also worried about what his confidante would say. He certainly could not talk about those feelings in his next appointment. So he kept the knowledge to himself, let it worm its way through his waking thoughts, let it appear in his dreams like a Hieronymus Bosch horrible. It was his secret.

The second time, his absence was no accident. He rode his bicycle into Central Park at 4:10 p.m., braking first for an elderly woman walking her dog. By 4:35, he had completed a circuit of the park. The sun was beginning to set. A breeze had come in. He dismounted and lay his bike on its side. He sat in the grass by the Harlem Meer. At 4:43 he looked at his watch. He glanced at it again five minutes later. He stood up and sat down again. His left leg shook. He pulled out a novel by Gide and read it in the remaining light. By the time he had to stop, because of the darkness, it was already too late to make the appointment. He climbed onto the bike and rode in the direction of Yorktown, where his friend Anton lived. He had to return a pair of pliers he had borrowed.

* * * *

Anton had the nerve to ask about his appointments. This was the following Sunday. They had climbed their bicycles up the Harlem-125th Street stairs early in the morning. Settling into their seats, they

pulled out their tickets for the conductor. He had purchased a round-trip ticket. Sarah, Emma, and Bess had ridden up from Grand Central. They were in another car. Their car was nearly empty. A man in a fedora licked his pen while considering the Sunday crossword.

They disembarked in a small upstate town. After some searching they found the trailhead. A rusting sign told them that they could take the trail all the way to Woodstock. The trees around them were finished shedding their leaves. Anton and Sarah rode ahead as a pair. He, Bess, and Emma kept together. At one point the paved trail ran over a bridle path, and his tires skated through a pile of dried dung. The tires shed the dung over the remainder of the ride.

Anton and Sarah pulled off the trail in a place where the trees cleared. A pool of water formed by a brook was on the side of the trail. At the far end of the pool was a small waterfall. They parked the bicycles and sat beside the pool, taking out food and water and cloths to wipe their sweat.

“Nice climb,” Sarah said once everyone had sat down.

“Good workout,” said Bess.

“I’m just glad to have gotten the day off to do this,” said Anton. “I kind of miss your grad student life, Gregg.”

“Don’t we all, once it’s over,” Gregg said. “But it’s a real piece of work while it’s going on. I have the chapter due soon. This is just a break for me.”

“To rest your nerd mind,” said Bess.

“Sure.”

He had less and less in common with his college friends. Once, when they had first moved to the city together, they had enough to talk about. They all envied his easy hours. Their lives were endless work, fourteen-hour days, romantic frustration, and the condition he referred to as stagnation of the soul. Now the hours were still bad but they had made lives despite them. They thought that these lives made them superior to him. They thought his easy hours were a mark of weakness and his career path a road to poverty and obscurity. They brought him along to keep in touch with their selves from college, with the literary magazine, the cigarettes, the long evenings spent listening to his music.

“You were such a mess the other night when you came over, Gregg,” said Anton, lying back with his hands behind his head.

Bess passed around a bag of salty trail mix.

“Was I?”

“Yeah, kind of. Looking around, all distracted.”

“Oh. How’s Maggie?”

“Isn’t Monday when you have your appointments? That’s what I remember.”

“What? Oh, yes it is.”

“Everything all right with that?”

“Yeah, of course.”

From his tone everyone could tell they needed a new conversation. He just could not understand why Anton had asked him about the appointments. Everyone knew he had them. He went to them every week. It was like asking about a person’s breathing. Or her bathroom habits. It simply was not done. But it was just like Anton. Anton had always been that person.

He felt better once they had remounted and started climbing another hill.

* * * *

“It’s good to see you, Gregg.”

“Good to see you too.”

“How are you doing?”

“Fine.”

“Yes?”

“Uh huh.”

“Are you all right with answering my questions?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll tell me the truth?”

“I will. Yup.”

“Are you sure?”

“Uh huh.”

“Can you swear to it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I just want to make sure. You missed one appointment. And then you missed another one. Is there a reason you’ve been missing your appointments?”

