

# THE COMPLETE COLLECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES & THINGS

by

JOHN DERMOT WOODS

(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

## ABSTRACT

The introduction, "Completing the Collection," is a critical exploration of the sources from which *The Complete of Collection of people, places & things* leaked. It is a study of the personal and societal pressure exerted upon us by the aesthetic allure of consumerism. The essay looks particularly at the marketing culture surrounding children's toys in the United States in the 1980s and the public gallery that is the consumer complex of contemporary Tokyo. Each new topic is introduced by a drawing, mimicking the form of the collection it introduces.

*The Complete Collection of people, places & things* is a collection of inter-related short stories. In the vein of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, it follows the anxious lives of several residents of a single town. This town is peopled by citizens named after popular toys and television characters of the 1980s. The stories particularly look at the town's ultimate decadence during the mayoral administration of the shy and nervous Optimus Prime. Each story is introduced by a drawn image, meant to break open, rather than illustrate, the narrative.

INDEX WORDS: postmodernism, flash fiction, story cycles, image-text, comics, toys, consumerism, collecting, Winesburg, Tokyo

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by

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## DEDICATION

*for the bicycle-friendly streets and sidewalks of Tokyo, Japan*

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# **Completing the Collection**

**a critical discussion of  
The Complete Collection  
of people, places & things**

# Introduction

*The Complete Collection: of people, places & things* is a study, through fictional narrative, of the nature of collecting. It is certainly a very personal project that stems from an understanding that my own history has been shaped by a desire to collect, as well as a concept of *sets* (complete and incomplete) that define the moments of the narrative that I consider “my life.” This book is a reaction to the material-driven culture of the Tokyo that I wrote it in, both beautiful and horrifying, a culture which produces a daily encounter with the sublime. The more I’ve explored the aesthetic pleasure that I draw from collecting and collections, the more it becomes undeniable that this pleasure is inextricably linked to the dangerous and morals-consuming materialism that is so essential to our late capitalist world.<sup>1</sup>

Susan Sontag notably wrote, “Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect against art” in her aptly titled essay “Against Interpretation” (7). Perhaps she would warn me against writing this introduction. But, what this comment denies is the fact that art is an interpretation of intellect itself. Kenneth Burke thought that we could interpret our own interpretation, criticize our own criticism, and that is what I hope to do here. I wish to explore the relevance of my own memories. How did my desire as an eight year-old to

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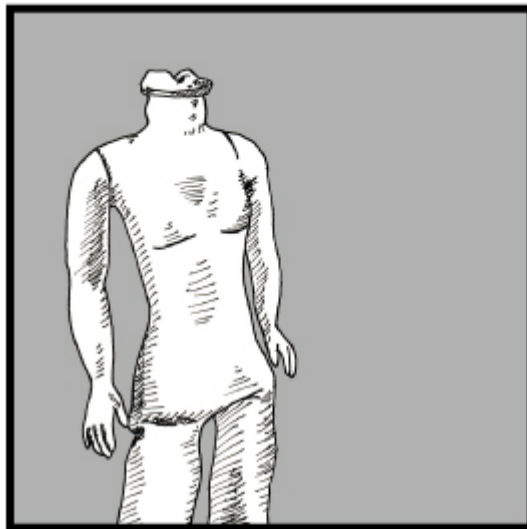
<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise that Frederic Jameson chose Tokyo as a quintessentially postmodern city in his text that defined the very term “postmodernism”. In certain neighborhoods, the streets have become “so many aisles in a department store” (98). It is a city whose language, architecture, and attitude are so full of “breaks” that it absolutely resists any semblance of summation.

own my one-hundredth G.I. Joe figure create my current drive to draw exactly one image of the same dimensions for each story included in *The Complete Collection*? I don't hope to satisfactorily answer this question, but I hope to create a tension in my manuscript by discussing it in this introduction. Theodor Adorno understood that the tensions in art reflect those of society, and I have no doubt that the tension that led to *The Complete Collection* is a tension caused by the materialism that is such a part my life and a formative cultural element of the communities I have and do live in, from the suburbs of Long Island to the sprawl of Tokyo. Adorno believed that artwork could not correct these resulting tensions; that could only happen through a transformation of society. Not only do I hope that *The Complete Collection* can spur such a transformation, in whatever intimate way, but the book itself is nothing if not an account of a society passing through a period of correction. It portrays a strange, little sequestered burg hidden behind some vague and imaginary hills, peopled by the figures of 1980s American popular culture, who are hoping their irrational mirth can prevent the obvious decay that threatens them.

It was this same mix of perma-grin and decadence that I witnessed as a newcomer to early-twenty-first-century Tokyo. It was a society whose consumer culture raged against the first signs of serious economic decline the country had experienced in many years. Consumption distracted Japanese citizens from the economic realities that threatened their lifestyles. The free market, which is supposed to also provide an open

exchange of information, instead offered Japan a temporary analgesic. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited the Yasukune Shrine, a memorial to Japan's military efforts in World War II, and the Chinese rioted. When I asked my Japanese undergraduates what they thought of this, they said they were unaware of any ill will between the countries. When I asked them about the roots of American hip-hop and the East Coast-West Coast turf wars of the 1990s, they gave me incredibly precise narratives and the concurrent album releases to match these events. They understood the trivia of rap music history like few Bronx natives do. When I asked a group of kindergarteners' mothers what it thought of nuclear proliferation in North Korea, an immediate threat to Japan's security, several of them shook their heads and said, "It's a shame" but would discuss it no further, not as if to avoid some taboo, but because it was so abstract it wasn't worth discussing. Instead they taught me about American and European independent cinema; they all enjoyed a film called *Bagdad Café*, a musical, made in America, which I had never heard of. As a *gaijin*, a foreigner, this collage of paradoxes was irreconcilable, the system that supported them was intransmissible to my consciousness. This is what Giorgio Agamben would call "alienation value" which, he writes, is the basis for modern art (107). As it did for Frederic Jameson, Tokyo became a living work of art for me. I certainly could not reconcile this city or apply a system to it, so instead I reveled in its tensions and contradictions.

This state of uncertainty became what Michel DeCerteau would call my “practice of everyday life.” This practice is unique, in that it is repetitive and unconscious. DeCerteau suggests breaking through this unconsciousness by studying our actions as a consumer society, and, in turn, as individuals. The following introduction is my attempt to do just that, to look at this book I created as a means of capturing the interplay of my experiences in Tokyo with my personal history. Burke thought that action exists between reader and writer, and that there is no purpose in studying literature in an isolated manner. Here, I hope to further develop that interplay with my reader by discussing the book’s context. In writing this, I hope to become conscious of what I’ve done, to understand and further the book’s work, as much as I wish to offer my reader additional opportunities to explore *The Complete Collection*.



## **The Collection Drive**



Books are difficult to write. Long, uninterrupted projects are daunting to my hyper-mediated constitution. To push forward I must always feel that a goal is imminent. So, I mentally separate my projects into series, or sets (with subsets), not unlike the Topps and Donruss baseball cards I once collected.<sup>2</sup> The very layout of this introduction and the order of the ensuing story collection is a testament to this mindset; both are a series of passages regularly punctuated with titles and illustrations. I am driven by a desire to collect these passages. The tidy nature of this arrangement, like finding a Norman Schwarzkopf single in a pack of 1991 Desert Storm Trading Cards to get one important step closer to completing my first series, has a soothing effect. Burke ascribes this to our tendency to apply a satisfying narrative arc to the movements in our life, what he would call a “terministic compulsion,” a desire to end or *complete* something (73). Ultimately, though, I identify art in those places where the series ruptures, where the collection resists completion.

A finished collection is not so much a disappointment as a negation; the lust of collecting is in the process of acquiring rather than the act of retaining a full set.

Finished collections are usually relegated to places like three-ring binders, childhood bedroom closets, or series of poly-vinyl storage bags. Kant believed that the collection

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<sup>2</sup> Note the size and layout of the plates that begin each section of *The Complete Collection*. While not consciously created as such, it certainly mimics the physicality (portrait and subtitle printed on a neat rectangle) of the trading cards, the Garbage Pail Kids and wooden-bordered 1987 Topps Baseball series, that once so consumed me.

of raw material was creative in itself; this is what he calls the “manifold of sensation” (128-130). Just as we accept that composing a narrative is a creative act, we can accept that acquiring objects (often, but not always, physical) to be arranged in a certain manner is an action of creating art. In overcoming the challenges of collection, we feel a certain satisfaction. The graphic novelist Seth writes about the disappointment of internet shopping and eBay in his booklet *40 Cartoon Books of Interest*, when he bemoans the fact that buying a computer allowed him to find, in an instant, the ten rare books he had tracked for years (3). The automation provided by an internet browser and a PayPal account deprived him of the craft that was involved in the creation of his collection, the skill it took to browse classified ads, wait on lines at rummage sales, and pick over bins in Salvation Army thrift store book lots. The act of collecting is certainly more important than the collection itself.

Walter Benjamin is a paradigmatic example of this idea. He was a scholar, a philosopher, a storyteller, but, above all else, a collector. His drive to collect, to collect books, to collect quotations, to collect information, is what led to the printed documents that have created a record of his work. He did not see himself as a writer or even a scholar in a contemporary academic sense. He was a collector, and, luckily, the physical manifestations of these collections are his essays and books. In his essay “Unpacking My Library,” he very directly discusses his personal collection drive. But his *Arcades Project* is perhaps one of the greatest examples of collecting as art. He actually tries to

collect the city life of Paris within the pages of a book (or several notebooks) and, as with any sublime collection, it is a project that has never been completed, and, moreover, could never be completed, for that would suggest that an idea so vast as the very life of Paris could ultimately be contained.

Once a collection is complete, it is finished, and, therefore, its impetus is killed. (In light of this, I hope that a vast gap exists between the literal meaning of my book's title, and the nature of the content found within. The gaps in the book were as important to me as the included narrative.) The comics artist Ivan Brunetti, who is an avid collector of found and manufactured objects, describes collecting as a "process of gradually coming into focus." He continues, "When I figure out what it's about, I stop collecting" (qtd. in Hignite 292). Once the mystery is dispelled, the narrative is complete, and the creative process is finished. This applies to both artist and audience. A closed and reductive narrative offers a very shallow experience to the reader, an experience that completely shackles the reader's creative capacity.

Benjamin's contemporary and friend Georges Bataille might suggest that this collection drive is neither creative nor a drive at all. In his essay "The Notion of Expenditure," he puts forth his theory of "unconditional expenditure," in which he posits that the fundamental human drive is toward loss, not acquisition (858). Acquisition is an unwanted result of expenditure. He writes that there is a pleasure in expenditure, but it is mitigated by the capitalist insistence that loss be productive or

useful. I would certainly agree, as I believe would Benjamin and Brunetti, that the expenditure of passion and resources involved in collecting is essential to its pleasure, and this is what I find so compelling about Bataille, in terms of *The Complete Collection*. But also necessary for this pleasure is a concept of production, a carrot. Inherent in this concept of collecting is the notion of a product, a final collection, whether it is an illusion or not. And if it is illusory, it is still a useful illusion.

The fractured narrative that *The Arcades Project* or *The Complete Collection* produces shows that value of purpose when expending resources. Eventually, a story is found, a new idea is acquired. A work of art is created that can be shared with an audience. As an artist, this is the ultimate pleasure I derive from my own collection drive, to gather raw materials and assemble them in such a way as to produce new ideas in my readers.



## **The Narrative Collectors**

In an effort to penetrate the new Tokyo that I came to in 2004, I tried to locate narratives, patterns in the language and practice of everyday life that I observed. To fill the narrative gaps, I began to recall the fables that are most ingrained in my consciousness; they acted as a ready interpreter of Japan's mythic consumer culture. These stories were not the classic European tales, but the origin narratives of the toys of my youth, the Madison Avenue interpretations of Mt. Olympus and Valhalla, the death of Optimus Prime in *Transformers: The Movie*, the betrayal of G.I. Joe commando Snake Eyes by his ninja brother Storm Shadow, even the tragic childhood of the Emmanuel Lewis-portrayed Webster and the presence of his only blood relative, Uncle Phillip (played by tap dancer Ben Vereen). Giambattista Vico wrote that myths are "true narrations," not allegories (131), and that never rang more true to me as during those first months in Tokyo. Fables revealed the history and reality of my surroundings more than any sociological interpretation or demographic analysis could. *The Complete Collection* began as an attempt to collect these narratives residing on the edges of my memory, in terms of my new context.

Not surprisingly, this effort eventually manifested itself as a short story collection. It also became essential to my project that I include a graphic element, as Tokyo is a continually stunning aesthetic experience, and visual image was the most

important aspect of my understanding of that city. The eventual physical form of *The Complete Collection* as a forward-progressive series of stories is perhaps an inevitable result of the narrative culture in which I was raised. English-language fiction writing, for the past two hundred years, has been essentially an object-oriented literary process, dictated by the ubiquity of the “book of fiction.” It is a process of collecting, a gathering of independent narrative units that are assembled in a particular series that comprises a story, a novel or a collection. The inner-workings are revealed best in the “novels” that belie their origins as short story collections, such as Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (which is, as my book’s epigram suggests, the primary formal inspiration for *The Complete Collection*) or the related narratives contained within Edgar Lee Masters’s poetry collection *The Spoon River Anthology*. In these books, the pieces that comprise the whole are still obvious as separate entities; the seams are left showing. Readers can experience the collection process, as these works leave the assembly process (the final steps to “wholeness”) largely to the discretion of the reader.

This tradition has been carried on by the contemporary “short-story cycle,” a term that would most likely be applied to *The Complete Collection*, should such a device prove necessary. Books like Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son*, a series of loosely connected episodes marketed as a novel, Tim O’Brien’s Viet Nam War narratives *The Things They Carried* (also billed as a novel), and Margaret Atwood’s commercially perilously titled *Moral Disorder: And Other Stories* are examples of the continued, if not increased, appeal

of stories where the process of collection is evident, where readers can imagine the original, independent objects (and perhaps re-imagine their arrangement). These loose connections not only resemble the fables from which our contemporary stories are drawn (such as the biblical and Classical myth systems, with their respective shared stables of characters that operated within largely self-contained stories), but they reflect the increasingly brief and episodic nature of popular narratives.

Italo Calvino best describes the role of objects in narrative in his essay “Quickness” from *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*. Calvino looks to objects in fiction as connectors that hold together disparate elements; he believes objects are devices that offer readers a lens through which they can understand other related ideas. Objects are contained and seemingly insignificant, but they often possess the vast symbolic power necessary to address complicated concepts without hampering the narrative (31-54). With *The Complete Collection*, I attempt to focus on this interplay of objects beginning with the book’s subtitle “*of people, places & things*” which is the very definition of the grammatical unit used to portray objects, the noun. Even when the dramatic concerns of my characters seem unrelated, the physical trappings of their world are dragged into each other’s tales: the tent, the Bear, the Blossom District, game cartridges. The objects become the stories themselves, assembled like a physical collection, each with a visual incarnation.



This idea of collection and narrative is perhaps better understood when looking at art that possesses a more physical dimension, such as Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* (the Greek word for "memory") project.<sup>3</sup> Warburg, usually referred to as an art historian or an anthropologist, was primarily a composer of narratives. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, he collected photographs, press clippings, pictures, and various ephemera and assembled them onto boards to explore various philosophical themes drawing images from European antiquity to Native American cultures. It's a remarkably dynamic and living piece of work, pieces of which have appeared in various permutations since his death. His attempt to physically capture memory has inspired other projects such as Gerhard Richter's more personal *Atlas* project which he has worked on since 1961, as well as *The Complete Collection*. My hope is that the narratives of *The Complete Collection* can somehow capture my memory at a particular moment.

My narratives are often based on object models; I look to the literary infrastructure of my predecessors. This idea of formal inheritance can be seen obviously in the comics of Chris Ware, whose page layouts, particularly in his masterpiece *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*, are clearly modeled on the pages of Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* and George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*. He is not borrowing their themes but the actual physicality of their pages, and therefore the rhythms of their

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<sup>3</sup> For an in depth study of Warburg and his process of collecting, see *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* by Philippe-Alain Michaud, translated by Sophie Hawkes.

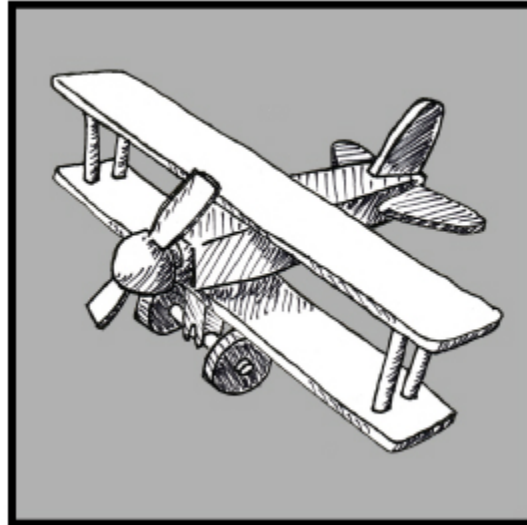
narratives. In this age of material collection, I find it natural to look at stories as transferable objects. Several stories in *The Complete Collection* rely heavily on the formal precedent of various fiction writers, for instance Günter Grass ("Chopsticks"), Virginia Woolf ("Danger Mouse and Penfold"), and Anderson ("A Village Beyond Approach").

Finally, it is interesting to note that Agamben would say that this idea of "collecting" art is not necessarily an age-old instinct. He attributes it to the emergence of the "man of taste" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once this distinction was made, the objects that this man of taste acquired became "collector's items" (13-16). This evolution paved the way for the Warburgs and Joseph Cornells of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose art is based on this very idea of the item having value without function. Inevitably, this drive to collect permeated the less physical dimension of written literature, and authors were driven to possess narratives, to collect them and to focus more on the stories' arrangement and presentation rather than the meaning of the individual narratives themselves.

Agamben describes art as "man without content" (55), and that is the essential concept of collecting: to become unaware of an item's content, to simply appreciate its existence.<sup>4</sup> *The Complete Collection* is ultimately an assemblage of found words, images, and cultural detritus, hopefully arranged as an challenging work of art.

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<sup>4</sup> A beautiful example of this is the fact that Benjamin never read most of his beloved library.



**Long Island to  
Tokyo:  
A Journey  
in Acquisition**

T.S. Eliot encourages poets to be aware of the “presentness” of the past. He writes, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (761). Eliot felt it was important for poets to understand how poetic and artistic history shaped their own work. But it is also important to understand his recommendation on an even more personal level, to look at how your own past artistic and cultural experience affects your current artistic creation. In terms of *The Complete Collection*, Tokyo conjured up the images and instincts of my material youth. I recalled the experience of “sets” of toys based on a system of collection and continued acquisition. The material lust that is so essential to these two incredibly disparate cultures associated them closely in my mind. Memories of shopping for G.I. Joe figures at Toys R Us and picking up weekly shipments of Marvel comics at the local shop were unearthed, not from the long-forgotten regions of my memory, but from that part of my recall reserved for the insignificant, those impressions that were neglected as soon as they were made. Tokyo lent these memories new meaning and vitality.

This new metropolis inspired a similar sublime longing for the things in my past and for those objects and ideas around me. This latter feeling is what Jameson would

describe as “nostalgia for the present” (279-295).<sup>5</sup> It was not an interest in what the Japanese fluorescence and freneticism means for the future but in how it might mark an end of a time, a culture, a personal moment.

Edmund Burke wrote that we take pleasure in resemblances (302). And there was something satisfying in locating my quotidian past playing with toys on Long Island within the strangeness of Tokyo. But, this pleasure would have been less sublime if the past and present was an exact match. Friedrich Nietzsche claimed that in forgetting we get closer to the truth. He describes this artistic state of forgetting as “Dyonsiac” (629-630). Only by losing track of my personal history over the years could I relate it to my new context. If my memory remained more vivid or whole, it certainly would be impossible to associate my childhood quest to acquire with the complex popular art of Tokyo that is driven by another quest to “get.” The murkiness of my memory and the confusion of my immediate surroundings worked to complete one another, and perhaps began to suggest a broader truth of experience. Living in New York or Japan, I had been indoctrinated with an art and culture formed by late capitalist impulses that, whether supporting consumerism or not, were in some way reacting to its ubiquity. This culture of consumerism is especially apparent in stories like “Party Favors,” “Lady Aberlin,” “Kiosks” and “A Pair of Zips.”

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<sup>5</sup> To read more about this idea, see Jameson’s chapter about film, which is, in fact, titled “Nostalgia for the Present” in *Postmodernism*.

In completing this project, I became aware of the constant and disturbing persuasion to thoughtlessly participate in a culture of acquisition. This influence of late capitalist surveillance governments is easily ignored. Adorno suggests that art's ultimate intention should not simply be to satisfy, but, like natural beauty, it ought to "rub (sic) on a wound" (61-62). I hope that my project not only rubs on the wound of consumer pressure, but that it embraces the wound. *The Complete Collection* is obviously aware of the culture of consumption, but it also attempts to co-opt the influence of marketing. I divorce the images or *forms* that constitute consumer culture and recreate new narratives with these loose parts. This might be what Jameson would describe as a postmodern undertaking, in that *The Complete Collection* is not interested simply in what is new, but in the breaks and ruptures in that new system. Perhaps my inability to decipher Japanese culture allowed me to divorce the ephemera of marketing from the material it hoped to promote. And, in doing so, Tokyo itself became an art exhibit. The featured work included over-sized Calpis ads showing crudely drawn blob-people worshipping a larger blob who sipped a milky white drink, photographs of pretty women dressed as men in Victorian finery, and a former Major League baseball player (Tsuyoshi Shinjo, a former New York Met and Queens resident who lived not 20 miles from birthplace) dressed as an aged Elvis Presley and riding a surfboard. The products they sold were inconsequential. This was a form of consumer liberation. So, as I drew together the characters and situations that would comprise *The Complete Collection*, I

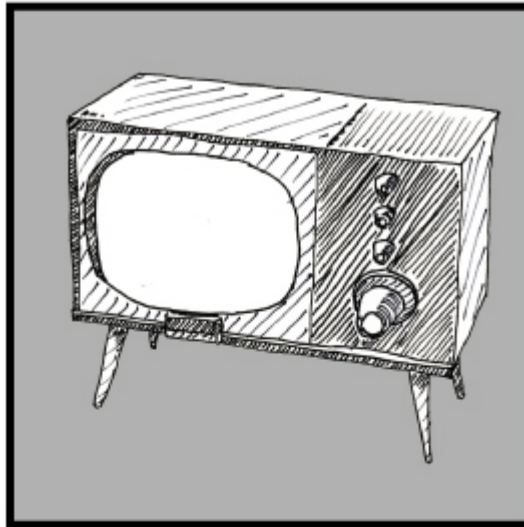
attempted to divorce those names that once held such material meaning to my younger consciousness, and to celebrate them for the poetry of the names and narratives, rather than the products for sale that they once represented.

Naming my characters after toys I had once played with maintains that element of spectacle and wonder generated by the marketing machine. It lends a fairytale-like quality and system to the town and events that are presented in *The Complete Collection*. But, the allusion ends with nomenclature. The narratives contain no further connection to the products that they once represented. In divorcing name from material, I am able to mimic that same consumer liberation that I experienced in my appreciation of the Japanese advertisements hawking products that I could not identify. It allows me to wrest control of Optimus Prime and Storm Shadow (the heroes of my youth) from Madison Avenue, with the hope of telling a story, not making a sale.

Art driven by consumerism is the link that I discovered between my childhood and my adult present, between Long Island and Tokyo. It is a link that only became obvious because of the passage of time and travel through a great space. The similarities that remain between the two cultures are therefore all the more exciting. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing began this discussion of space and time with his critical discussion of Johann Winckelmann's essay on Laocoön when he made a distinction between sculpture and poetry, claiming that sculpture has the unique ability to depict space and poetry the capacity to capture time (339). Friedrich von Schiller looks closely

at Lessing's distinctions of space and time. He describes the "formal drive" which can annul time; it occurs as man searches for the abstract, the universal. This is, of course, what attracts man to create formal art. Schiller writes, "Man is more than a match for nature's terrors once he knows how to give it form and convert it into an object of his contemplation" (qtd. in Adams 415). This is accomplished through the "play drive," a state in which the mind is free, in which it brings together sense and intellect. Schiller claims that civilization, on the other hand, drives these apart (416-417). What was so frightening about my realizations at this time was the concept of how pervasive and well-meaning force-fed consumerism had become. Schiller's description of art aptly describes the hope that artistic creation gives the artist. Writing *The Complete Collection* was a process of gaining independence from a certain monolithic terror, a civilization increasingly driven by material acquisition (and disposal), and finding art within that very process as means of liberation from it.





**Keeping Up  
With the  
Hollywood-  
Madison-  
Avenue-  
German-  
Publishing-  
Conglomerate-  
Dentsu Mafia**

*The Complete Collection* is a system of unstable constellations, one constellation of prose pieces, one of images, and one of titles. These diverse elements resulted from the influence of “competitive” media, various practices challenging my instinct to write a work of prose fiction. To live in Tokyo is to be at the center of constant and ecstatic media bombardment. My understanding of written Japanese is limited, so visual images took on a primary role in my absorption of Japanese culture. Written English became a strange new friend, whether it was by retreating into the familiar territory of novels and short stories or in the odd poetry of Japanese marketing copy that borrows so heavily and, more importantly, so liberally from my native tongue. William Paulson describes literature as the “noise of culture,” and, in the context of Tokyo, that description seems almost literal. In the tradition of Victor Shklovsky’s renowned idea of “defamiliarization,” Paulson believes that literature is not a seamless part of culture, but a presence that always keeps us aware. Literature resists oversight. I hope that the gaps and tensions between my images and text will prevent the reader from reading passively and instead encourage him or her to approach the stories of *The Complete Collection* with consideration and reconsideration.

Paulson does not limit literature’s definition to words on a page, and nor do I. He believes that literature will last forever, as new literature will result from the gaps in

today's disciplines. Accepted written English often comes up short, especially in an international context. Image and an adapted English language (one that aspires to universality) work to overcome these shortcomings. *The Complete Collection* is an attempt not only to use the capabilities of written prose but to capture the possibilities of graphic image and usefully hybridized English. I expanded my set of tools with the hope that these narratives could be interpreted more diversely by a broader audience.

This book clearly borrows from some very specific artistic disciplines. The prose itself, terse, somewhat slippery and at times suggesting poetry, looks to the American postmodern foundation established by John Barth and especially Donald Barthelme. The repeated use of specific terms and references is a result of Japanese advertisements that employ certain "pet" words from English, which English-reading eyes are drawn to again and again as they traverse Tokyo, words like 'kiosk,' 'let's,' 'heart,' and 'excite.' The dissociation between the elements of Japanese popular aesthetics, from milk cartons portraying crying teddy bears to children's dolls used to advertise investment plans, is found in my choice of titles, most of which are drawn from some consumerist source, yet somehow resist the narratives that they announce. The drawn image is more prevalent in Japan, with a cartoon mascot created to represent almost every municipality, civic group, corporation, sports team, corner store, or hospital. This tradition of iconic cartoons is generally more associated with youth marketing in

America, hence my personal association of Tokyo's visual culture with the toys I once owned. It was natural to create an image to represent each story.

Adorno's artistic practice is an apt example of using the influence of one medium to create another. His relationship with history (as represented in his writings) is often described as "atonal philosophy." This term is a reference to the basis of his practice in the medium of music. He was particularly influenced by Schonberg and the atonal Vienna school of music. In similar ways, image addresses my personal relationship with memory.

Describing the source of the elements that comprise *The Complete Collection* is risky, as I hope that my unstable constellations rise above the vocabulary of the media from which they are derived, to create what Marshall McLuhan would call a "new ratio." Schelling warns against the misfortune of restricting one form of art to the strictures of another (465), and, as such, I hope that my image-text will be respected on its own terms and not primarily in terms of another form.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, the aesthetic components of *The Complete Collection* are drawn from the vast vocabulary of consumer mass marketing, a lexicon drawn from Hollywood, produced by other countless consumer vehicles, and, in Japan, dictated largely by the highly-centralized advertising-entertainment giant, Dentsu. The purpose of the work created by this consumer complex is a clear and simple one: to encourage people to buy

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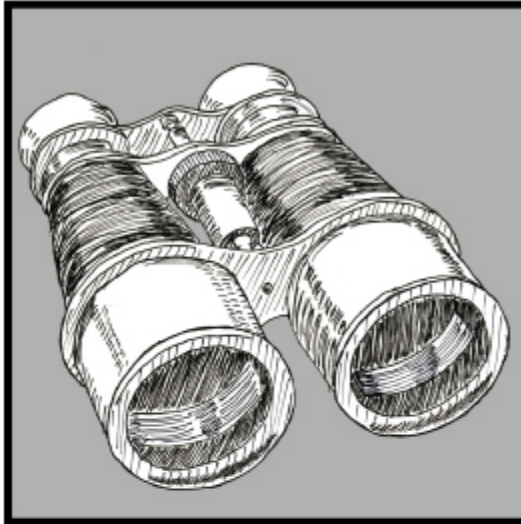
<sup>6</sup> We've seen similar critical missteps when comics are evaluated using the vocabulary of film or the imagistic expectations of painting are applied to poetry.

products. On the other hand, I intend *The Complete Collection* to create an openness, rather than a prescribed outcome. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, he holds up the epic as the highest form of poetry because its great scope lacks unity, it avoids summation (63-64). The gaps in *The Complete Collection* attempt to create that same interpretive opportunity for the reader.

I have found openness in the tradition of minimalism, as opposed to the epic, for sparse narratives lack containment – or completion. Barthelme, of course, is an ideal model of this interpretative minimalism. His images are rich, but he resists the need to “satisfy” with accompanying exposition. The vague oddness of Russell Edson's poetry and adjusted logic of James Tate's environments are similarly effective. The economy of language leaves undefined those things which would deprive their narratives of many layers. The allowance of manifold interpretations acknowledges the true complexity of the world I am addressing, rather than suggesting some false and ultimately harmful concept of a closed system. Even the “conventional” prose style of Raymond Carver, who works in the verbal tradition of Ernest Hemingway, benefits from what he chooses to leave out: prescriptive interpretations and reductions of his vivid and universal images. Carver never “describes” an emotion; he shows us moments. In the same way, much of the work in my construction of this portrayal of a single town involved deciding what not to include. For instance, *The Bear*, in some ways the most essential

character, is never given a chapter of his own. The origins of the town's quarantine are better left undefined.

*The Complete Collection* is a borrowed collage of ideas, images and literary methods. But I hope this is a fact that my reader will soon forget.



**The Display  
Case  
(The Primacy  
of the Book)**

The story is an object and this is an introduction to a collection of these objects.

Collections only have value when they are displayed, in some public or private manner.

As such, the appearance of the book itself is critical; its function is essential to the story that *The Complete Collection* tells. Despite Plato's objections, there is truth to be found in appearance.<sup>7</sup>

The appearance of this book furthers the ideas explored in the narratives themselves. The pages are loose, susceptible to shuffling. The images reside on single small, brown pages, ideal for trading. A single red band wraps the stack of pages, a striking reminder of *The Complete Collection's* tenuous unity. Finally, the book is sealed in a paper envelope with a typewritten label, a portable community, not pegged to a specific geography. The postal allusion suggests sharing and the folkloric tradition.

Lessing's discussion of sculpture and poetry offers one of the first great critical defenses of the value of form. He makes a distinction between the plastic and the literary arts, between the spatial and the temporal, as discussed earlier. He boldly claims that beauty lay in form (339). My project is a literal marrying of the plastic and

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<sup>7</sup> In Plato's *Republic*, he rejects poets as members of his ideal society, as they are interested in the imitation of appearances, which divorces them from reality (twofold). He believes reality can only be found in *ideas* and *forms* which we apprehend through our rational powers, not through appearances, which we apprehend through our sensual abilities.



literary; the artistic intention is as involved in the prose as it is in the book's physical aspect.

In his essay "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument," Stéphane Mallarmé states that he much prefers the newspaper to the book, as he admires the newspaper's ephemeral nature and he hates the book for its "almost religious significance" (674). It is for this same reason that I admire the book. Mallarmé's discussion is a terrific example of how a work of literature's form can affect its value. The same text found on disposable pages of newsprint carries a far different meaning than if it were printed on thick stock and sewn into a binding protected by two leather covers. It is the ability of books to inspire reverence, a reverence which causes the reader to consider and study its contents, which I admire. A book which offers a unique construction that affects how the narratives it contains are read will awaken a reader from habit and ask him or her to actively explore a new intellectual landscape.

McLuhan explains why it is impossible to discount the form of a work of art as inessential. He describes the medium as a prosthetic (or, as the subtitle of his book *Understanding Media* suggests, an "extension of man"). It becomes an extension, specifically, of our senses. The artistic object and art perception is created by the very form of the object. In creating this book, one of my primary concerns was how my audience would physically interact with *The Complete Collection*. I imagined the

experience of receiving a book in an envelope, the different texture and thickness of the picture pages and the text pages, and the experience of breaking the red paper band.

When considering the form of *The Complete Collection*, it is helpful to reflect on Benjamin's concept of "aura" that he describes in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Aura addresses the distance felt between an audience and an object, and Benjamin writes that mechanical reproduction has diminished aura by making the relationship between audience and art less intimate (221). The manual assembly of my project attempts to return some of the intimacy, to engage my reader on a more personal level. The irregular page cuts, off-center labels, and manually typed cover are all evidence of the artist's (my) hand. This evidence may remind my reader that the memories which shape the stories in *The Complete Collection* are the memories of a specific person.

There is a rich history of books in which the form dictates the narrative, books whose physicality inspired *The Complete Collection*. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, often deemed the first postmodern novel, is an ideal object lesson. Sterne regularly placed colorful plates, abstract expressionist precursors, within his meta-narrative. He even famously employed the use of both a blank page and a blacked-out page. These formal choices certainly did not make his editions easy to publish, but Sterne felt they were necessary to the integrity of the complicated fictional autobiography that he was

telling, a story that comments as much on the nature of written narrative as it does on Tristram Shandy's story itself.

In *Understanding Comics*, notable commentator on the nature of comics, Scott McCloud, refers to this physical aspect of the book as "surface" in his Aristotelian "Six Steps." McCloud describes "surface" as "production values, finishing ... the aspects most apparent on first superficial exposure to the work" (171). It is this aspect of the art of comics that was probably the most immediate influence on my creation of the *The Complete Collection*. Perhaps due to the fact that comics creators are visual artists in their own right, this genre of literature tends to emphasize book construction more than purely written literature. Consider the completely different designs of the hardcover and soft cover editions of Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*. They feature not only different covers, but completely distinct sets of written ephemera and end notes. Similarly, Max Ernst's early graphic novel *Une Semaine de Bonté* was released as a series of five booklets, each with its own color. He constructed the book as a unit, but it was important to Ernst that each section be considered separately, and it was by determining the nature of the book's surface that he could create these clear distinctions between sections. Similarly, looking at Dave Gibbons's artwork for *Watchmen*, in which he uses somewhat crude and garishly colored panels for the inside pages, but gracefully painted detail portraits for each issue's cover, we see the use of physicality to determine story. His interior pages establish the feel of pulp superhero comics; a genre, which

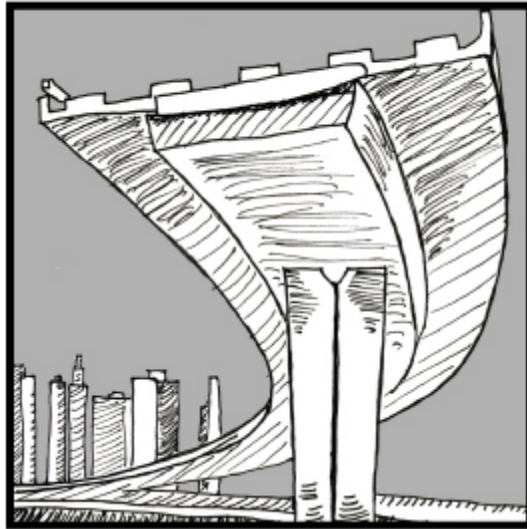
vastly more often than not, asks little of its audience. But the abstract violence and intimacy of Gibbon's covers suggest that complication and innovation that underlie the hackneyed images within. These covers are, of course, supported by Alan Moore's groundbreaking narrative that questions the very use of Cold War-inspired mythologies in American politics. In the same regard, a large part of *The Complete Collection's* narrative is contained in its surface design, not simply in the content discovered by reading the ink printed on its many loose pages.