“No, and I’m very sorry about both of them. I know it sounds silly, but it was an oversight both times. I was busy. I let the time get away. I’m so sorry. I feel terrible.”

“Is this a bad time to have the appointment?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“There are lots of times to choose from.”

“This one is fine.”

“All right. Well we can talk about it more later on. I have a story to tell you first.”

“What is it?”

“I want to get your opinion.”

“What happened?”

“Do you know a woman named Roberta Mukherjee? She lives in Queens, near the border between Sunnyside and Woodside. It’s an old brick building, a fifth floor walk-up. She lives with her two sons, Kevin and Martin, who are both in high school. Her husband is out of the picture.”

“No, I don’t know her.”

“You’re sure you don’t?”

“Yes, positive.”

“All right. Here is Roberta’s story. For some time, she has been living off of support from her ex-husband. She kept a couple of jobs for a while, but decided to leave them. She moved into a cheaper apartment. One of her sons works part-time. He helps her out with the utility bills sometimes.”

“Uh huh.”

“There is a small collection of jewelry that she received as presents from her ex-husband and from two men she dated after her divorce, Frank Prior and Gus Scarlatti. Pearls, some gold bracelets and necklaces, one diamond ring. Together, a valuable asset, likely totaling fifteen thousand dollars. A few pieces have disappeared from her collection over the years. They turned up in a pawn shop on Roosevelt Avenue in another part of Queens. Roberta never mentioned anything having been stolen. She never purchased a safe. She kept her jewelry in the bathroom and scattered in a few places around the apartment.

“On the night of October 27th, a break-in occurred in her apartment. Martin, her younger son, called 911. The police responded quickly. Some of her furniture was overturned. The kitchen cupboards were all open. There was a spill on the floor. Her bathroom mirror was open, but not cracked. The toilet

seat was taken off and was sitting beside the toilet. There was some cash hidden in her closet that was still there. Beside the cash was a white gold ring with initials carved into the interior. The police searched everywhere in the apartment but could not recover any of the rest of her jewelry. She lost it all.”

“Wow.”

“No trace of the jewelry has been found since.”

“OK.”

“So what do you think happened?”

“It sounds like she was trying to trick the insurance company.”

“Say more?”

“The break-in sounds staged. She wanted to pretend that there was a break-in and the jewelry got stolen so she could collect on the insurance policies, and then she was going to pawn the jewelry somehow.”

“You’re sure that’s what you think?”

“Yes.”

“If she tricked her insurance company, that would violate her insurance contract. She would lose her payout.”

“That’s what it sounds like she was doing.”

“All right, I’ve made a note. It’s an interesting story, right? Now let’s talk about your life. It’s been a while, so this might take some time, but I want to make sure we’re caught up. We can extend the appointment past six?”

“That’s all right with me.”

“Nothing scheduled for six?”

“No, I’m meeting a friend for drinks at ten.”

“Which friend?”

“George.”

“You haven’t gotten drinks with him in some time.”

“No.”

“We can talk more about that later.”

“OK.”

“Let’s start with Tuesday the 16th. Do you remember that day?”

“Yes.”

“It’s been a while.”

“I remember it.”

“What did you do?”

“I had class, then I met up with friends for coffee.”

“You met up with Ted and Lisa?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you have coffee?”

“The diner on 107 and Broadway.”

“How was it?”

“Good.”

“Did anything else happen that night?”

“No. I made dinner at home and watched TV.”

“Did you engage in any online stock transactions?”

“No, I’m done with that.”

“You didn’t go out to a bar that night?”

“No. I had a lot of work to do. I have to finish my next dissertation chapter by the end of next month. And I’d already spent time over coffee.”

“Sarah Elkins said that she saw you at Harry’s Place.”

“The bar in Harlem?”

“Yes. Is she telling the truth? We know that you dated her once.”

“When did she see me?”

“Sarah said that she saw you there having a beer with a couple of other people. She remembered it because it was the first time she saw you since your break-up, which she thought was strange because the department is so small.”

“Oh, I remember that now.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“Who were you with?”

“James and Holly. James wanted to hang out and I told him I thought I was too busy, and he told me I would only get busier and we should celebrate our lives, being young in the city, and he convinced me.”

“Interesting.”

“Sorry I’d forgotten.”

“That’s why it’s so important to have weekly appointments. Sometime I’ve had people who are so forgetful that we meet twice a week.”

“I’m very sorry about missing the appointments.”

“We can talk about that later. How long were you at Harry’s Place?”

They continued in this way for another hour or so. From time to time Gregg would get up from his chair to refill his glass with water. He tried to keep talking as he did that. He fidgeted when sitting. When his focus drifted from the conversation he experienced depraved thoughts. He had always wondered what would happen if, during an appointment, he unzipped his fly, pulled his penis out, and started to stroke it, just to see what would happen. Or if he dropped his pants and flashed his ass across the room, like a teenage boy. A small part of him thought nothing would come of it. But most of him knew, worried, that it would affect how seriously he was taken, how believable he was. He kept himself seated properly, with his legs crossed, hands resting on his knee, eyes full and alert.

At 6:20 p.m. they returned to the subject of the missed appointments.

“It’s great that you are OK with us going over.”

“Of course.”

“You’ll still have plenty of time before you meet George.”

“I will.”

“You’re sure that you did not intend to miss either appointment?”

“No. It was an oversight both times.

“You’re not unhappy with the appointments?”

“No, no. Very happy. They’re great for me.”

“You will make sure not to miss them in the future?”

“I am.”

“What will you do to make sure?”

“I’ll put a recurring note in my calendar to remind me. I’ll do that until the habit gets so ingrained that I will no longer forget.”

“That sounds reasonable. You’ll have to do something more for me, though.”

“What?”

“You will write a brief statement, no more than three pages single-spaced, no fewer than two, about the value of keeping these appointments. Think about why we have them, what they do for you, and why missing even a single appointment is detrimental. Because you are a graduate student, you will have no fewer than ten footnotes. You could cite some sociology literature.”

“All right.”

There was a period of silence.

“Gregg, I am afraid that you are holding back.”

“No I’m not.”

“Gregg, you told me that you would tell the entire truth. That means everything that has happened. I need to hear the truth. For your sake, you need to tell me the truth. At the next appointment, you will tell me everything.”

“I’m telling everything.”

“We will see.”

He went for a walk after the appointment was over. On the way outside he slammed the door shut, making sure that the lock clicked into place. The night sky had a pearly haze. When a cold breeze blew over him he zipped up his jacket.

With hands in his pockets he wandered from store to store. There was a shoe store on Broadway that he stopped into. They had some sort of sale. He tried on a pair with a thick sole and a slight heel, but did not buy it. The shoe was too narrow, and it pinched his foot. He went into a clothing store. Staring into a mirror opposite, he leafed through the hangers on a sale rack. Eventually he looked down, and a few of the shirts caught his eye. He thought that at some point he would save up to purchase a leather jacket.

After going into a few more shops, he wondered what he had meant to buy all this time. He was now deep in the Upper West Side. He saw the hardware store on the next corner and entered. He had meant to fix the broken hinges on his closet door but did not know what size screw he would need to buy. He also wanted to repaint his living room walls. That would have to wait until after the dissertation was finished, or at least this next chapter, and maybe the one after. He saw the aisle with the wet mops and remembered that his had broken. So he purchased one and carried it the thirty blocks home.

His mind continued to fuss as he sat on his couch. He looked around, and at the TV cabinet. All he wanted was to lie down. The clock ticked on the wall. It was 9:30 p.m. The 1 train ran infrequently at this hour. He had said he would get drinks with George. He had no good reason to cancel. He supposed he had to go.

* * * *

They called this corner of Randall's Island the Funny Farm, or alternatively the Buzzard's Den. It was a patch of well-trodden grass a quarter mile square, ringed by a chain link fence that was topped with a touch of barbed wire. The grass that day was muddy from a heavy rainstorm. The mud gummed the boots of the prisoners who milled about the quarter mile square, forming into lines when called to order by a guard.