A recent trend is testament to an increased appreciation of a book's physical aesthetic and that is the increased respect given to the book designer. Unfortunately the possibilities of book design are often mitigated by the late capitalist demands of book marketing. But designers such as Chip Kidd have overcome these market pressures. Kidd works closely with the authors for whom he designs to create a cover and page design that do more than illustrate the book's theme, but enhance the author's work. His design for books by writers such as Ware and Marty Asher, and for Howard Stern's surprisingly well-received autobiography *Private Parts*, is more of a collaboration than a service.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, we see books such as *Vas* where the authorial credit is given to both the writer (Steve Tomasula) and the designer (Stephen Farrell). The story of *Vas*, a narrative-historical collage addressing reproduction and eugenics from the personal to societal levels, is inextricably linked to both the book's text and form. In the same way,

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<sup>8</sup> For an almost complete survey of Kidd's work to date, see *Chip Kidd: Book One: Work: 1986-2006*.

the story of the decadence of the town that I portray in *The Complete Collection*, and the arc of Optimus Prime's mayoral administration, is as much dependent on the words that comprise the stories as it is on the pictures and arrangement of the pages.



## Plot Devices

*The Complete Collection's* fundamental building blocks are objects, materials things. My process began with the conception of a series of people, places and things (hence the subtitle), and the narratives were produced by considering how these objects might interact with one another.

Shklovsky and the Russian formalists were quite interested in the idea of “images,” a concept closely related to my own idea of objects. Shklovsky writes that the ability to remember images “is far more important than the ability to create them” (752). As I’ve already stated, personal memory is my source material. Although, I consider memory and creation to be the same process; I do not differentiate them as Shklovsky does. Memory, which is removed from primary sensation, requires creativity to establish a coherent image. Gaps and ruptures inevitably appear in our memory, yet we demand narrative wholes, and, as such, we fill these holes with inventions, or, at the very least, feel an urge to have these missing sections patched over. This is where the creative process comes in. The human mind has the ability to invent, and create stories. By focusing on these fuzzy parts of memory, and substituting the missing pieces with the immediate sensations of Tokyo’s physical and verbal universe, I was able create the stories that form the completed book that follows.

This brings us back to Calvino's discussion of objects. For him, stories emerge from the distance between these touchstones we call objects, the tangible elements of a narrative. The objects in *The Complete Collection* were drawn from physical objects, the toys of my youth. The process began with the memory of the humid den that still comprises the ground floor of my family's split-level house on Decker Avenue, in North Merrick, New York. The carpeting was beige and the walls had a wood-panel wainscoting. Beside the television, which was hidden behind shutters, was a walk-in closet, which contained the tin sides of a laundry chute that connected our top floor to our basement, the very chute down which I tossed so many G.I. Joe figures, sometimes with parachutes, sometimes without. Inside this closet, we stored various playthings: Lego bricks, Lincoln Logs, Tinker Toys, Monopoly, Transformers, Smurfs, Life (The Game of), Sorry!, and a whole arsenal of paramilitary action figures and vehicles that comprised my G.I. Joe collection. While I staged battles that ranged from the recliner to the banker's desk, I always kept in mind the G.I. Joe mythology as prescribed by the Marvel comic book, as opposed to the DIC television series, which I dismissed as inauthentic. Yet, these play sessions were often staged to the drone of after-school cartoons, which were, in essence, a series of half-hour commercials that were interrupted by shorter more obvious commercials. It was here, at these times, that the images of Rainbow Brite, Glo-Worm and She-ra passively etched their mark into my memory. The battle raged on, and after-school cartoons gave way to syndicated sitcom

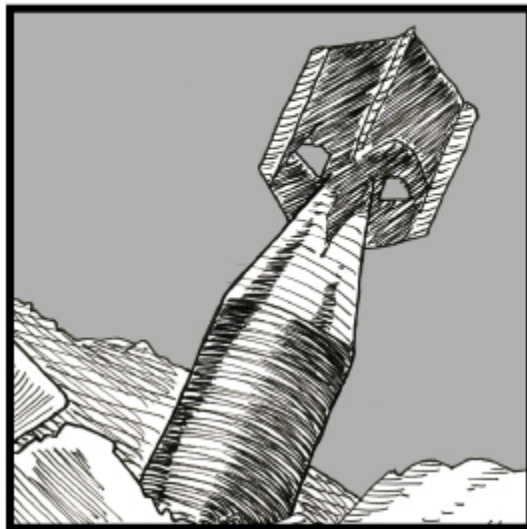


programming, shows like *Webster*, *Punky Brewster* and *The Facts of Life*. These shows left not only the trace of particular characters (like Mrs. Garrett) but ingrained a certain narrative expectation into my psyche: the idea that stories quickly develop a conflict, but that it can be resolved in a swift and satisfactory manner, preferably through some maudlin leap of faith. As a writer, I still find my creative instinct influenced by this progression, and the narrative arc of certain stories in *The Complete Collection* were consciously constructed to subvert this expectation (while the book's complete arc is something of an homage to it). In the mid-1980s, playing with my toys beside that TV set, I found myself directly in the crosshairs of capitalist consumerism. As an adult in Tokyo, I felt like a similar target. Naturally, I used the objects I had borrowed from my earlier experience to interpret the confusing narrative of my new environment.

Looking at the work of certain plastic artists clearly shows the role of objects in composition, as they leave their physical objects on display. For instance, the work of Cornell, which is very much in the same vein as Warburg's Mnemosyne project, displays various found objects and refuse in wooden boxes, allowing his audience to read narratives in the places between the objects he chose. Cornell scoured the discarded and ignored world, and reclaimed pieces of it, to create sculptures with remarkable thematic and narrative unity. To understand how this physical idea can be translated to the printed page, look at the comics of Ware, who often cites Cornell as a major influence (and who has created similar three-dimensional object assemblages

himself), the pages of which often mimic the physical aesthetic of Cornell's boxes. This is particularly evident in the over-sized pages that he fills with small, often wordless frames, including many of his *Quimby the Mouse* comics.

In the same way, these "things" are the devices I use to tell my stories. According to Arthur Schopenhauer's "principle of sufficient reason," our minds construct a concept of the world as a representation, as an appearance or phenomena (496-97). These mental representations become my objects. Schopenhauer further explains that we can free ourselves from this representational world through aesthetic experience, an act of *will*. Constructing these stories was a way for me to control these objects rather than have their representations control me. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari wrote in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (5). My objects are not analogs to some past personal "reality." They are the tools with which I explore the possibilities of narrative.



**Picture Pages,  
Picture Pages**

Longinus asserts that the sublime is an effort to combine inspiration (what Plato calls “madness”) with rhetorical mastery. He believes the sublime is similar to nature and, like nature, it should be ordered (although it is impossible to control) (88). The sublime is a shared sensation of horror and beauty, and that is the exact sensation that my chosen objects rouse in me. In these things I understand a complicated aesthetic beauty with a consumerist implication this is frightening. To capture this uneasy and wavering sensation, the narrative methods I had previously used would be insufficient. Instead I chose to tell different parts of the story using three different techniques, with the intention that the relation of these three elements would inspire a sublimity and a dynamism similar to my memories.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge isolates the elements of Longinus’s assertion and claims that the beautiful is specifically a product of intellect, and not sensation (472-73). Accepting this, I hoped to locate something more than beauty in composing *The Complete Collection*. I searched for a new expression of intellect to capture the sensations that I felt, the familiarity within the bewilderment of Tokyo’s landscape. As such, I chose a method that relied on the unconnected methods of prose fiction, titles, and drawn portraits.

Following Longinus, Francis Bacon contends that reason will inevitably bend to nature, but that poetry will offer something higher. He writes, “Poesy ... may at pleasure join that which nature hath severed, and sever that which nature hath joined, and so make unlawful matches and divorces of things” (81). Settling on a certain technical method is not enough to achieve my goals. To do so, I follow Denis Diderot’s idea that creation begins when the senses are dulled (in his example, the work of an actor; in my case, the work of an author) (43-44). I use my prescribed system of composition to create a distance between myself and my memories. Each aspect – the titles, the stories and the pictures – are autonomous, with an intention to avoid illustration of the ideas presented in another, to avoid redundancy. This was a dulling of my authorial control, an attempt to leave more of the eventual narrative to chance and interpretation.

Shklovsky’s idea of defamiliarization is worth looking at again, as it is also involved in this idea of distancing. The juxtaposition of the elements that comprise *The Complete Collection* will help the reader avoid the habitualization of narrative. The gaps between the narrative features require creativity from the reader. This notion is very much in keeping with Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea that reader continuously *invents*. Art is less limited the more freedom is given to the reader (986). My hope is that neither *The Complete Collection* (nor this introduction) over-determine the reader’s experience.

My basic method is one that explores the potential of formal constrictions, in the tradition of Raymond Queneau's OULIPO (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle, translated as "The Workshop for Potential Literature") group or the OUBAPO (Ouvroir de Bande-dessinée Potentielle, translated as "Potential Comics Workshop") group which similarly explores potential in the realm of comics. The OULIPO working method is to undertake literary endeavors by abiding by a predetermined series of constraints, often based on complicated mathematics. My method is simpler than most OULIPO experiments. I gave myself the challenge of creating a title, a story, and an image to represent each narrative, with the idea that none of them would inhabit the same space or serve the same function.

The graphic novels of Ernst, including *Une Semaine de Bonté*, serve as a formal precursor to this work. Ernst, whose images were all clipped from other sources, such as Victorian catalogues, referred to his work as "gluings." This term suggests *assemblage* rather than the divisive or "cut-up" nature of the word "collage." It suggests both intentionality and the additive nature of his work. His work has an apparent seamlessness that ultimately brings to light what is irreconcilable, and, in so doing, reflects certain inconsistencies in society. In the same way, the disparate elements of *The Complete Collection* are meant to maintain a tension between cohesion and rupture.

My stories' titles are simple, even typical, with the aspiration of being subversive, in that they can be easily overlooked. These titles serve a similar role to Gibbons's

*Watchmen* artwork. It acts as a relief to Moore's subversive scripts. The physical characteristics Gibbons portrays are straight cliché: square-jawed protagonists, sunglass-masked feds, sinister nuclear testing facilities rising out of the desert. It is the pabulum of the state art of the Cold War, the aesthetic of jingoistic Silver Age super hero comics. It makes the unexpected and tragic nature of Moore's script all the more unsettling. The unadorned nature of my titles was adopted so as not to create an obstacle or a stumbling block, to create a sense of comfort from which my images and stories can awaken the reader.

The function of image in this book is the most inherently necessary. The world that I am addressing and interpreting is one that is primarily constructed and driven by visual aesthetics. Tokyo was, and still is, in my conception, an amalgam of visual sensations. The memories it uncovered are visual, as well: television scenes, product packaging, and the color and sheen of action figures. Not including a visual component in *The Complete Collection* would be denying the very nature of the project. The constant challenge was to ensure that the drawings were additive rather than illustrative.

I've already discussed the role of the short stories in "The Narrative Collectors" section. As I stated, Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* served as a formal inspiration for the shape of this book. But his narrative technique plays less of a role; a more unstable method was necessary to capture my subject. A technique that provided narrative distraction was more appropriate, more like the discursive meta-fictions of Barthelme,

Samuel Beckett, and Lydia Davis. Following Adorno's idea of atonal philosophy which I have described earlier, I wrote what I feel is an atonal or *volatile* narrative. The stories' uneasy relationships with one another and with the accompanying titles and images, aspire to a maintained dynamism; their purpose, like Adorno's philosophy, is to continuously "rub the wound" of the audience.

The result of the elements is one that is neither closed nor dogmatic. I constructed *The Complete Collection* with respect to what John Keats describes as a poet's "negative capability" (494). The narrative remains content with uncertainty and doubt; in fact, these are essential features of the story. As I composed the book, completing each of the three elements, I found it useful to visualize the model of an atom. Within the atom, three types of particles (protons, electrons, and neutrons) exist together, some stable, some in constant flux, some sharing an attraction, and others in a continual state of repulsion. Yet these particles somehow maintain a system that ultimately preserves the wholeness of the atom. Despite the gaps and unrest within the pages of *The Complete Collection*, the book's title is not an ironic statement; it is a suggestion of an aspiration foisted upon us by consumerism, an unattainable goal.





## **Fracture and Flow**

The experience that led to composing *The Complete Collection* was one of confusion with occasional flashes of comprehension – flashes that were ultimately more complicated. Living in a city where a language you have not mastered is exclusively spoken is obviously disorienting. But this is an expected confusion, and a fairly ordinary situation in the current “globalized” world. From a poetic standpoint, this linguistic estrangement is particularly interesting in Japan where English is used so liberally, both in a straightforward manner (usually in the context of marketing and advertising) and in an adapted manner (in the form of words that are represented by the *katakana* alphabet). Naturally, as a native English speaker, I searched for commonality or translation in these English words that popped up, but more often I found a completely new understanding of the same word. Words like “heartful” and phrases like “high tension” carry very specific and very Japanese definitions. I found a real poetry in my own lack of understanding and in the distance that is created when two cultures interpret the same language in disparate ways. This distance or gap was the inspiration for the language found in *The Complete Collection*. The nature of the language is certainly fractured in our own natural native-English context, but once it is understood as a foreign interpretation, perhaps based on the understanding of the characters found within the story, then the language can be appreciated for its own internal flow.

In his essay "Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense," Nietzsche describes language's fundamental tendency toward abstraction, which leads toward rational fixity. Concerned about language's inclination toward reduction, I resisted fixing the language used in *The Complete Collection*, and avoided over-determining its meaning or purpose. I did not intend the language I used to carry with it a prescribed set of symbols or analogs. To accomplish this, I bore in mind Jacques Derrida's claim that "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" (284). Meaning in language is an illusion, and I never pretend that it is anything more tangible than that. To use Derrida's terms, play creates tension with history, and disrupts presence (or *meaning*). Play and history (context) are what drive *The Complete Collection*. This lack of stability is completely appropriate for the situation, time and place that I am addressing. It is expected in our postmodern world, especially in an environment so basically in flux as Tokyo.

The rhythms of this language are certainly a stylistic response to my environment at the time. In certain ways, they mimic the English of Tokyo, the English of billboards and the Japanese language. William Wordsworth encouraged poets to use the language of everyday men (438), but *The Complete Collection* does not use it so much as co-opt it. It borrows from the everyday use of marketers and Japanese mass culture, an everyday use of which my own understanding is intermittent, and applies this language to its own purposes. The cadences, vocabulary selections, and indirect syntax

that are often found in long paragraphs on bottles of water or lipstick advertisements, became the exact models on which I based each story in *The Complete Collection*. Transliterating this marketing copy into my stories lent them a necessary tone of foreignness.

Davis, whose spare prose I previously cited as a particular influence, recommends against the use of “adspeak” or jargon in fiction writing. I flout this recommendation completely, but with the specific intent of undermining the meaninglessness that corporate marketing attempts to impose on our language. My intentions are quite similar to those of poet and Dadaist André Breton who felt that language should be used to irritate and disrupt, and whose life and work was committed to this idea. I aim to cause this irritation both in context of the narrative itself, and in conversation with readers’ contexts. My hope is the language I use in *The Complete Collection* questions the use of clichés by major administrations, both commercial and political. Barth best tackled the problem I am addressing when, referencing Hemingway, he described the use of abstract language to address war, in particular, as obscene (par. 17).

Ernst’s *Une Semaine de Bonté* is once again a useful example. He was certainly responding to the political situation in Germany at the time of his work’s composition, the early-1930s, a time when the Nazi party was coming to power. There is reference in the five pamphlets that make up *Une Semaine de Bonté* to the Seven Deadly Sins, but

Ernst avoids a direct correlation. His work is more powerful in that it suggests certain specific issues, but is not engineered in such a way to fix it specifically and exclusively to a single analog. My hope is that the language of *The Complete Collection*, a fractured vocabulary and grammar that is dictated by its own flow, allows the book's story a similar expansiveness.

# Conclusion

Despite the specific thoughts and interpretations I've offered here, I hope that *The Complete Collection* can overcome them, that it can create a new ratio between its elements that is divorced from Tokyo, G.I. Joe, NBC's Saturday morning lineup, Calpis and Pocari Sweat drink advertisements, and all its other sources.

As *The Complete Collection* proves, I certainly embrace or, at least, feel moved by the instinct to collect things. But I wish this book to undermine the tyranny of acquisition that often accompanies this drive to collect.

Adorno suggests that the best political corrective is not art that addresses political concerns, but art which presents its own tensions so successfully that the flaws in society cannot be ignored. In the same way, I hope that, above all else, a *tension* pervades *The Complete Collection*, a sense of nervousness and unease that points to the same struggle that we create and endure in our own everyday practices.

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By remembering it I have been able to understand many people and things  
that I was never able to understand before.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON, *WINESBURG, OHIO*

# **A Village Beyond Approach**

THE COLLECTOR, an avuncular man who smoked short, fat cigarettes, broke his pen nibs much more often than he should have. They were all gifts and made of gold, a very soft metal. A young man – who drank his coffee in slurps and broadcast his opinions loudly – saw the collector struggling mightily with his broken pen. The brash young man offered him a box of ballpoints, erasables. After all, the collector needed to transcribe the world around him, and a broken pen shouldn't be enough to stop his work – which was the actual creation (not recording) of posterity.

The collector scrawled a few shapes with his new disposable pen and spoke to the young man beside him. He lit a cigarette, a signal he was taking a break from his writing. They talked about history and who could create it.

The collector admitted there were times his pen lost the shape of the world he intended to craft. He was once a part of a league (he thinks it was organized by the local Policeman's Benevolent Association). It was a whole collection of collectors who pooled their efforts. They compared, contrasted, refined, and traded their doubles. But, over the years, trends kept changing, and, as such, the process of transcribing history became more taxing. Most of his compatriots found more ephemeral subjects to collect and

quickly discard. Alone, his words faltered and he fell silent. He stabbed his new pen at an empty page, piercing his notebook ten pages deep. The young man couldn't bear an unstable collector, and he took his pens back.

The collector watched the stars glittering on the cover of his shut notebook. He picked it up and wrung it tight. The young man took that too. It was too valuable to lose. The collector smoked four more cigarettes then threw away the rest of the pack. Right then, he understood the history he had created. *For the first time*, he told the loud young man. He needed his notebook back, his story; he needed to set it straight. The young man acquiesced.

The collector began all over again, and he scratched out the world as he thought it should be understood. He claimed this work was a *culmination*. When he was done, his companion was still beside him. *This is the final record of our time*, the collector said. *It can no longer be approached*. He gave the notebook to the young man, but said he'd like to keep the box of ballpoints, should anything else strike him.

I saw the notebooks only once. It wasn't just a recounting, or a Manual; it was complete. Seized by the frenzy to acquire history, I don't know that the collector ever understood that his goal was fully realized. I don't remember it all, but I do remember that it was

certainly focused. He thought he was creating the whole world, but, as I read it, it was clearly his own world. It could not have been anything but a recreation of his home – a much more valuable resource than the project he had intended. I can't visit that town, but I can see it in my own. I see pieces of my world that I thought would be forever hidden.

It is the complete reality of his accounts that made them so unapproachable. His descriptions are ultimately comprehensive; his world was one that left no luxury for erosion. Its reality was certainly what prevented his notebooks from being printed (and reprinted). The book only lives on in the flawed memory of me and the others of my time who had the opportunity to read his hand-scrawled notes.

The young man accepted the collector's writings, each and every notebook that he had filled on the bench that day. Then he reclaimed his box of pens, as the collector wanted to keep going, filled with a lust to gather. But the young man told him that history had been complete and he refused to let the collector change a thing.

\*

Here I can only report his wholeness with my own imperfect recall.



**Optimus  
Prime**

OPTIMUS PRIME SWORE he'd never run for mayor. He suspected it was filthy business, like an unwiped big rig leaving the loo. Now he was standing on the pulpit, preparing to speak, to preach to his converted. Not bad for Optimus; he had spent all of fourth grade worried about a urine stain. Right in the crotch of his gray sweatpants. A perfect circle where the four corners met and the stitches pulled apart. He tried to wipe it away and actual moisture came off, onto the palm of his hand, right the middle – where his handlebars had left a nubby little callus.

Optimus kept the inside of his little windowpanes mote-free. His mother provided him with vinegar. His sidewalk cracks were filled with sprouts of grass, but his vacuum had covered every surface inside. He only opened his door to let in his one friend, The Bear. Neighbors wondered why the two men would be such friends. Especially men as overgrown as Optimus and The Bear. They had a schedule: The Bear always visited for twenty-six minutes, about twenty-five times a year. He often had an idea, an idea that made Optimus say *I shouldn't* – always a good idea. Mayoral candidacy was a new kind of idea; it didn't suit Optimus in any way. Yet, for the first time, Optimus considered one of the Bear's propositions. *Nothing's going to change* – The Bear held Optimus's mitt in his own – *No need to transform your life*.

The Bear convinced him to do it. He said the whole situation would be MINT. *Agreed, but my problem is I stay inside.* So, right then, The Bear took him out for a ride, out for a conversation. Two seats, tandem: The Bear talked, and Optimus Prime was given no chance for rebuttal. The more The Bear talked, the more they had to pedal. They just outran the new tram at the intersection. Optimus saw his future; he saw it glistening on the sweaty fur before him, the fur creeping over the edge of a tank top.

The Bear's primary reason: puppetry. Optimus Prime could comfortably sway at the ends of the Bear's strings. The delicate Mr. Prime was unoffended by this suggestion, even impressed. *Perhaps* – his nod betrayed his steel face – *but only if there's a per diem involved.* (He'd watched his father work a deal before, when he was young. He could get Optimus a single pair of sweatpants at the bulk rate. Although, sometimes he'd have to pull the drawstring through himself.) The Bear assured Optimus that he'd take up a collection at The Gathering each week, if there wasn't any other compensation. Optimus left everything in his hands. He wondered if The Bear's visits would be more frequent now?

Daily schedule of a figurehead mayor (patriarchal duties informally eschewed): Mornings are spent at the public pool, circle-swimming, satisfied with the knowledge



that the admission fee was comped. Brunch with a spork. The arcade doors are opened and a bucket of tokens provided. A space at the foosball table is offered and politely declined. On to World of Burgers (W.O.B.) for the crinkle-cut fries. The day ends with a reinvestment of the money saved (several bits) in Pay-Per-View. In the silence of the evening, the absence of an ursine presence is impossible to ignore.

They were all going to vote for him anyway. Your-Next-Mayor Prime stepped away from the microphone before he even tapped it. He let The Bear do the talking.



**Alf**

TRY NOT TO WORRY about Alf. Contrary to word about town, she had not been sent to the desert; she chose to be left alone (just as Optimus Prime chose to be alone no longer). She lived right downtown, in fact – in an attic apartment above the alchemist. It was a wonderfully stimulating atmosphere where varied aspects of the town's hubbub were channeled to her. Her apartment was composed of vents, chutes and shafts more than proper rooms. With that kind of access, she had very little reason to come down and see what was going on.

Early on, Alf saw the worst. She used to maintain a kiosk in town, a difficult industry. She was on the street from daybreak until she could hear the bartenders inside calling final rounds. Usually it was blossoms, but she'd sell whatever needed selling that day. She suffered often back then; her bones tightened and her ligaments balked. But she was willing to struggle. The pain in her limbs became so acute at times that she needed to be carted about. Still, whatever it took, she never missed a shift. When Optimus Prime's tax policy hemmed her in, she found new revenue streams. She endured a lot: her stands were knocked over, rain arrived in torrents, restrictions generally impinged, fashion trends discouraged consumption, and she was struck with common colds more

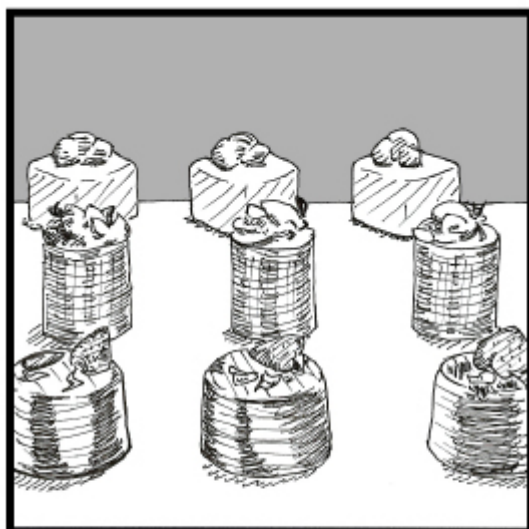
often than most. Nevertheless, each fiscal year, her profit margin was considerable, several bits more than her closest competitor.

It was a problem at home that finally took her from the streets. A fire began in her living room at midday and, by the time she clocked out, it had climbed throughout her house. She had been trying out new recipes. One called for a slow boil. But it turned out that had been a misprint.

Alf couldn't risk another complete domestic loss. Her books wouldn't balance. So she decided to rent. She scoured the listings for a new place. She searched *smart*. She'd live off the fat of her venture's liquidation. The classifieds came up dry, but her senses were keen. She was always on the hunt. One day, she was waiting for the alchemist to concoct a particular conjuration that had been prescribed to her. Despite the fact that she was thumbing through her wallet, counting out her co-pay, her search was still on. She hinted that a new home would suit her. The alchemist, filling a paper bag with powdered metals, nodded to the door in the back of his shop. Alf seized the moment and entered, following the stairwell behind it. She planned to leave the store that day with a cure; instead she stayed – with a solution.

Word under the tent on Tuesday evenings was that Alf was too pleased to emerge (at least among those who would admit she hadn't headed for the hills). The Bear would neither confirm nor deny her whereabouts; he replied with only the huffy look of why-would-you-ask. He then whispered something urgent into his black headset.

The Bear did mention Alf to Mayor Prime on one very private, most likely tipsy, occasion. Certainly, it was a slow day – a town holiday or a snow emergency. *Alf*, he said, *has found her own epicenter in that attic*. He continued, *and I'll tell you something else, that neither you nor I might want to admit: she's installed herself at the center of this whole goddamned town*.



**Chopsticks**

THE VALUE OF A SIMPLE PAIR of chopsticks had been increasing steadily since the revision of the standard cuisine. The prevailing dishes around town were prepared such that they could only be enjoyed with a clean pair of chopsticks. But supply was limited, and no chopsticks were natively grown or manufactured. There was obviously a great desire to build a factory, but there was almost no room to expand, and Optimus Prime's Administration wasn't about to shut down any of the conventional utensil plants (even Spork Manufacturing, Ltd.). Not to mention, most of the proffered chopstick money was from the pockets of the biggest eaters (The Honourable Society of Gourmets and Gourmands), which was clearly a conflict of interest – not the kind of muck Optimus Prime and his people were about to dip their hands in. After all, he had only been mayor for a few weeks, and one of his stated goals was to never rise above figurehead status.

Mr. Greenjeans was importing a fair number of chopsticks to sell in his shop. Some people even suspected that he was exceeding his quota. They fetched a good price. The premium pairs were precisely arranged in a velvet-lined show window. They became the item-to-have in the early autumn months. Some people would gather in giddy

crowds around his window to admire the high-end chopsticks; others would try to find a quiet moment alone with the display.

Mr. Greenjeans watched them from his stool behind the register and was charmed by the spectators' murmurs and sighs. But that only made him want to feel their admiration more intimately. One night, after work, he left his shop unlocked and settled himself behind the hedgerow across the street. Who wouldn't be tempted by those glorious chopsticks, free for the taking? They were the fancy kind.

It was a quiet night, but citizens strolled by at regular intervals. Without fail, his chopsticks gave them pause. But it took a special woman to actually check the lock. Her name was Belle, the very same woman whom Mr. Greenjeans could never marry. She nudged the door and it swung right open. She walked into the shop as naturally as she would into her own home. *If only it were*, Mr. Greenjeans thought. He longed to cross the street as he watched her caress and sample each pair of chopsticks. Her soft hands gently tested every set in the window, prodding and then grabbing a feast of invisible food. He wanted to go to her, but he remained rooted to the rich soil behind the hedge. Belle selected a fairly modest pair and tucked them inside her coat. She left the shop, remembering to close the door and set the lock before she did so. Mr.



Greenjeans sat alone, stunned by the sight of his altered display, now centered around a glaring absence.

He could have stopped her; he could have saved her at the last moment. But he wanted her to have those chopsticks. He would let her bear the burden on her own. When he arrived at the shop the next morning, the authorities were already waiting for him, pads and pens at the ready. The theft was excessively apparent to the whole town, and the officers were visibly shaken. *How could someone steal something so valuable?* they asked. They took it personally; Mr. Greenjeans's chopsticks had become the pride of the town. It pained him to do so, but he admitted to witnessing the crime.

Despite agreeing to identify Belle, Mr. Greenjeans could not bear to see her arrested. The only idea more unbearable was living in a town where depravity such as Belle's was left unchecked. The sour taste of the theft, and her subsequent removal, never left him. Chopsticks' popularity continued to grow, and Mr. Greenjeans became a very rich man. But, at his own table, he swore them off completely. Eventually, the town phased out knives and forks all together, but, even then, Mr. Greenjeans ate only with his hands – sometimes not washing them for days.



**Gargamel**

GARGAMEL HEARKENED BACK to the dancehall era. He was the very engineer of that time, opening hopping joints on the north side, the south side, and the Blossom District. Back then, it wasn't rare to see him standing, near the entrance of any of his dancehalls, tapping his foot, humming softly, a different song than the one pulsing from behind the closed door at his back. But he'd never stay for long – there was always another set list to write, a mathematical model to be built. In those brief moments you saw him, it was obvious that he was a business man, and it was obvious that he loved his customers.

There was a time when sessions at Gargamel's dancehalls were the brightest nights in town. Capacity would be long surpassed, but Gargamel's main muscle, El Capitan, might be found to prop open a backdoor, let in a few stragglers. But, as fate would have it, mayors came and mayors went again, each one leaving a new distraction, a new recreational legacy. More and more people spent their Fridays at the sack races, under laser lights, or breaking records of speed. Fewer and fewer dancehalls were necessary, until finally, Gargamel's last interest was forced to shut down.

The cops had let the dancehall stay open until the sun rose on its ultimate night. Gargamel himself had waited out the final set in the tall grass around back, lying in it,

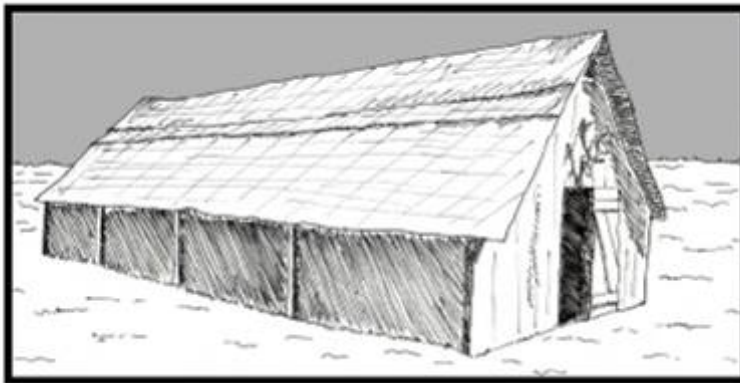
drumming his fingers to some unheard beat. Everyone who had ever stepped foot in one of those dancehalls had cried for him: *his time had come too soon*. But when the last record had faded, Gargamel himself wasn't sure they were right about that.

His real challenge had become finding a role in the everyday running of things. He got a job with the Town: tending official matters and running trips for the kids. He didn't mind playing his role, easing into age. He brought the ladies rugalach from EasyBake's on Thursday mornings; they cooed and called him king. Afternoons with his feet up in the sportshack suited him; he lent Frisbees and kickballs, and recorded the loans lazily. He didn't put his own calendar on the wall of the shack, but he was sure to flip the month on his coworkers' calendars (zeppelins for Willy Joe and llamas for Tank) every thirty days or so. If he saw the sprinklers outside his window pop up off-schedule, he put in a call to maintenance.

On Saturdays in August, Gargamel led the ten-to-twelve years on excursions to the carousel by the bay. 'Round and 'round, then a cotton candy and a dip in the drink. The Bear had gone on one of these Saturday trips as a kid, and, when he arrived home – even after the forty-five minute van ride back to downtown – he was still crying. The gray Gargamel told his parents and, later, The Board, that The Bear was *inconsolable*. Forums convened behind closed doors and Gargamel waited at home drinking herbal

tea at a furious rate. When the verdict was handed down, he was out of a job. They told him if he kept quiet, severance would be paid and details wouldn't be disclosed. He wished they had at least discussed the matters with him.

As an adult, The Bear shouldered many responsibilities as the-man-behind-the-mayor. He now had access to the *Sears' WishBook* and in it he found the address of the complex where Gargamel was living. He dropped a note to the boys in landscaping. Every Thursday morning from then on, Gargamel's lawn was shorn and his bed's were turned. Tuesday nights under the tent, an empty seat remained in the first row. When people asked if the seat was taken, The Bear always said it was. He would always say, *That seat's reserved for Gargamel.*



**The Hall**

THE HALL WAS just as you'd expect, everything as it should be. It was each of the following: long, festive, well-equipped. The Hall was not a place you admitted to visiting. But, when the door was lifted – *just for you* – you checked your top hat or crash helmet and left the kid a buck. You wanted to be drunk in and swilled around until you were lukewarm and cozy. There were corners all over The Hall, and those interstices were where the living went down.

One night, a group entered ... inhaled ... and promptly exploded. Every single one of them. It was a goddamned mess. Punky Brewster, who was sitting at the counter, watched the whole thing, but she didn't say a blessed word. And Optimus Prime was there (The Bear watching his left side, as he always did when the mayor was out too late) and no one said a word – about that. The clerk threatened to close up shop, but everyone knew better than to trust his word. He just shoved his tip jar toward the crowd and manned his post. The regular customers traded sidelong glances and smiled. The clerk couldn't share the things he felt about the darkness he saw in The Hall every night, but he promised himself that closing time would be severe that night. There had been a terrible explosion on his watch, and those responsible would be made to respond.

When he rang the bell, several patrons were left behind, some to account, others to atone.

A lineup of the top suspects was called and the clerk's staff set to work. One potato, two potatoes, three potatoes – they were all there. *Now that we're gathered*, the clerk offered. *Who's going to pay for all of this?* his chief chimed in, thrusting a long, straight finger at the mess. Guilty silence was broken by a rustle from the nether rafters. Down dropped a pigeon and squirrel. They ran and, of course, the squirrel beat the bird. The rodent was awarded the only exit. The bird was left to fly headlong, again and again, into that sash that had fallen shut.

*I know how to settle this!* Punky Brewster said, still at the counter, polishing off her final round. *It'll be a race. A freeforall to the ends!* The clerk and his chief called a huddle. They decided a race would definitely determine who was responsible. The two men shook hands, and their staff added a chorus of nods (no gusto was spared). The lineup riffled.

*On your marks, getset ...BOOM BOOM BOOM.* The race had begun but nobody moved. The suspects were frozen – out of options for escape but unsure they could each outperform the others. Their only hero (his name is forgotten due to traumatic



indifference) stepped forward. Nobly, he sent the rest home – safe. Punky Brewster had a few extra minutes and spun her stool around to watch. Fellow suspects absolved, the man faced first the clerk and then his chief. *Are we ready?* And so continued the night of nods. *You know what you have to do*, the man was told. *More than you know*, he replied.

The guilty party began to run his course. From beside his table he glided north to the mirrors and made his turn. Then he paced forward, toward the The Hall's origin, a direction as yet unplumbed. Inconclusive finity was suggested, and, hoping for proof, the late night crowd stared, shallow-breathed. The man strode toward the unexplored section and he diminished, as prescribed. Away away away – cyclical physics set in – and then: an End.

(Nobody made a report. What happened happened. And how could they have known anyway? Eyes pregnant with emotion, all along the quiet Hall, and nobody needed to say aloud what they all understood; nobody needed to be told to hide their story when the sun came up – should its daily return prove true.)



**Hacksaw  
Jim**

LUCKILY, Hacksaw Jim could light a flame under the whole damn town. But, for a price. Pay him two bits and he'd strike flint. Results weren't his worry; starting things was. He was long gone before his laborious fruits dropped from the tree. He paused just long enough to let you see those orange and yellow pinwheels spin in the glass of his rapt eyes, then he was long crosstown enjoying a draught or an espresso by the time the black-and-gray arrived. Later in the evening – on occasion – he'd sneak a peak at the horizon to see if a bird had responded to his call. He told himself that he didn't care if it never came, expecting it was good enough.