Most of Randall's besides this corner was playing fields, for baseball, softball, soccer, cricket, and rugby. The city resodded them at the beginning of each spring. In the summer they hosted a few music festivals. Some of the fields abutted the highway that connected the city's three northern boroughs. On these fields the air was smoggier and the sound of the cars drowned out the cheering spectators.

The prisoners came over in boats from Rikers. Recent expansions on Rikers had mitigated that island's outdoor space. The authorities of the prison chose Randall's to site an alternative recreational venue. One of the prisoners' recreational activities was to walk over the playing fields and clean up litter. No item of waste was too small. If a guard upon inspection of an ostensibly sanitized playing field found a wad of chewing gum nestled in a clump of sod, he had ways of punishing the prisoners responsible.

The prisoners had hours to clean their fields. They could take their time. Some of them found ways to play sports out on the field. They twisted their clothing into bats and swung at aluminum cans or crumpled newspaper. They played touch football with miniature milk cartons. The guards did not sanction the prisoners for participating in these games.

He was not sure whether he had deliberately come over to Randall's. He had meant to bike down 125th. He stopped into a bodega on the corner of First Avenue. When he reached the East River he decided to take the bridge. Arriving on the other side, he went over to the group of prisoners responsible for cleaning Field 14.

The prisoners pretended to ignore him until he went up to one and slapped him on the shoulder of his gray jumpsuit. The man turned around and gave him a stare with his small hazel eyes. Another one said, "What the fuck?" That one was shorter but broad-shouldered, with his red-brown hair thinning to the top of his scalp.

He stepped back a bit but then responded. "Where's your guard?" he said.

"The fields are closed today until three," the redhead said.

"Where's your guard?"

"What's it to you?"

"Hey, don't worry, I'm not fucking with you, I just wanted to know if any of you is the guard."

"Of course we're not. Are you looking for him? His name is Boris."

"No, just wanted to see if you had a guard."

"We've got these." The redhead grabbed his ankle and slid his jumpsuit up to his calf. On his skin, the head of a tattoo representing a snake stuck its tongue down into his boot. Around his ankle, pressing into the flesh, was a thin black band.

"Even if we wanted to escape. Even if I grabbed your little toy bike and took it for a ride. The long arm of the law would be after us. Even if I ever found a way to get it off. It would be the duty of people like you to tell about us, where you had seen us. They would recapture us, eventually. And imagine what they'd do."

"No need for a guard," said the man with the small hazel eyes. The other prisoners who had been talking with them, six of seven, had grown bored of the conversation and turned their backs away, toward the river. Some distance away, the horn of a truck blared.

"I'm Gregg," he said.

"I'm Henry," said the man with the small eyes.

"I'm called Wes," said the redhead. "But my official name is Dave. Why are you coming over to talk to us?"

He did not want to answer yet. "Do you have appointments in prison?"

"Prison," said Dave. "Isn't it a thing? Have you met a prisoner before?"

"No, but I've seen you over here on other Sundays. I bike across here sometimes."

"Isn't it a thing? You know what I'm in for?"

“I know,” said Henry.

“Right, I’m in for shoplifting. That makes me a shoplifter. I stole enough that I’m in here for three years, well originally two but I fucked around with the system my first year. They tacked another on. My mistake was taking some of my loot and giving it to a friend. An upstanding friend. I should have kept it all.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t my question.”

“Appointments? Why would we have those? They don’t care enough about us to have those. We don’t see anything, do anything. They already have us in their clutches.”

“I’m in for felony assault,” Henry said. “Don’t trust us, man, if that’s what this is about. We’re dangerous people. You’re crazy to be talking to us. And we’re crazy to be spending our bit of freedom talking to you.”

“Oh, shut up,” he said. “Do you talk with people on the outside?”

“I don’t have any people,” Dave said. “Henry doesn’t either. He used to have a girl, but she didn’t last long when she found out he’d be in for, what, five? But some people talk to people. Don’t trust us.”