Late on one particular Tuesday morning, crackling booms slowly drew Hacksaw Jim from his sleep. Peeling back his shade just-so, he glimpsed the park below – all tar, no terrain. An old man on his bicycle drew circles, so tight he almost tipped. Almost, until he was saved by the thick heels on his new boots. To celebrate the end of each little lap, he drew a single red rocket from his pocket. Lit and released, the rocket set out on its own to explore the depths of the teeming concrete neighborhood that surrounded them. Neither Hacksaw Jim nor the old man bothered to follow the path of the shot. Jim watched his newly-discovered old man, and the old man tended his whirring pedals. Go-stop-go. Two rockets, three rockets, four rockets – shouts. Hacksaw Jim drew his

shade on neighborly politics. Five rockets. He cocked an ear and found no more crackling booms. Back to bed for Hacksaw Jim.

On Wednesday (of the very same week), the rocket's report came early. Dispensing of a doublecheck, Hacksaw Jim zipped down three flights to the blacktop below. The old man had honed his acumen; now he could pedal and shoot at the same time – no problem. Rocketly refuse settled over the bungalows and townhouses, twinkling dust decorating dawn-drenched roofs. The old man's tires ground gravel and his hands offered firepower. Hacksaw Jim commanded him to halt. *Cease your goddamn fire! Putitout, put-it-out!* Granted, his demands were fair; people were trying to sleep. But his true concern: losing his corner on the fire market. The old man braked as told, and, turning away, Hacksaw Jim nodded. But, the old man had his own request: *Will you light this for me, Jim?* – he offered a wick – *I know you still have my lighter.*

Here's the thing: Hacksaw Jim only used matches – that was the kind of cold, hard fact you could put right into the savings and loan. He used Exact Matches. He had owned a lighter once, when he was a rookie. But that was an ugly memory he had put behind him. Hacksaw Jim was shocked to find that the old man was right. Early that Wednesday morning, he found the lighter, stowed deep and snug in a forgotten corner of his old pocket. He pulled it out and struck the flint. *Okay*, Hacksaw Jim said, *but just*

*this once.* The old man held onto the rocket this time. But before he went, before the flame reached the fuse, he said, *Keep the lighter, Jim.*

Crackle. Boom.

For weeks afterwards, the fires about town were left abandoned, allowed to simmer, spit, spark and molt. Optimus Prime told The Bear to ask around. The Bear, of course, consulted Hacksaw Jim. He found him out back, unexpectedly hard at work. Hacksaw Jim flicked and flicked his lighter, and sparks danced about the tinder piles that were disappearing with the dusk. *The wood sticks,* The Bear said. *Where are your matches?* Hacksaw Jim shook his head. The Bear understood and patted his back. *It's time, Hacksaw Jim. We've got a good package for you.* The Bear left him alone, and he stayed up until morning, striking the same smooth flint.

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## **The Crash Helmet**

THE CRASH HELMET WAS something they all could share. When worn, it didn't reveal man's inner truth. Instead, it spoke to the world around him, his community, his civic body, his town itself. It was shared by rotation, an intuitive one. Actually, a polishing and a rotation. When one citizen was done with the crash helmet, it was meticulously cleaned and passed to the next agent on the understood list. It had been this way for years, and Governor Optimus Prime's administration saw no need to tweak the regulations.

Wonderful feats had been accomplished while wearing the crash helmet. Most public works projects were first conceived by a head beneath the crash helmet. The whole concept of record breaking could only be considered if you were wearing the crash helmet. (For instance, if Voltron had qualified for The Games, the town would have insisted he wear it.) The greatest parties had helmeted hosts. There was a sweet drunkenness associated with the heft weighing down upon your crown and the leather strap binding your jaw tight. And the best thing was that everybody got a try. All you had to do was wait your turn. Wearing the crash helmet was better than being mayor.



The cleaning process was intuitively acquired; it wasn't like getting up on a two-wheeler. No resident could tell you, *I remembered when I first learned to clean the crash helmet*. It was something everybody understood. It wasn't rare to see a young child, after her first or second go-around with the crash helmet, walking alone down to the riverbank to clean it. The process was specific but liberating in its rote. First, it was rinsed in the river that ran through the west side of town, the crash helmet's inside facing upstream. The wearer was to collect a handful of coarse moss (a vigorous and non-native growth) that could be found only along the section of the river where the water's velocity was greatest, and with this moss the crash helmet was scrubbed vigorously – an equal number of strokes with the left and right hands. Soap was verboten. Then, a thin reed was used to dislodge any stubborn residue from the crevices. Finally, the crash helmet was placed on a rock downstream, in the lazy part of the river, where it was given the afternoon to rest and to prepare to be worn again.

The crash helmet was always waiting when the next person came to pick it up – without exception. The milliner, who had injection molded the crash helmet so many years ago, took great pride in his creation, and would watch over it. Now that he was in the blissful years of retirement, he had the luxury of waiting by the river and observing each new person strap on his crash helmet. He still loved it best, despite all the other headgear he had crafted in his years. But the basic purpose of the cleaning process

became apparent to him, and he strongly disapproved. His crash helmet was meant to be shared and to grow with the residue of time. But they were forcing it to suffer constant rebirth; the whole town had conspired to stunt its maturation.

He aired his grievances one Tuesday night under the tent. The Gathered responded with sympathetic sighs. Still, effective oratory was not enough to put an end to the innate urge they felt to clean and pass on the crash helmet. They had great respect for the old milliner – he was *revered* – but the crash helmet continued its rotation, recurringly shiny and new.

So the milliner built a dam. He was a clever man and knew that at his age he could never win a fight, not a real fight with knuckles and knees. He couldn't just snatch the crash helmet away from someone cleaning it. So each day he would squat beside the river and lay stones, one atop another. Seasons passed, and, at the same rate that the river eroded its own banks, the milliner's dam rose up from its bed. Eventually, the river became just a bleed and a trickle at its most vigorous section.

The milliner smiled as he watched people dangle the crash helmet in the almost still water, barely a speck of dirt washed away. It continued like this for some time. As his

later years wore on, he would take great pleasure each afternoon, watching his soiled creation drying downstream, revealing the lives of the town who wore it.



**Rainbow  
Brite**

RAINBOW BRITE TENDED certain public rows, held the key to the city (she liked being called in the middle of the night when someone was locked out), acted as the parade's grand marshal, and, most importantly, organized the annual Poshlust Festival. Then, one year, she decided to go on vacation. And everybody was invited. It was a package deal. She'd fill a van – a bus – a whole caravan. Or – if everybody could get out to the airport – she would arrange for a charter. That would make things affordable.

In the days leading up to the holiday, she met Sheila at The Sip Shop, to discuss Details. *Oh, Rainbow,* Sheila told her, *that's because you're better than me.* Rainbow offered her pure cream. *Remember, Sheila, that doesn't mean I'm lazy.* She went on to relate another party, talk about another *my ex-boyfriend*. Rainbow and this guy she was dating went to this place for some reason. Sheila left politely but quickly when the time came (she said she had to see Hacksaw Jim about a job). The mayor had just come in and was hoping to grab a Koala Cola. Rainbow Brite called him over. *I hope Sheila will be okay,* she let him know.

In this town, Rainbow Brite had twenty-six-and-some-fraction men currently claimed as once-her-own. Sheila, and not Sheila alone, knew that Rainbow would be lucky if four

of these agents agreed to be implicated. Sheila set up a blind date for her friend, brought a guy in from the other side of the pass. A big guy – tough. Sheila paid for his train ticket and a meal in the dining car, in case things didn't work out with Rainbow Brite. She just wished Rainbow Brite would let her help make things go smoothly. Let her do her hair, at least.

One tradition that Mayor Optimus Prime continued to uphold throughout his tenure, was calling Tuesday night meetings under the tent. So Rainbow Brite told Sheila that Tuesdays were strictly out as far as blind dates were concerned. She had a regular seat at the Gatherings, but no one would save it for her. Now, she was consistently early, even if she had a date that afternoon. When she was settled into that unfolded chair, it was the least anxious part of her week. Snug under the Big Top. The air always froze down there; it kept a tear burning in her eye and those around her – together they gleamed. Before the proceeding began, they distributed popcorn, and *nothing*, she said, *was more invigorating than the yellow smell of butter*. Last Tuesday was special, because last Tuesday The Bear agreed to announce Rainbow's Vacation.

Sheila, two other women, and – most impossible of all – The Bear were collected on the runway when Rainbow arrived with the dawn. They had been waiting together in the cold dark, watching each other's emerging silhouettes. They realized they were not

there for Rainbow Brite, but they were there for one another (who were there for Rainbow Brite). It was The Bear that made the difference. His bellowing morning hack and sweater-covered fur raised the stakes, introduced the stakes in the first place. The trip was under-booked, but, with The Bear already dozing in the bulkhead seat, Rainbow Brite was unafraid to tell her girlfriends that the flight would cost a little more than expected. And she meant it when she said it would be worth every penny.



**Lady  
Aberlin**



LADY ABERLIN GOT a new job. They gave her exactly one-eighth of the TV screen, the bottom left section. It was her own little world and she could do whatever-she-liked. She had only one directive – and it was a clear one – keep it occupied, all the time. She started on Tuesday and had already fashioned herself an oval by the weekend. It had white trim and a subtle fade. Lady Aberlin couldn't help but be proud of her handiwork.

Of course, she had hobbies and interests. But those would have to take a backseat for the time-being. There was a time in life for pomp and sacrament – but this wasn't it. This was the time to get ahead, to innovate – to make herself *indispensable*. One Thursday, she created a real stir: she invited a guest. Another face was fit beside hers and together they kept watch on the remaining screen. (Who it was, people can't remember. Some swear it was Slim Goodbody while others will insist it was Voltron wearing the crash helmet.)

The station's mailroom was swamped with praise, and nobody in Litigation slapped Lady Aberlin's wrists for not having secured clearance. One intern asked the head counsel if he should draw up the proper paperwork, *in case she pulls this stunt again*.

The program director interrupted and gave his two cents (he was eavesdropping on his colleagues): *Let's let her do her thing.*

Lady Aberlin was riding a wave, but she knew that she'd soon have to paddle for herself. Sitting in her screencorner, offering *funky* translations, wouldn't cut it down the road. That's when she got into politics; it was a necessity. Things were going pretty good in those days, and folks were settling in. Maybe some tweaking (or shifting) would be welcome. She began with jokes, a quip here or another there. First it was during the tired hours, and then closer and closer until she hit the prime slot. Her humor refined itself into commentary and then, fatefully, into criticism. Some people breathed, and others choked, but they all tuned in.

Then, not long after sundown on a weekday night, she said his name, the one citizen relegated to the shadows by public consensus. She invoked The Bear.

After that, Lady Aberlin's personal life escaped her. Or, more to the point, the media – her media – took it from her. They reported that she couldn't curb her compulsive filing habits, and, as a result, her gardener left her for a better set of benefits. She now spent her off-time in her laundry room tending to her brother's old socks (the brother that went missing at adolescence only to be found polishing public works projects up

north, under an assumed name). They were antique socks, at least. A whole industry emerged in her wake, and it produced a slew of Lady Aberlin recreations. These she was forced to observe from her little, increasingly claustrophobic corner of the screen. The Bear never visited her even once, never made so much as a phone call, but his point was made.

Lady Aberlin scoured her contract for clauses and realized her oversight: there were no provisions for vacation. They wanted her corner occupied each day – without fail. How could she regroup with no reprieve? A plea for compassion was in order – no sense or numbers, but compassion. Her argument hefty and ready, she marched down to H.R. and asked for her days – free and clear. No wrangling was necessary, though. H.R. nodded and sent her on her way. Time off? They all heard her question. *Yes!* They stomped each other's toes in reply. *Yes, we think that would be best for everyone.*

Lady Aberlin surveyed the whole staff. It was clear; they all agreed: the time had come for her corner to be swept clean.



## **A Pair of Zips**

TWO BITS FOR A PAIR of Zips: it seemed a reasonable offer. Word spread and lines formed before each of the five temporary kiosks that had sprouted up on the playing fields along the edge of town. Right at the foot of the hills to the west. The vendors hawked their wares; shouts were sent up: *black pair! blue pair! size large! extra small!* The crowds flowed in and out and a community was born. Marriages were arranged, babies coddled, business partnerships cemented, even water sold. Some were disappointed when their end drew near, when it was time to make their purchases. With morbid charity they'd offer, *Wanna cut?*, hoping for a few more minutes of precious expectation before the ultimate transaction. Blinded by ecstasy, the buyers always chose to ignore the salesman's wink to his sales-kimosabe's smirk.

Business had been burning for just under a week. Everyone stopped by to pick up a pair. Rainbow Brite cleared a cool half dozen. Then the five men running five kiosks closed up shop as quickly as it was set up and headed for the hills. The Bear caught the last one by the coattails and gave him a *Whatgives?* The man replied, *Managing expectations m'man.* His compatriot salesman came to his side. *Knowing when to fold, sir.* And a third: *Leaving something behind. A red hot iron.* The Bear understood the game; he had played it once too. He opened his paw and the captive merchant took flight. The

quintet could be heard belting out choruses on their merry-way as they absconded with the night – leaving behind a thirst in the throats of the uneasily sleeping townsfolk.

Lost souls peppered the playing fields among the foothills during the following weeks. But, soon enough, even this dedicated crowd took to staying at home, as necessitated by the heat wave then the cold snap that followed those wonderful Sale Days. People looked at their Zips, neatly wrapped and ready for exploitation. But they had empty corners in their closets and free space in their garages. And these, they happily filled with sealed boxes of Zips. *Another pair of Zips*, many of them said, *and then you might have something. But just these? No thanks.*

Voltron, Alf, and a handful more had second thoughts. They opened their packages, their plunder from those Glorious Days of the Five Vendors. Each was rewarded with a new pair of shoes inside. Voltron, for instance, tried his on, and the fit was divine. *Not too shabby*, unbeknownst lonely voices were agreeing about town. They took to the streets and people took notice of the new leather on their feet. An outside agency came in and offered endorsement deals, while this thing was still a murmur. *Get in there while it's still cool*, the agency's representatives were told. *If this thing should roll to a boil, we want our fingers first on the pulse.* With documents and totes in hand, the representatives flew, turning the fortunate handful into a gaggle of pleasantly surprised joggers and

Sunday-walkers. In exchange for their signatures, they were christened 'minor celebrities' and 'spokespersons.'

Payments were made and posters alit in the likely spots. Voltron, Alf and the handful more became the face of Zips. *Consistency*, the reps told their new poster children. *You are your Zips on the poster; you are your Zips on the street.* They were contractually bound, so they pushed – Voltron, Alf, each one of them. The campaign was embraced and savored. People rejoiced in it all, everything but the Zips themselves. Somewhere, the message set out in its own, leaving behind the shoes that given birth to it. The agency sent a directive to its reps: ZIPS ARE A BLACK HOLE. Requisite checks were cut to the remaining endorsers and the reps cleared town, as the vendors had before them.

On their way out, they crossed through the playing fields at the foot of the hills. Five small groups had gathered, smiling to one another, twitching every so often when something moved among the hilltops. *Who are you?* one rep asked a man, his Zips tied tight. *A believer. We're gathered for the comeback.*

The reps hurried back to the agency.



## Kiosks



THE KIOSK WAS THE STANDARD forum for commerce, where bits (the standard unit of commerce) were exchanged. Things could only be bought and sold through its medium (unless a vendor secured a rare variance for a cornerstore or a shopping mall). But kiosks became something more to those who built them – and used them. They were a way of standing alone, being an individual, while still abiding by a social contract. People added throw rugs and moldings to their kiosks, and Storm Shadow became the first to install a toilet. Once you obtained a kiosk, it was yours for life, unless you made the mistake of abandoning it, even for a quick breather.

Insomnia ran rampant among those who ran the kiosks. There was a time when people wouldn't talk about it, but kiosk sleeplessness eventually became the darling topic of the tabloid media. "Caught Napping" was a rare headline to read in those days. And the merchants inside their kiosks sought relief. Insomnia was a mild burden, but the microscope of the public eye was too much to bear. Their businesses became two-fold: they sold their wares out of their front windows to passing customers, and they developed a remedy trade out of their backdoors – with one another.

The kiosk dwellers became so caught up in their own challenges (i.e. their failed search for a cure) that business started to sag. Incensed by poor service, the town's Fraggles population boycotted the kiosks en masse. They found alternative systems of trade, going so far as to barter with one another. The tired merchants did not even have the energy to take notice. Their prices soared and they let them go. Most of them spent the workday – when they should have been hawking and catcalling – huddled hard against their backdoors, listening closely should the answer to nighttime rest happen by.

And one day, it did. But, like everything else at the height of the Prime Administration, it required government intervention. After getting word of the stir, The Bear sent an envoy to check out what was happening behind the kiosks. The envoy was disappointed to find what he had suspected: the backdoors of the kiosks had all been left wide open. Toes were sticking out; merchants were thinking about leaving their posts. Nervous eyes peeked at the envoy as he walked down the alley of open doors. Hushed whispers begged for z's. Vacant kiosks meant an end to the prosperity of the mayor's term. The envoy left, determined to find sleep, a sleep he could share.

It was decided that sleep could only be brought by force. The mayor's office accomplished it with a series of under-the-table deals. But the most effective measure was simply giving a few bits to teenage hang-about for their services. In one fell

swoop, the teenagers slammed shut the open backdoors of every kiosk. They nailed timbers across each doorframe. They sang lullabies when night fell. They hushed all passersby and encouraged them to join in the chorus of numbness for the beleaguered merchants. Sometimes, The Bear was seen conducting vespers. With the aid of nighttime song, slumber returned, and, with it, a stable economy.



**Slim  
Goodbody**

SLIM GOODBODY TRAVELED from abroad, because he had a job to get done. Nice compensation (including fresh pears from exotic locales) was dangled and he made his move. He wasn't looking for salvation behind the counters of the Blossom District or answers among the town's famous kiosks. He didn't think learning a new language would save his life. Hard work and nocturnal distraction – that's all he was looking for. He would he spend his hard-earned bounty when the time came?

He never imagined the time should ever arrive.

The folks back home offered him free return train rides on a periodic basis. But Slim Goodbody said, *Forget it*. Even if he didn't know anyone here, there was nothing he hadn't seen back there. People around town began to gather this from his shrugs and silences. This guy had *memories*. His mind was *occupied*. People wanted reports of his accounts, but no one had gathered up the courage to demand them. Instead they let Slim Goodbody turn the tables; they let him level such a look against them that there was nothing they could do, except hope to clear their own names. He wouldn't scream, he wouldn't yell, he wouldn't laugh, he wouldn't smirk, he wouldn't even sob for them. He wouldn't give anyone the distraction.