“The people who have people don’t talk about stuff with them, though. No one wants to be responsible for knowing other people’s business. They want to be able to walk away from here, well not here but the prison, well not walk but take the ferry, and all they have to say is that they talked to us and asked us if we were well and told us the news from the outside, and didn’t learn a thing. It’s a lot simpler that way.”

“All right, I get it. I just want to know something: did you confess?”

“You in need of confessing?” said Henry.

“Henry don’t ask that, dumbass,” said Dave.

“Just answer my question.”

Henry looked around at his companions, who had turned some trash into a game of croquet.

“Of course I confessed,” said Dave. “How could I not? The evidence was all there. Where had I gotten the crap from? I was really trying to impress him. I thought he would keep quiet about it. Wishful thinking. But that’s the way it is. You can’t trust anyone.”

“It’s a tough thing,” said Henry.

“In the end, there wasn’t much for me to fess up to. It was all there.” Dave started to laugh. He had a gravelly laugh. “I hadn’t mentioned going into Charmier. Well, why hadn’t I mentioned it? And so on. I hadn’t mentioned paying for any Charmier goods. It would have set me back. I had a nice dinner at Patrucchio’s the day after, to celebrate the heist. I’d mentioned that. I’d been seen there. It was a silly

thing, what was I celebrating, but it was my first crime. I blew a lot of what I had on it. How could I afford that dinner? Why was I eating alone?”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“There’s not a lot you can do,” said Henry.

“And does confessing matter?”

“Maybe,” said Dave. “And especially if you come out with it right away, instead of letting them lead you into a corner. Maybe then there’s some mercy. Because you’re doing what they want.”

“You’ll still get some time,” Henry said. “Unless it’s nothing, what you did. What did you do?”

“C’mon, Henry.”

“Let him say if he wants.”

“Not much a way of escaping it,” said Dave. “The thing is, you’d need a network. A great big network of people all willing to say what they needed to say. But that’s quite a thing. That’s a lot of people to trust. And it’s so easy to go wrong. One bad apple spoils the lot. The stories don’t line up just right. There’s a crack. They blow open the crack. It makes another crack. Pretty soon someone collapses. They want to save their own skin. Who wouldn’t? You’d need a fucking conspiracy.”

“And that’s just what they’re watching for,” said Henry.

“How can you depend on that many people? How can you get that much love from so many people? Do you have people who love you that much, Gregg?”

“Does anyone?” he said.

“I sure didn’t. I sure didn’t. But here I am. Here we are. Another couple of years and I’ll be done sitting on my ass and cleaning up other people’s crap. We’ll see how they like me on the outside. We’ll see what I do.”

“Can people escape?”

“Oh, I’m not in the business of escaping.” Dave looked at him in a new way. “Are you out to get us in for longer? Trying to root out disloyalty? I’m reforming, sir. Are you talking to us because we can’t talk, but you can?”

“Don’t be an idiot. You haven’t told me anything they don’t already know.”

“True. And what’s it to me anyway? I’m already fucked. No one I know of has escaped from Rikers, but there are people who want to.”

“I wasn’t asking about Rikers. I mean, you know, escape in general.”

“Make a run for it?” said Henry. “Leave the city?”

“Oh sure, I’ve heard of people fleeing,” said Dave. “Why not, when there’s nothing to lose? But it can’t be easy. It must be insanely difficult. Where would you go? Maybe you have family somewhere, but you wouldn’t want to put that burden on your family, making them accessories. Maybe you can get to another place, start a new life as someone else. But how would that work? How could you explain that, suddenly appearing? Where had you come from? Where had you been all the rest of your life? In the end you’d have to have a story, and the only story they’d buy is the one you’d tried to leave behind.”

“Impossible,” said Henry.

“Wish I could be more hopeful, my friend. But if you’re in need of confessing, you’re fucked. We might even be seeing you in one of these soon,” Dave said, tugging on his jumpsuit. Behind them, there was motion. Dave came over and tapped him on the side of the head. “You’re a fool, whatever you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“Want to play some stickball?” Henry said. “We use an actual stick.”

“No, I’m good. I’ve got to get home.”

“Home. Might as well,” Henry said. “But you’ll need to practice if you want to play in the tournaments.”

* * * *

The Mets had won the World Series. Their star catcher and his teammates stood in cars that drove down Broadway. The city would memorialize the event with a small brass plaque set into the sidewalk near City Hall. The wind stirred the falling shreds of ticker tape in the sunny October morning. The camera panned along the sidewalk to show the crowd packed behind the barriers. It zoomed in on their faces. Almost all of the children smiled. The station went to commercial.

At 4:54 p.m., he switched off the television. He walked to the kitchen and activated his hot water kettle. He leaned against the counter, waiting for the kettle to boil. At 4:57 p.m., it hissed. He scooped green tea from a jar into his teapot. He poured water over the tea. At 4:59 p.m., he set the teapot and a mug on his coffee table. He went to his desk and grabbed a few sheets of paper from his printer. He put them on the coffee table.

Not a moment too soon he opened a drawer of his television cabinet and took out a sleek silver box. He set the box beside his television. He grabbed a cord attached to the box and stuck the end into a wall outlet. He grabbed another cord and plugged it into a port on his television. A green light flashed on top of the box. The box had no other distinguishing features except for a small cylindrical protrusion on its front, facing out into his living room. The protrusion was covered by a thick pane of frosted glass. It was the kind of glass used in the manufacture of shower doors, bathroom windows, and old-fashioned gay bars.

After a few seconds, a voice called out into the living room. It said, “It’s nice to see you, Gregg.”

“It’s nice to see you, too.”

“Are you all right with answering my questions?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ll tell me the truth?”

“Sure.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Can you swear to it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Have you had a good week?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You were asked to prepare an assignment, weren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have a chance to prepare the assignment you were asked to prepare?”

“I did.”

“I’m so glad. Would you read it?”

He read the pages he had taken from the printer.

When he had finished, there was a short period of silence.

The voice spoke again. “Thank you for preparing the assignment and for reading it, Gregg. Now, we have a story to tell you. Are you prepared to listen to the story?”

“Yes.”

“Good. The story concerns a young man named Ezekiel Rutenberg. He lives on Staten Island, not far from the ferry. He commutes into Manhattan to work at an investment bank. He works long hours, on rare occasions over one hundred hours in a week. Often he will stay in a hotel in Manhattan to avoid the commute back to Staten Island, and sometimes he will even sleep on the couch in his office. He grew up in Florissant, Missouri, and went to Hazlewood Central High School. Do you know Ezekiel Rutenberg?”

“It’s possible. I have some friends from school who work in investment banks. They may have talked about a colleague who lives on Staten Island.”

“Have they ever mentioned anyone in particular? Would you like more particularized details? He is twenty-nine years old, five feet ten inches tall. Would you like more details? If you have any reason to believe that you might know this person, you should disqualify yourself from hearing his story.”

“In all honesty, I really doubt that I know him. I’m sure that investment banks employ thousands of young college grads. I only have a few friends who work for banks, and they don’t talk about their colleagues much. I’ve only met a handful of their friends, and none of them fit that description.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, we will proceed. Every Thursday, if he is able to get off work, Ezekiel meets a group of friends from college at a bar in the lower thirties. The bar is called Rat’s Ass. Each week they drink beers and talk about their lives. One of the friends, Algernon Frederick, has stated that they met last Thursday, as per usual. That was the night before the final game of the World Series. As I am sure you know, the Mets had come from losing three games to one to being tied at three games apiece. According to Algernon, they spent some time talking about a date that another friend, Philip Lassiter, had gone on with a girl he had met online. Ezekiel complained that he never had enough time to go out on dates. According to Algernon, they also spent some time talking about the World Series. Philip did not believe that the Mets, in his words, ‘could ever pull it off.’

“The friends were seen leaving the bar at eleven thirty p.m. by the bartender, Josiah Franklin. Josiah knows the group quite well and remembers thinking that they were, in his words, ‘calling it a night a bit earlier than usual.’ At eleven forty-eight p.m., the security guard at Ezekiel’s investment bank, whose name is Derek Lemuel, saw them enter the front door of the bank’s office tower. When shown a randomized assortment of pictures, he identified the group of young men he had seen as Ezekiel and his friends.