In reality, things were hard for Slim Goodbody, not that he allowed anyone to guess it. It's hard to live in a new place. He had been warned (by his mother). He picked up a few phrases, but that didn't constitute intimate contact. He tried a new restaurant for every meal, but that only reminded him of his alien palate. He met a new girl (one of several), but he wasn't the type to let that kind of thing be his savior. If he ever did go home, there'd be no consideration of her tagging along. It was a treacherous line of thinking, anyway; it was dangerous to consider either that things might last, or that he might ever go home. The best thing to do was to eat something hot after work and then return to his suite – alone or accompanied. Which one depended on the next day's workload.

Strangeness is lonely, but there was no lack of citizens lining up to be Slim Goodbody's friend. Some issued formal requests, but most let their intentions be known through the barkeep who fashioned Slim Goodbody his first after-work cocktail. The barkeep kept a tidy list, updated daily, which he showed to Slim Goodbody as he breathed in his first few sips. He nodded and accepted most offers, turning down the rare applicant for very personal reasons.

The new members of Slim Goodbody's circle enjoyed being there, but it wasn't long before they began to question his commitment. They wanted to live his adventure, see the world over the hills through his eyes. But he was tired when they gathered; he had worked a full day. He often didn't speak loud enough for them to enjoy his accent.

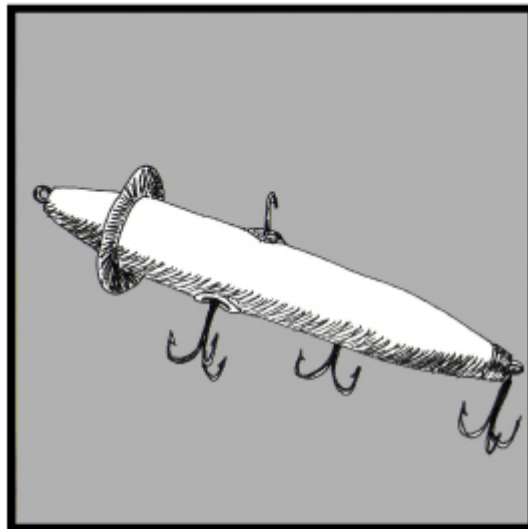
But Slim Goodbody gave his friends some signs of encouragement. One Tuesday night he appeared under the tent, where weekly town meetings were held religiously. Many a man offered his chair, but he was just fine standing. His opinions on the issues weren't clear; he withheld even his signature nod on that balmy evening (his friends were watching). He refrained from weighing in on the public referendums. But his eyes and ears were attentive. He was becoming a part of the town. And that was a good sign, or so his friends told one another. But deep down, they shared a great deal of regret: their journeyman threatened to go native.

Slim Goodbody became a regular Tuesday night communicant. First standing, soon sitting, and, eventually, scribbling notes, sometimes furiously. And then, he was gone.

His friends were bereft. They called in sick the next day (telling no lies) and, first thing in the morning, they went to find him in his office. They were informed that his tasks were complete and Slim Goodbody had moved on. One-by-one they stepped outside

and, under the sharp morning light, they gasped and they floundered. They were faced with seven empty hours and all they could do was ask questions. By lunchtime they had a favorite: *But I really thought he was adapting, didn't you?*





**Velcro**

IT WAS SOMETHING that touched people where it meant the most. People cherished their Velcro when they were alone – or sometimes with their immediate families. Velcro was solemn; it was usually found in kitchens. For years, people had been doubting if real innovation was possible; Velcro seemed so fully realized. Now it was admitted that change might come – but acknowledged only in whispers – between thundering knocks on wood and the grating dirge of the headside of a one bit coin scraping against the tailside of another. People liked their Velcro just the way it was; they just didn't trust that it would stay that way.

Velcro was not dangerous, but every parent kept it hidden, because it was precious, sacramental. Velcro was a private institution. So when a man – a Stranger – was reported waltzing around the streets behind the stadium with his Velcro out in the open, an alarm went off. But what could they do? Was there even anything on the books to address this situation? It was so unlikely that someone would do this. The Bear's phone rang off the hook and he organized a committee to field inquiries. He couldn't find documents supporting action but momentum seemed to dictate that he do something. A summons was drawn up from scratch (he couldn't make use of even a

snippet of boilerplate), delivered by messenger, and word was put out that the incident was over. The people, as a town, could move on.

But the messenger returned a wreck. Something didn't gibe. The man was still out there, behind the stadium, with his Velcro hanging out for the whole town to see. He did not refuse the summons, he actually accepted it rather politely, but he offered no comment in response. The messenger had been prepped for all responses, but no contingency had been planned for a complete lack of one. The mayor's office froze and traffic did the same. Out behind the stadium, the Stranger sat down on the hot cement. This inexplicable behavior attracted a crowd. The Bear's worst fear was realized: people all over town began to follow the Stranger's lead.

Victims of indefinite paralysis, authority ceased, for the time being. Meanwhile, Velcro was put to the test. It emerged on all the streets and even some rooftops. It was brought from the back of closets and put right in front of the public eye. The cards were on the table, and, by sundown, Velcro would either be made or be broken. The beautiful invention was paraded around town and some onlookers began to cringe, but not a single person balked. Under mass scrutiny, each individual's love for Velcro endured.

As a chilled wind brought out the dark parts of the sky, people went back inside, leaving out their Velcro to collect their lawns' excess dew. The last of the crowd gathered behind the stadium reported that the Stranger held his position. They left him there, not knowing they would never see him again. He was gone by sunrise.

This allowed The Bear to set his office back in motion. They no longer had to deliver a response that did not exist. Affairs were in the same order as they were before the Stranger arrived (they told themselves), and that was just fine (they told themselves).

The Bear walked the town's perimeter to make certain that the traffic flow was sufficient, and, perhaps, to clear his head. He enjoyed the abundance of exposed Velcro and thought that he might have to go and get some of his own. He was relaxed; the Stranger was gone. But, just as he turned up the path to his front door, his face fell and he stopped in his tracks – The Bear realized that the Stranger had left something behind: the evolution of an Institution.



**Danger Mouse  
& Penfold**

IT SEEMED ODD that Penfold should be concerned about his friend Danger Mouse, who claimed to be the happiest man in the world. Why balk at such fortune? Penfold held his hand and guided him across the street, while Danger Mouse, a headful of bliss, stared up at the clear afternoon sky. A motorcade roared up behind them and Penfold dropped his friend's hand, knowing it's the right things that are hard to do. Then, social propriety triumphing over moral understanding, he yanked Danger Mouses's collar and removed him from harm's way. Weak-willed Penfold no longer faced taking – for the first time ever – his afternoon cocoa alone.

Danger Mouse only then realized his near miss. He offered Penfold a polite bow. He didn't understand why a motorcade was necessary. The pomp seemed out of line. Penfold hushed him and complained that he was always commenting on pomp. Danger Mouse held his tongue because he was content (hence his claims of wild happiness). The secret behind his joy, he did not reveal, even to his buddy Penfold. He was so happy because he had an *escape route*. The hills were impregnable, a fact the visitors' guides touted and town residents were ever-so-proud of (along with the charms of the Blossom District). But Danger Mouse could get around them. All he needed to do was to craft a careful plan, work out the final details.

Penfold was happy to revel in retirement each simple day with his good friend. They enjoyed slow walks and browsing the sticker collections kept in private holdings. But the moment that distressed him every evening was when Danger Mouse expressed his desires. If Penfold understood correctly, his constant companion wanted to leave. That urge was a complete mystery. Penfold knew it, just like they all knew it: there was nothing for any of them behind those lush hills.

Danger Mouse believed everything he had been told; that's what drove him. He wanted to see nothing, to run away to nothing, and to live amongst nothing. He began to show up for afternoon cocoa with brambles stuck to his jacket and dried straw laced through his hair. Penfold didn't ask, but Danger Mouse offered. He'd been hiking the hills, getting a lay of the land. *There are routes, Penfold.* Penfold offered him whipped topping: *Nonsense.*

The next afternoon, the air felt crisp and sky seemed perfectly settled. Penfold sat with a warm cup between his hands and waited for his friend. Almost an hour ticked by and there was no sign of Danger Mouse. Calmly and promptly, he rang the service bell resting before him. The waiter rushed to his side and asked how he might be of assistance. *Sound the alarm,* Penfold said. *There's someone lost up in the hills.* He knew

more about Danger Mouse's reality than the happy man himself did. He would certainly be lost by now, off alone for so long, without Penfold's interpretive assistance. Penfold sipped his cocoa and whispered, *That's enough of this goddamn bliss.*





**Stormshadow**

STORMSHADOW WAS a wrangler. She could broker any deal; she could fetch any price. She was especially renowned for breaking markets wide open. Her kiosk drew the biggest crowds, and she slept while the other merchants struggled with insomnia. People can still buy tulips at a reasonable price per dozen because of her. She spent two seasons retooling the inner-workings of the Blossom District, and that's all that she needed – she provided a little supply control (some coercion of demand), and unshakable patience.

A woman like Stormshadow (everyone agreed there was no woman like Stormshadow) always stayed in the clear. That's why it came as a surprise that she allowed herself to fall into the center of a media blitz. An unfortunate media blitz. Things became so bad that Optimus Prime wouldn't dare the public embarrassment of granting her a pardon.

Her public life came to an end behind the hedges that lined her back fence where Jenny Mews and the 6 p.m. Camera Crew found her hiding. Not so long ago, the shamed woman would have told the newshound to *fuck off* if she had so much as crossed her property line, and the game would have been over. This time, Stormshadow kept kneeling in the dirt, waiting as they ran cable to her, an oversized microphone dangling

off its end. She squished a stinky orange holly berry she'd been holding and smeared it between her palms. She apologized to the microphone and asked if Jenny Mews might excuse her while she used the restroom. Inside her house she filled an overnight sack and went right out the front door. She became one of the first to clear the hills beyond town before Jenny realized she had lost her exclusive.

Stormshadow's mistake was to stand by her people, her former key to success. Reggie got caught up with some of his boys from back home, and he came to Stormshadow, laid out his pickle. *That's some rough shit*, she agreed, *but you're one of mine*. She talked to some people, and leaned on some others to forget some things. When Reggie came back, after his month *on the ranch*, she called him into her office. *You got your job back*, she said. *You stay in line, and this whole thing's behind us*. Reggie stayed in line; it was the second part she was wrong about. The Bear had warned her, but she thought she had it all worked out.

She found shelter with a Welfare Mother who lived beyond even the sight of the hills. After her escape, Stormshadow spent her afternoons dusting baking sheets with flour, helping the other women run a pastry business out the backdoor. She became a role player, but she never ruled out coming back when things got quiet. If you were to ask anyone who followed the story in the papers, they'd tell you Stormshadow's goose was

cooked, burnt and picked to the bone. But, if you could ever get an interview with Stormshadow, she'd tell you differently.



**Switchboard**

THE SWITCHBOARD WAS a bank of switches, little wires connecting one to the next, with a few blinking lights thrown in for good measure. You could flip a switch in someone's name, but never your own; it just wasn't feasible. A friend or an associate could do it for you, if he or she felt it was appropriate. Similarly, there was nothing stopping you from throwing all the switches you pleased for the people that you knew. The upshot of having a switch turned on in your name was that you would then be dedicated to a vocation – whether you liked it or not.

The switchboard was found just below the Blossom District, not far from the former canals. It was housed in its own kiosk, which was left unlocked at all times. A shanty village had evolved on the sparsely developed lots in the switchboard's vicinity. The people who lived in the dainty blue-tarped homes were not necessarily without economic means. On the contrary, they had gathered only because of an all-consuming zest for leisure that they each had allowed to fester independently. They zealously protected their free time and understood that the switchboard posed a threat to that. Should a known party choose to flip a switch in any of their names, then their lazy days might come to an end. So, as a group, they responded with vigilance. They kept a watch over those who approached the switchboard's kiosk, off-handedly discouraging

familiar faces, physically obstructing the entrance if necessary. In this way, they were never made to commit themselves – to anything – and they preserved their free and easy manner.

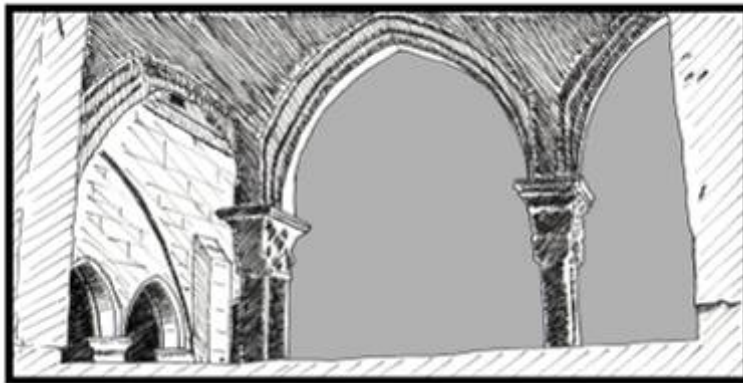
Mrs. Garrett enjoyed her time in the switchboard ghetto and didn't mind when rainstorms found their way through the small tears in her plastic roof. She was especially quick and keen at identifying dangerous parties entering the kiosk and turned them away with little effort. If it didn't flout the very foundations of her sworn leisure ethos, she would have volunteered for extra guard shifts.

One quiet night, Mrs. Garrett stood watch, lazily dozing against the night-darkened kiosk. She was roused by a small man approaching her. His face clearly a mystery to her, he was clear to pass. But he didn't. He stopped before her and reached deep into his pockets. Wordlessly, he offered her a gift, a token. It was a pair of wire cutters, the handles carved from hardwood, obviously handmade in the small man's workshop. Gift in hand, Mrs. Garrett immediately looked toward the switches, and the frail little wires that connected them, but she thought action wasn't in keeping with her lifestyle and placed the wire cutters in her pocket (as that's where the small man had kept them). He moved on without flipping a switch.

Predictably, Mrs. Garrett's patience came to an end. It was during one sleepless night following many others. She tore out of her shelter and ran to the switchboard. Inside the kiosk, she brandished her handmade wire cutters furiously. She was prepared to cut every connection, setting the town's beholden free. They would no longer be required to complete those tasks that others required of them. She slashed left and right, up and down (even a few diagonal swipes). Those people who had come to the kiosk to flip a switch under the silence of the night fled in terror. When she had regained her composure, Mrs. Garrett gently placed the scissored blades of the wire cutter against one long stretch of copper. But she never squeezed the smooth wooden handles. Instead, she gave the tool away – to the next pilgrim who stepped inside the kiosk.

Mrs. Garrett turned her back on the leisure class. She still kept vigil over the switchboard, but now she hoped, for the first time, that someone would flip a switch in her name. Day after day, she looked for just a single set of eyes that recognized her, but they never seemed to come. She began to consider the small man who had given her a gift one night. Would he ever return? And, if he did, would he know her? Could he flip a switch for her?





## The Canals

THE FIRST HEADLINE of Optimus Prime's term was his sanction of a complete downtown revival. He would allow for deep digging throughout the area. Moreover, he would direct those shovels to dig until they struck gurgling, unadulterated water (and this was a time before water had been proven). Ultimately, it was discovered that seeping right into the downtown district was a web, a glorious confusion, of canals. The Bear, Optimus Prime's First Secretary, surveyed his list. Quality of life? *Check*. Commerce? *Yup*. Transportation? *Affirmative*. No downside. The Bear's sensors confirmed what intuition suspected: this summer was going to be the best summer ever.

So they threw a party – a fundraiser to pique awareness of the canals. Signs were hung (it was a campaign): WATCH BENEATH YOUR FEET. And the project had a name; it was “The Canals Down There.” The night was lit, the dress was snappy and the conversation, as dictated by Papa Smurf, casual – and cool. The Bear allowed himself an indulgence, a pat on his own back. He danced from first to last: the jig, the mambo, the Roger Rabbit. No breathers that night – he could read a demographic like a children's storybook, and, according to Benvereen, *that's all the big fella ever really wanted*.

*I knew it*, Rainbow Brite remarked as a stomping Bear passed her on the dusky streets of The Morning After. *There were jinxes all over those banks and under those bridges last night.* There was a hitch in The Bear's winning streak, and, in those early morning hours, the Prime administration manufactured its second headline. The Dragonfly Incident developed stronger legs than most other tales around town.

This is what happened: A young Snork was sent home unescorted from the gala's closing moments. She didn't want to traipse, but it was an order. (Ask from whom and you'll get as many answers as people you ask.) She followed the canals, a fresh geography for which the maps weren't due from the printer until the following morning. Remember: with new water comes new biology. As such, this Snork met her first dragonfly. A boon for some, but only if you know what you're doing. Needless to say, this Snork did not. And, as already stated, it was the end of a long night.

Reports vary, but, put mildly, the Snork did not emerge unscathed. She was still alive the last time anyone bothered to check, but her condition was a matter of the State. The dragonfly was never found, even after a full sweep followed by a perfunctory dredge. Patrols were dispatched and the canals became a sad reminder, a place where people ended up remembering, when all they wanted to do was regret.

Blame was placed squarely on the Canal Project and all paths traced directly back to the stylish, new gubernatorial set. Optimus Prime purged personnel and the censors were searching the classifieds the next Monday morning. He called The Bear into his office and demanded accountability (almost unnoticed, at that moment, he acted as governor for the first time). The Bear realized this wasn't his project anymore; he'd given his friend the name, and his friend took the role. *Don't worry, Prime, he assured, I'm taking care of this.* He wanted to forget dragonflies, but he needed the chorus to join in, he needed everyone to forget with him.

Years later the pavement downtown still had a certain timbre, a tinny ring. They all knew the sidewalks were hollow. Water was a failed experiment, but no one could deny that it still flowed somewhere beneath their feet.



**Punky  
Brewster**

PUNKY BREWSTER WOULD PAINT the town whatever color you'd like, on any given night. She taught the kids their lessons – religiously – but they knew nothing of her post-work existence. She never ran into her students at the station. *Bifurcated*, she confided over a secure telephone line – *bifurcated*.

Her clock squealed midnight and Punky Brewster rose for the second time each day. This time, unlike in the morning, she was already dressed. Wrapped in long sheath of waterproof, treated cotton, she stepped out of her side door and into the permanently damp alley. Over the remnant rails, under the rotunda and ankle-deep in a rivulet, she found her spot. And there, she had nothing to do but keep dark and wait quietly. Antsy crickets and misplaced woodland creatures completely overlooked her. She was safely tucked into the soggy shadows of overgrown grass.