“Algernon has stated that they took the elevator up to Ezekiel’s office, which is on the thirty-first floor of the building. No security guard was in the hallways.

“According to Algernon, they went into Ezekiel’s office and began to talk more about the Mets game. They were spotted by a coworker of Ezekiel, Rashida Brenner. Rashida has worked with Ezekiel for nearly six-and-a-half years. She has stated that she was walking along the corridor and heard noise. She peeked around the corner and saw a bunch of men in Ezekiel’s office gathered around a table. Some sat on the couch, others stood. They were talking. They were laughing. They were laying money down in piles on the table. She saw Ezekiel take a photograph of a document lying on the table. Ezekiel then handed the document to her.

“According to Rakesh, Ezekiel had mistaken her for a custodian, or a mailroom assistant, or something of that nature. Ezekiel told her to shred the document. He told her that legally, she had to shred

the document, and that he would get her fired if she did not. Then he went back to his friends. He pulled out a bottle of sparkling wine and poured drinks for everyone.”

The television flickered into life. On its screen appeared a photograph of a small sheet of paper. A column of black boxes ran down the left side of the document. To the right of each black box were two numbers, one larger and one smaller.

“We have reproduced the document that came into the possession of Rashida Brenner. The names have been redacted, but through subsequent investigation we have confirmed that they belong to the men gathered in Ezekiel’s office last Thursday night.

“Now, there are a few things you should know. First, not all gambling is illegal. Certain types of gambling are permitted. For example, if one wishes to bet on the outcome of a sports game, betting parlors exist where one may place bets on the outcomes of games. That is gambling in a legal manner. Second, it is the state’s policy to punish the person who promotes illegal gambling, not the person who gambles. You can only be punished if you encouraged others to gamble illegally. That means that you either willingly allowed illegal gambling to occur in a location or on a device that you control, or you profited from illegal gambling activity, in other words that you earned money from it. Either way, you can only be punished if you knew that you were encouraging others to gamble.

“The last thing you should know is that there are two ways that a person can be punished for promoting illegal gambling. The only difference between them is how much money was at stake. If more than ten thousand dollars was at stake, the person responsible for promoting the gambling may be punished more severely.

“Gregg, do you think that Ezekiel knowingly promoted illegal gambling? Let me know if you need me to repeat anything I’ve said.”

He sat back on the couch. He went up to the television and looked closely at the document. He poured himself some more tea. The green light on top of the sleek silver box continued to blink.

“You know what, I think he did. But I’m not sure I can completely justify why I think that.”

“Gregg, that is quite all right. Your reasoning does not matter. The only thing that matters is what decision you reach. Thank you so much for answering my questions.

“Now, Gregg.”

He reached down and took a swig of his tea, which was quickly becoming tepid.

“Before we begin to discuss your week, Gregg, we should return to something we talked about last week, which is the importance of telling the truth. In particular, the truth about what happened the night of Wednesday, October 24th, that is, twelve days ago. You remember that night?”

“Yes, I was working on my dissertation in Butler, Butler Library.”

“You stated that was the sole activity that you engaged in that night.”

“Correct. Well I also walked home. And I ate.”

“That is what you told us. But consider what I am about to tell you. We know that you were once romantically involved with Belinda Foster.”

“You could say that.”

“We know that you and Belinda Foster hardly see each other anymore.” The voice listed four people who could attest to this fact.

“Yes.”

“We have statements from Ron Evans, Travers Williams, and Anne Friedrich that they saw you near Belinda’s apartment the evening of the 24th. They thought that it was suspicious that you were transporting a crate up the hill on 123rd, on a dolly, and they all remember that it was clearly you.”

“OK. That was some of her things, from my place.”

“We understand that you have serious financial problems. Representatives from your bank have made statements to that effect.”

“I’m a graduate student.”

“You are aware no doubt, Gregg, that everything kept in the second-floor storage room of the East Wing of Brathers Hall is the property of Columbia University, or held in trust by the university for its rightful owners.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You are aware that some graduate art students, for example Belinda Foster, have access to that closet.”

“OK.”

“You may not be aware that daily inspections are conducted of that closet. Some of the pieces kept there are quite significant, and it is quite important that they remain where they are.”

“OK.”

“You may be very aware that on the morning of the 25th, an inspection of the closet found that two paintings that Winston Frickey, a professional curator, described as ‘subversive in their own day’ had gone missing since the day before.”

“No, I’m not.”

The voice continued to lay out the case. It was impeccably thorough. The voice brought up statements from so many people who had known him or Belinda. The subject of their lives had consumed many of the appointments up and down Manhattan.

“Worst of all, Gregg, Belinda is missing. She has not been seen since that Wednesday. We have statements from thirty different people who saw her that day. Not a single one from the day after. Gregg, where is Belinda?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

“We think that you know what happened to her. Now, will you tell us the truth?”

“None of that is the truth. I told you the truth. I was in the library.”

“Was it just an accident? That makes a difference. Just tell us what happened, Gregg. It can only help you.”

“No, none of that is truth.”

“We supposed that you might say that. On the suspicion that we would figure something out here today, we took the precaution of notifying the police. Sufficient force is present outside of this building to arrest you in the event you attempt escape.

“We need to ask your story to enough people to see if we may legally put you into the custody of the police. It is impossible to predict how long that process will take. Usually, it does not last more than an hour or two, and tonight is a popular night for appointments. But there is quite a large threshold before we can get statistical significance. In the meantime, we will have to wait. We will keep the appointment open. We still need to go through the rest of your week, after all.”

“This is bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“They are all lying, or they don’t know what they’re saying. This is bullshit, I’ve done nothing wrong, I’ve never heard of those paintings, how can you just keep me here based on what other people said in their living rooms?”

“Gregg, you recognize the value of these appointments.”

“I’m not sure I do.” He had stood up.

“Gregg, that was not a question. We have ample evidence that you recognize the value of these appointments. Consider, for example, the assignment that you typed out prior to today’s appointment.”

“You made me write that.”

“We did not tell you what to include in it. Consider, for example, this passage: appointments are not a perfect system, but they are the best system that could be devised by our Founders under the circumstances. They are voluntary. They rely on the voluntary statements of members of the community. They rely on the voluntary judgments of members of the community. You said all this.”

“Oh come on, don’t give me this crap. I don’t believe any of that. Of course I don’t.”

“You do, Gregg. Consider what you said: appointments are only frightening to people who have something to hide. We decided as a society that the system of appointments is far superior to the alternative, which would be a system of constant surveillance, a camera on every corner and in every living room. The world is an increasingly dangerous place, and it is better to rely on the collective agency of the community than the cold stare of the panopticon. You said that too.”

“Bullshit.”

“Nothing in this world is perfect, Gregg. We strive toward perfection. We never reach it. We recognize our faults and we make improvements. Randomizing the pool of listeners who decide a story was an improvement. So was changing the names and genders of subjects and witnesses to protect against bias. If you can think of additional improvements, suggest them. If you believe that our investigation is erroneous, that the witnesses’ statements are falsified, or that the manner in which we relate your story is unfair, challenge those procedures. Otherwise, do not stand in the way of the system of justice that you have always accepted when it concerned the lives of other people.”

By this point he had collected the bat from his closet. He knew they did not have the truth, but he did not want to tell them everything. He had promised Belinda. He was not really guilty. But he could not tell them everything.

“We sense resistance, Gregg. While such resistance is suspicious, it is not our province to determine whether you are guilty of the crime that we suspect you committed. That is the responsibility of your fellow citizens. Your resistance, however, does mean that there is little profit in continuing our conversation. Please remain on the line. Do not attempt to escape. Attempting to evade arrest is a crime punishable by imprisonment. Remain where you are. Consider what you may have done. For now, Gregg Frayman, you are nothing but a story.”