It was a complete surprise that the hat-covered man should find her. Obviously, her location had been divulged. Hat band around his ankles, he appeared at her side. *A keen spot*, he winked. *Unquestionably*, she agreed, *tell me one good reason I should leave*. He held out his hand, and on its palm: rice paper wound tight, around which brown string had been pulled taut. She opened her coat and placed it inside. He spun her around

and it ended in a dip. *The Hall*, he said, *that's your reason*. *Unquestionably*, she agreed, and left the hat-covered man to hide from the crickets alone.

Late night at the Hall, and the schoolteacher was a ward of the state. She left her coat outside (she didn't trust it to be checked) and cozied up within. Punky Brewster always wasted the last dance to buy herself a few more precious minutes. Shuffling replaced silence and the lights came up. Ceramic and glass, soiled by the night's revelry sat before her. She picked up a spoon and held it aloft. Down it came – mellifluid – symphony poured forth. The stragglers paused one more moment for a final bit of grace in their days, pushing off when her performance came to an end – with an expected crack and a crash.

On her clothesline, Punky Brewster left her coat out to dry and, inside, she finally found her pajamas: lingering, patient cotton. Blanket on high, pillow packed flat, her left ear sang and her right one buzzed right back. Her eyes rested on the window and anticipated the sun. And, against all odds, she was right; it came again. She was behind her desk, pencil vibrating, before even her most nervous student arrived early for class.



**She-Ra**



SHE-RA VOTED for the light rail. She was so enthusiastic about her decision that she camped out the night before the results were announced. Her camera was poised and ready when the proclamation was made: they would be building limited public transportation on the town's west side. She lived on the east side, but she'd have some time during construction to go house hunting. She rolled up her sleeping bag immediately and ran to the cornerstore. She bought a newspaper and a new Erasermate – all the tools she'd need for her search. She found new digs before the late edition of the classifieds were off the presses.

Living conditions were certainly a downgrade. Still, the extra rent was worth it for location. She didn't have a window, but her new neighbor showed her how to make one with a hammer and chisel (he had lived in the building long before the local renovation projects had begun). She chipped \ a neat square into the wall, from which she could watch the street below. The light rail would be making a left at her corner. She hoped she would never grow accustomed to the sound of its bell. She dreamed about it waking her up at night.

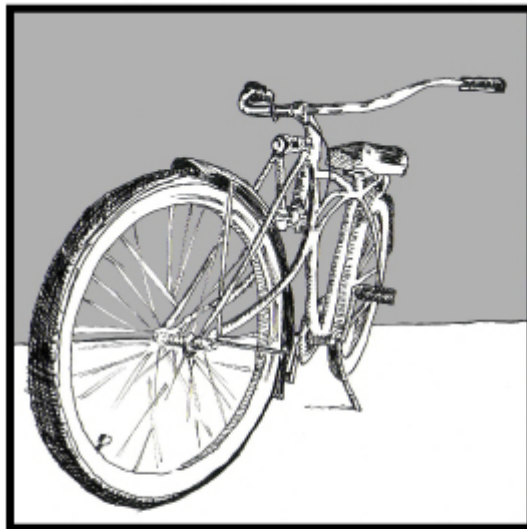
She-Ra's excitement drove her to exhaustion. She no longer had a kitchen in which to fashion herself a proper diet. Every day, through the hole in her wall, she watched the construction progress, until one day an actual tram came by on a test drive. Once she had glimpsed that functioning car, she stopped working and she stopped sleeping; all she could do was anticipate. Finally, the light rail's maiden journey was announced. She-ra bought the first ticket.

It was an icy day, but, nevertheless, people showed up in droves to stand beneath a logoed yellow banner boasting "The Horn Blows Here!" The ribbon-cutting ceremony began and the ceremonial scissors were unsheathed. She-Ra rushed the stage and asked the beloved mayor if she could have a snip. Shyly, he obliged, and with exaggerated gusto she cut the ribbon. A new era in public transportation had begun.

She-Ra decided her first ride would be to town square. She might stop for lunch and then come home. But, as she became the first customer to settle into one of the tram's molded plastic benches, she knew wouldn't be getting off anytime soon. She opened herself up to catatonia and enjoyed the ride.

She-Ra watched as town square flew by and gave way to the canvas flaps of the tent and then, in time, the foothills themselves. She felt the tram enter its turn, and she was

more than happy to do another lap, sunk comfortably into her seat. But the tram kept going forward, not back along its tracks. She-Ra thought they had reached the town limit but the tram was pressing on, regularly finding new tracks and even cable to hang from and stations to stop at. Alarm wakened She-Ra from her trance; the scenes outside the windows seemed familiar, but she had certainly left home. This was not what she had in mind when she boarded. She considered barging right into the conductor's booth and demanding where they were going. But she told herself this is what she'd been waiting for; she had finally gotten what she wanted. She settled back into her seat with no hopes and dreams but to ride the rails.



**Stilts**

STILTS WERE MADE mandatory for all citizens. The statute that required them had no discernible author, but somehow the law inscribed itself in the books. And, these days, the officers enforced it – to the letter. At first it was one of those things that was understood. The law was on the books, but, if you forgot your sticks, they let it slide. Now they were nailing old ladies and greengrocers alike, for minor stilting oversights.

One night the grounds crew witnessed a scene. It happened as they were standing on their raised perches hosing down the west side of town square. On a verandah that wrapped around a house on the east side of the square, an older police officer, slouched atop his stilts, rested beside a bright young woman. His eyes watched her from below lids that he could barely keep raised. Suddenly, she ran down onto her front lawn, with absolutely no stilts to speak of – barefoot, right out in the open. The officer tried to put on airs of nonchalance. Still, the grounds crew couldn't help but notice him bristle at the young woman's infraction. The young woman looked up at the grand officer teetering above her, as he balanced on her verandah, and the men of the grounds crew knew she saw the same thing in his eyes that they did: the officer cared for her.

The verandah was a wraparound and the officer stepped out of the grounds crew's sight. They sprayed down the last of the dust to the rhythm of his racket behind the house. The bright, young woman crawled back into the comfort of her verandah and wondered if her officer would return. The grounds crew, as they rolled up their hoses in a staggered but orderly succession, commented to one another, *The regulations won't allow them to come together.* Not one of them saw how it might happen. The woman stood alone, still without her stilts, albeit less confidently, while the officer's clatters and groans rose from out back.

The grounds crew adjusted their stilts, but they weren't ready to shuffle away yet. The woman shouted around back for the officer to show himself – without delay. Instead, a pair of stilts appeared. They were brand new, handcrafted and extra-tall. They trembled before her. Eyes blazing, she shouted, *Are those for me?*, knowing full well they were. She peeked around the house and said, *Officer? Where are you, Officer?* Exhausted, she leaned against her new stilts and began to laugh. Shyly, the officer stomped forward from the house's opposite side, and, once again, both players were in full view of the grounds crew (who, seeing two people and four stilts, began to doubt their predictions of a doomed union). The rubber bottom of his left stilt nudged her grounded foot and she looked up – dumbstruck. *Let's go*, he commanded, and she pulled him down from his stilts. Together they walked off the verandah and onto the

moist dust of the town square. The officer saw the grounds crew scatter, barely maintaining their balance as they fled. They would surely report him, and without his stilts, he did not know what to do, or even say.

By the time the authorities arrived, the man and woman's shadows could be seen chasing one another down the backstreets of town. He teetered precariously, back atop his stilts; she ran ahead of him, then behind, her feet surely bare. While the authorities considered pursuit, the couple disappeared down an undetermined lane. Remaining was one brand new, handcrafted and extra-tall pair of stilts, left unattended on the verandah, on the east side of the square, for all the town to admire.



**Voltron**



ONCE AGAIN, Voltron was the man of the moment. Matters were a bit too grave around town those days, and he was about to return from his sabbatical just in time to turn things around. Joe would nod to Sally on the street, or Bill would wave to Terry in the park, and it wouldn't be rare to hear one say to the other, "Voltron – he knows the score."

One reviewer described his return as follows (all the critics agreed it was a terrifically poetic remark): "Suitable for us to quench our thirst after perspiration."

Where was Voltron during the many months of his sabbatical? How did he spend his days in exile? He was studying methodology. Board was provided at a notable clinic tucked among the verdant shrubs of a prominent mountain range. He rented rooms at a nearby inn. Colleagues in his field suggested he was wasting his time, but only in cafeteria whispers and under the cover of drunken nights. Voltron maintained that his projects were misunderstood, that the whole was greater than the parts. Whether the specifics of his self-evaluation were accurate, his product was wondrous. At the end of his tenure as the clinic's primary fellow, he dropped a sheaf on the scarred teak tabletop

around which sat the Board of Regents. It was titled “The Krantz-Haberlich Method” and it was signed *Voltron*.

Back home, there was intense speculation as to his whereabouts. It was a total and incorrect consensus. They all agreed he was training. He was preparing for The Games. Come autumn, and the work crews would begin construction of the winners’ podium. Come summer, and Voltron would be standing on the block reserved for first place, representing the hometown crowd. *Top Banana*, The Bear would say. There would be no match for Voltron, his lungs trained and accustomed to the rarified air from abroad.

Discrepancies between expectation and reality created less than prodigal praise upon Voltron’s return. He was accomplished in his field, and rightfully wanted everybody to know. But they had had other plans for Voltron; they expected him to be their champion. As an act of goodwill, Optimus Prime invited Voltron to speak about the work he had conducted up in the mountains. But his address was positively leaden. Those gathered under the tent that Tuesday night nodded and a-hummed assent, but each one decided then and there – perhaps out of spite – that the Krantz-Haberlich Method was something they would never use. Walking from the podium to the back door of the auditorium, Voltron felt their staccato claps in his spine. He was on his way

home before Optimus Prime had recovered the microphone and was apologizing to his constituents.

When the long days came, and the town took to its sun-brightened streets to celebrate its victory in The Games, Voltron stayed inside. His mind was parsed and admired in foreign journals – foreign journals hot off the presses – that piled high on his coffee table. The absence of his athletic talents was forgotten among the fireworks and hollers outside. He shut tight his windows and boiled water for fat, yellow noodles. He coated them in butter – exactly the right amount – the best meal he could make. If he was lucky, tonight of all the nights, they would turn out golden-brown.



**Glo-Worm**

GLO-WORM LIVED within town boundaries, but it was difficult to call her a member of the community – at least for her final few years, the time after she learned there were opportunities at the Chapter House and that there was a sign-up list. She could never resist a sign-up list. She walked over to the Chapter House at lunch one day and found that hers was the only name committed to the list. She thought that she would never be contacted, due to lack of interest. But, not one full season later, she received a letter by post, the Chapter House's stately logo emblazoned on the envelope. This was her calling.

Glo-Worm entered her new life alone. It wasn't always this way, but interest had been waning at that time. As people lost faith in the governor's administration, they lost faith in vocations. The Team Captain, having a team of only one recruit, phoned in his instructions and training regimens. If Glo-Worm claimed she was too tired to do her rotations, he let her slide. He showed her only half of the requisite knots, and he didn't even quiz her on those. The only day he showed up early was on the day of her final exam, knowing his program directors would be in attendance. Glo-Worm passed with Flying Colors; the Team Captain made sure of that. But the fix as in; there was no way she could have failed.

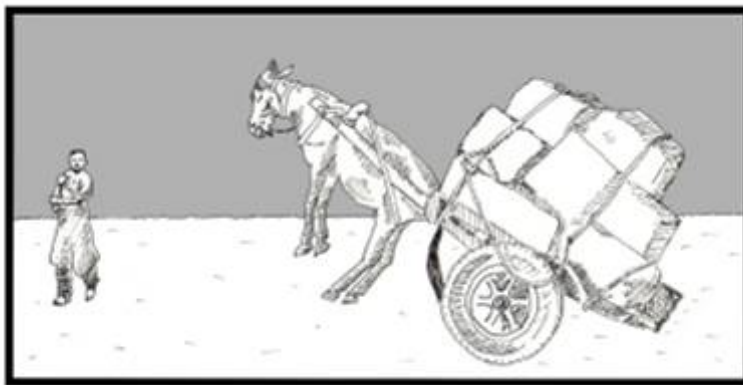
After she passed the exam and paid her processing fees, Glo-Worm was asked to sign a pledge. She was to use her new skills for the rest of her days. Her ultimate pursuit would be *contemplation*. She had two hours to say her goodbyes. *Clock's ticking*, the Team Captain barked, holding forth his stopwatch. He checked over his shoulder to make sure the program directors were watching. They were and they nodded approval. But Glo-Worm did him one better. She reached out and stopped the watch. *Goodbyes?* She slung an arm around the shoulders of one particular program director. *Those were part of my old life. What do I need goodbyes for now?* Everyone clapped as the Team Captain reddened.

They gave her a map and she set out into the woods. A small cement burrow was waiting just where they told her it would be. She dropped herself inside. She was not the first resident; the aftershave of the man before her still filled the room. But he had left the bed made and that she appreciated. She unpacked her few belongings and began to count. From the few things the Team Captain taught her, the one thing she understood was that the key to contemplation was vigorous counting. As she inspected her new digs, she found another room off the big one; it was smaller and wooden. And conveniently suspended by a thin but strong cable was a simple wooden abacus.

*Onetwothree* began each day. Then one morning she heard a reply. *Fourfivesix*. It came from above, from out in the woods. She popped up her head to see who was there: a group of dayhikers, her old friends, in fact – should such relations concern her anymore. They gasped in joyful surprise; they had found their long-lost friend buried in the woods. Glo-Worm did not share their excitement. *I'm glad to see you*, she said, *so you can go back into the town and tell everyone I've pledged myself to a mission. And I can't be disturbed. So, please leave me to my place in the woods and tell them all to let me be.* She went back down and picked up where she had left off. *Fourfivesix*.

Glo-Worm was pleased with the passionate start to her new life. That is, until her abacus caught fire on the candles that she kept for warmth. She wanted to put them out, but the Team Captain had skipped that lesson. She let the wicks burn right down to the colorful beads that she slipped back and forth each day. The flames came and she stayed in her burrow, pledged to her new life until it was over.

Her hiking friends made it back to town and delivered her message in no uncertain terms. People respected her wishes and her solitude. Unaware of the fire, the census-taker would step up to the forest's edge every season and place another tick on his sheet in honor of Glo-Worm.



## The Dining Car



AFTER THE FAILURE of the light rail, the citizens needed a place where things felt like they were moving. Approximate motion would do. People were starting to realize that AFTER THE FAILURE of the light rail, the citizens needed a place where things felt like they were moving. Approximate motion would do. People were starting to realize that the Dining Car was where you could find that kind of action. It wasn't a new place. Even in the days when the old part of town was still made of copper, the Dining Car was there. But then it became a Thing. (And, please remember, a Thing rarely lasts.) Someone appreciated it for what it always had been and this person wasn't afraid to say so and someone, under the influence of entropy, agreed, and that person let the cat out of the bag and another guy caught wind of it and mentioned it in passing...

The Dining Car worked just fine before things started moving. They were understaffed and loving it. They didn't have to pass code; inspectors came and went, but they were good enough never to call roll. Then, when business boomed, the Dining Car was thrown straight off its tracks. Crews inspected the rails and a sizzle could be smelled almost a week later. The grass behind it had grown unhindered for seasons on end, and now it was crushed. Inspections revealed that the brakeman was off-duty. In reality, he had never been hired – ever. After the derailment, the cook spent a season running his

business out of the back window and kept watch over his abandoned tracks in the evenings. During these quiet times, he breathed with unprecedented regularity and thought about restaffing.

Deprived of automatic locomotion, as models would dictate, sales lagged (as did the Dining Car's celebrity status). But what profit existed worked for itself and soon blossomed into a retainer for a well regarded hauling crew. Their services committed only until lunchtime, the cook prepared for their arrival. He cleared a wide path with a borrowed lawn tractor. One or two heave-hos and the Dining Car sunk into its familiar rails. Nobody washed their hands until they heard *click*. They did good work that morning, and the click came quickly. The fallow space now vacated, all agreed they had created a glorious new patch. The cook suggested lawn darts and they played three rounds before the midday whistle wheezed its plight to the hauling crew.

Movement restored, patron traffic returned to pre-derailing levels. Expectations were met, and – if one had the speed to pace the Dining Car's always open windows – he could see for himself. The customers were at peace. The issue of the brakeman was never addressed, and the mayor's office was being forced to take notice. Special interests had gotten involved. (Following the Dragonfly Incident, Optimus Prime could no longer afford to turn a blind eye.)

So, auditions were held. People from the mayor's office organized the process, but the cook was asked to contribute his two bits. As a judge, he felt awkward, but he had no choice. He was told, *This will be your man (or woman) so (s)he must satisfy you – as in, make you content.* So he took the whole day quite seriously, weighing each decision carefully, not allowing the event to slip into the pace of montage. The applicants poured their hearts out and he watched, they poured, he watched, poured, watched, poured watched, pouredwatched. And, then, he delivered his decision, two words to the governor's office: NO DICE.

The crowds kept up their side of the deal, and the Dining Car maintained its side – as it always had – without a brakeman. The margin was too high for the governor's office to address the cook's insolence; they didn't have the luxury to risk media involvement. Life was precarious in the Dining Car, for cooks and customers alike. That should have caused anxiety, but the cook stayed cool. He knew trends would change; he'd seen it happen before. If the car held its track just a little longer, until the rebirth of the upswing, stability would return without needing to be told.



**Jem**

JEM THOUGHT she was earthquake proof. And she knew that a quake was inevitable. She did nothing to prepare her own safety, except to check that the inside of her Freakie Freezies were still warm. The town vibrated at a very low frequency and only she could hear it. She didn't know how anyone could sleep, especially the people over at emergency services. *Despite their deafness, she thought, can't these people feel what's going to happen?* Jem wanted to stop the noise, so she roamed the town, fastening clandestine insulation (discarded baby blankets and loveseat cushions) to various ceilings and floors. Jem did what she could to muffle the sounds of the coming quake, to save everyone else the worry.

She began to lean on lukewarm cocoa to ease her burden. But one night her supply ran out. So she took to her balcony to get some air and ease the pain of her knowledge of the coming quake. Her teeth chattered in rhythm with the pavement. The vendors pushed their carts home along the traffic-free avenue below, and the wind stopped, almost on cue. In the stillness, she could feel the history of the town below her, the vibrant canal life that briefly flourished then died, and the rising hills that could once be crossed freely. She forgot why she had come outside – but, as always, the rumblings in

the earth's stomach were with her, the grinding of the town's plate against the outside world.

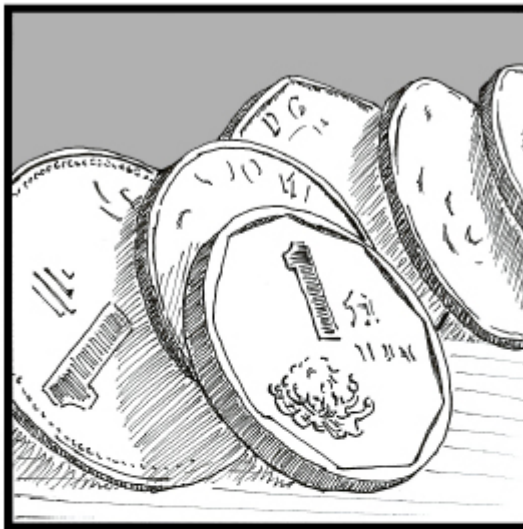
Since she couldn't sleep that night, she went for a walk and found herself in the restless kiosk district, the origin of the town's insomnia. She approached the all-night cocoa vendor. The man in the window laughed when she appeared and he said, *You're not here because you're a happy woman.* He leaned heavily on his arms and continued to laugh. He was drunk on his own product. That drew Jem in. She picked up a cup and held it under his urn, serving herself. She let it cool, holding it in her hand, afraid that it would spill if she placed it on the counter.

*Everyone in this town,* the man said, *they think it's easy to stay still.* He refilled his own cup. *It ain't.* Jem, of all people, understood. She asked him about the vibrations. Did he feel them too? He did not, but he couldn't stay still. He made her a bet. He bet her that if she came back the next night, his 24-hour cocoa kiosk would be elsewhere. She wasn't fool enough to take such an outrageous wager.

Jem, who doubted that anyone but herself would survive the big quake, believed that this man, this cocoa merchant, knew about the insistent motion beneath the ground. The next day, she went to the market for her creams and powders, her cocoa ingredients.

The stock boy told her that he also had been to the all-night cocoa kiosk. *It's sat on the same firm ground for thirty years*, he said. The stock boy said that he always trusted their cup; it was consistent. Jem didn't want to believe this; consistency was the last impression she got. The stock boy said that the man behind the window was like every other kiosk owner; he never moved. He had a bed and a toilet right beneath his register. He was there to stay. He spent his nights testing his mettle against the strength of his own cocoa.

Jem never returned to the cocoa kiosk. She hoped she could relegate its memory to that of an apparition. Just a few days later, her vibrations turned into tremors and she taped up her windows, comforted only by her unique sense of motion.



## Game Cartridges



ONE OF THE CLEAREST INDICATORS of the Prime Administration's downfall was the standardization of format throughout town. The dust settled and the game cartridge stood alone. The Bear and his staff had thrived behind the smokescreen of competition, but, with time, their machinations were brought front and center and the public became less interested in the glut of formats (some of which were clearly superior to game cartridges). They turned their attention to political intrigue. The Bear organized a response, putting Optimus Prime on stage. Before all the eyes of the town, the mayor feigned admiration for the victorious format and claimed to have believed in it all along. But then, he took the greatest misstep of his mayoral career. Right up on stage, for public display, he inserted a game cartridge – upside down.

The Bear thought it was best to confront the ears of his constituents head on. He gave Jenny Mews an exclusive with the Mayor, and that's when Optimus Prime made his daring confession: in all his years, until that horrible day on stage, he had never once used a game cartridge. Even when the other formats began to die away, he refused to admit the inevitability of the game cartridge's stand-alone status. He lived in stubborn bliss, surrounded each morning by the paisley wallpaper of his breakfast nook, refusing to cede to the realities of the lifestyle of the very town it was his duty to govern. At one

point, Jenny Mews reached out and touched Optimus Prime's hand. Although her signature motion, it was a gesture she would come to regret.

The Bear knew the interview was a risk, but its complete failure was impossible to predict. Not a single citizen could reconcile the fact that the man they chose to lead them neither believed in the wonder of game cartridges nor even knew how to use one. His penitent tears provided no reassurance. A referendum was printed and circulated on the black market and a consensus of NO CONFIDENCE was reached. Still, according to their social duty and their civic pledge, the audience continued to attend Tuesday night Gatherings beneath the tent. They held back their boos and hisses, but Optimus Prime couldn't stop himself from apologizing between each item on the agenda.

The truth of the matter was that Jenny Mews had a bigger collection of game cartridges than anyone else in town. It had been her preferred format since the beginning. Being at the top of the news chain, she always knew that game cartridges would prevail. But, during the prime slot, she had caressed the hand of the mayor during his darkest hour. She would forever be seen as a collaborator with The-Mayor-Who-Didn't-Know. There was a result of a Conscious Boycott, and her ratings went through the floor. She was once the town darling, and now the allied consumers had sent her packing. If she ever

hoped to charm audiences again, it would be beyond the foothills in whose shadow she had always stood. She set off alone, while a rerun played in her forfeited time slot, a box of her favorite game cartridges tucked snugly against her breast.

The Bear had ridden out enough trends in his time to not believe that all was lost. He thought that Optimus Prime's reelection was certainly possible. He even stood a chance at an uncontested race. So The Bear returned to his own chambers to spend his nights plotting a renaissance. Perhaps this was not the wisest decision of his tenure, as it was within the gray light of The Bear's own ascetic confines that his once keen understanding of the minds of his fellow citizens began to wither. When morning light told him it was time to salvage some sleep, he settled his oversized frame into his twin bed. The only thought that could bring him peace was this: despite the confusion around him, The Bear had never possessed a single game cartridge and he never would.



**Benvereen**

BENVEREEN WAS undoubtedly a family man. But he had lost something along the way. He made a pledge to the most ethereal and wispy clouds, in hope that whatever was lost would be found. He still loved his wife, but he wasn't sure that that kind of emotion was the correct kind of emotion in the current decade. When he wasn't praying, he kept his eyes fixed on the ground, not far beyond the tips of his toes, expecting that an answer soon would be there. He became well-acquainted with the town's highways and driveways, the walks hollow and dense, the covered lanes and exposed alleys. He'd sometimes flip a shiny bit into the fountain and hope that it'd settle the right way up.

He'd worked at The Sip Shop (*No Bites For Over 50 Years!*, the sign boasted) since he'd ever had a job. That made his face well-recognized around town. So it was quite unlikely that his wife didn't know he worked there, especially on the day that she strolled in with Slim Goodbody. Benvereen knew that she wasn't there to see him; at least her record showed that she didn't visit her husband at work. They sat right down in his section. Benvereen looked to his crew chief for a respite and was offered no such thing. *Your table*, she snapped. He set to it and took their orders. To this day,

Benvereen still considers that table often, and he still is not sure if his wife recognized him. At the end of the night, he didn't expect a tip and he didn't get one.

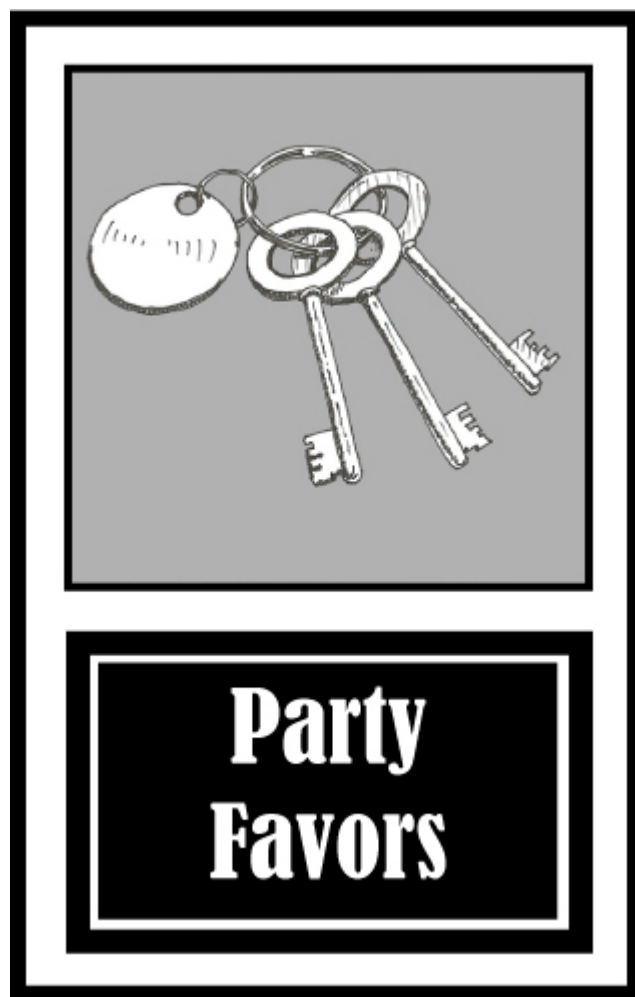
Benvereen reacted to the incident. He began to make his own friends. He took up dancing on the side. Although many swore it was his true vocation, he refused to consider it more than a distraction. But he knew he was good and he suspected that soon his wife would catch wind of his beautiful, restless shoes. *You dance with such vigor*, his instructors told him. *Your feet are filled with such wonderful spite*, his colleagues added.

Finally, they had a recital. Benvereen left tickets at the door. He saw the whole staff of The Sip Shop clamoring for the first row. But the footlights blinded him beyond that; the rest of the theater was an empty black cavern. He never knew if his wife sat in the dark and watched him dance – on that memorable night. And he never dared ask.

Hobby soon turned intolerable for Benvereen and he returned to living life only through substantive channels, like his trade. He sold his shin guards for half of their market value and exchanged his stockpile of balsawood for a new apron. He was home every night in time for dinner, usually with fresh bread. Often his wife would be there too. It was at the dinner table that he learned she was working too: refurbishing the old

Canal District. This struck him as interesting; her work was very similar to his. He told her to be careful of dragonflies – and he meant it sincerely.

What Benvereen saw at The Sip Shop that particular night, now many years past: his wife enjoying drinkable yogurt cocktails with Slim Goodbody. Slim Goodbody's face, famously inscrutable, revealed nothing of what the man was feeling, but Benvereen's wife was content. Benvereen had seen greater joy in her eyes, but such peace, he didn't know if he recognized. While they waited for their drinks, Benvereen served them a small plate of complimentary Saltines, belying The Sip Shop's slogan. Slim Goodbody pushed the plate across the table, and as his wife accepted a cracker. Benvereen thought he saw their fingers almost touch.





PARTY FAVORS WERE DISTRIBUTED in individually wrapped plastic bags to all the citizens. It happened on five particular days every year. Every year, there was a certain excitement in the air on that late summer morning when the new calendar was revealed. People rifled through it to find the five glorious holidays (one to represent each of the town's founding vendors) designated for party favor distribution. If one of those days coincided with your birthday, you were in luck. You would receive gifts in multiples.

On the five holidays, duties were suspended and the whole town took to the streets to see what party favors they had received. They carefully broke the seals on their bags and peeked inside. The avenues and lanes were filled with *oohs* and *ahhs*. Shop owners had the option to open their stores in the afternoon, but most took the day off to enjoy their new party favors. It was always a lazy afternoon and a good excuse to picnic at the foot of the hills. Even the garbagesweep reveled in picking up the piles of plastic the next morning.

Party favors needed to be distributed so often because they had a brief shelf life. When the holiday was over, some people kept theirs, but most had nowhere to store them.

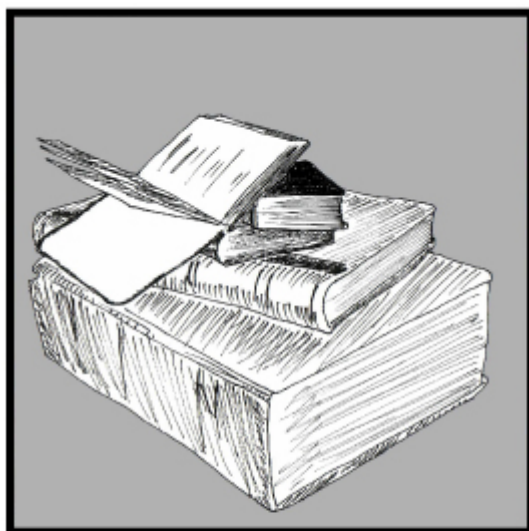
Even if you did have a box or a shelf, the party favors usually found a way to disappear. Every few months, an infusion of new material was necessary.

The party favors didn't simply appear; their preparation was a precise and arduous process, led by the Den Mother. She and her staff would meet in the gymnasium on the eve of the holiday and set to filling the bags in an orderly process. They had refined their technique over time and now acted as a rudimentary assembly line. The Den Mother's bark was their ON switch. They moved in a slow rhythm lit by fluorescent banks of lights, buzzing high above their heads. An always full bank of coffee urns fueled their creation. Sometime just before dawn, a few of the women would drive a vanful of party favors to a special kiosk that had been erected outside the tent. They would load it up, ready for distribution when the town woke up.

One holiday, the town was silent with the hush of morning expectation. Everyone was opening their bags and picking through their party favors, designating favorites and candidates for trade. Then, a scream was heard just south of town square. Papa Smurf had opened his bag to find it completely empty. His cry was repeated on the west side of town, just behind the kiosks. Rainbow Brite also had no party favors. Mistakes had been made. An opinion formed quickly: the mayor's office was losing its edge, and this miscalculation proved they could let the whole town slip right through their fingers.

Some concerned citizens offered to share their party favors with Papa Smurf and Rainbow Brite, but it was a half-hearted gesture. Really, they feared for their own safety; it could just as easily been any one of them who opened his or her bag, only to find it empty.

The Den Mother missed the daylight on that holiday, as she did on most. She spent her holidays sleeping off her all-nighter and the victory bottle she shared with her staff afterward. Usually she took an evening walk to enjoy the warmth of the picnics winding down and the sated revelers returning happy to their homes. But, this time, when she awoke and stepped out, the streets were cold and barren, and all she could hear was a distant snuffle, from the vicinity of the Blossom District. She followed the empty streets until she found Papa Smurf sitting against a building, still clutching his empty plastic bag. When he saw the Den Mother approach, he asked, *Did you do this?* She reached down and pried the bag from his fingers. *No*, she said. *We filled them all.* She turned over the bag and shook it. *This wasn't our fault*, she assured the frightened man. *We had a system.*



# Manuals

THE SLOGAN ON EACH MANUAL was "Read Once and Discard." It was emblazoned in green foil on the spine, a friendly script set within the neighborly tidings of quotes. Everyone received a copy of the Manual, but no quizzes were given and, in a short time, everyone obeyed the directions on the spine and found a trashcan in which to safely throw out his or her copy of the book. The result was one of the town's first public works projects: a huffy incinerator powerful enough to consume every scrap of leather and paper they fed it. It smiled and glowed like a jack-o-lantern. The Manuals were consumed, the vigorous generation who had read them faded, and a new one took its place.

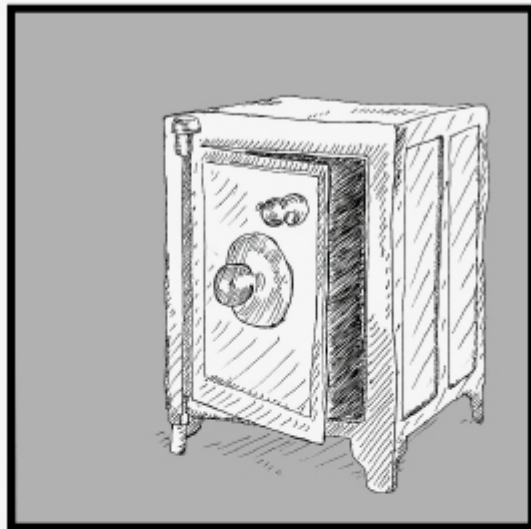
Papa Smurf identified a lack of order in the everyday running of town affairs and he thought the only acceptable solution was a conventional system of standardization. He searched for a copy of the Manual, but they had all been responsibly discarded. Packing himself a brown bag lunch, he caught the yellow bus out to the incinerator. He searched the structure from its hottest bowels to the outlying chainlink-enclosed scrubgrass that surrounded it. The incinerator hummed quietly and worked as advertised. Not a single scrap of Manual had been left unconsumed. Papa Smurf had to catch the last bus empty-handed. He sat in the back, looking forward at row after

row of empty seats, until he saw the back of the driver's head bumping along with the twists and turns back to town square. The seat beside him distinctly smelled of urine.

All Papa Smurf had to begin the Reconstruction was his fleeting understanding of the previous generation. He consulted experts in various areas of the recall discipline and, with their advice, he produced a guide that he was just about willing to refer to as a Manual. The next Tuesday, he left a copy on everyone's seat under the tent. By the weekend, the Manuals had been read and trips to the incinerator had begun. Papa Smurf had not forgotten to decorate the spine with the same graceful words that adorned the original books. The town finally had a set of rules, and, for the time being, its residents had a cursory understanding of them. As people returned from the incinerator, several of them disclosed the things they had read in the pages of Manual, and inconsistencies were obvious.

With time came memory. The longer the Manuals lay burnt, the more their contents evolved. The town, as a whole, conceived of the rules they had read. Their understanding adopted aspects of the lazy and the close read alike. Direct quotations (page and stanza) became less frequent over the years, but invocations of Manual-dictated policy increased. B.A. Barracus said it best: *This town's got some rules now, and, hell, we're gonna use 'em!*

Papa Smurf ran into his old friend George Papadopoulos at the counter of the Sip Shop. George Papadopoulos liked to talk politics, and that's just what he was up to that day. The mayor's office was in disarray and he thought it might be time for a recall. He was willing to *lead an effort*, he said, as he took a sip and spun his stool, *but the logistics seemed dicey*. Papa Smurf delivered his old line: *Lack of standards, George Papadopoulos – that's the problem*. George Papadopoulos almost choked on his bendy straw. He cried for the Manual; *But what about the Manual?* he bellowed. Papa Smurf took a seat at the counter and waved his weary hand. *If only we had committed it to memory*.



# **The Cookie Jar**



THE LAST CRUMB had been removed from the cookie jar. The Bear had emptied everything into a brown paper bag, which he had, in turn, stuffed deep into the bottom of his backpack. Optimus Prime opened the refrigerator door to shed light on whatever other provisions they could find laying about the hushed night kitchen. Milky Ways. Fun size. *Count 'em and pack 'em*, The Bear whispered, nervously eying the whirring egg timer on the stovetop. *We'll need all the help we can get.*

The Bear grabbed the empty cookie jar. *Leave it*, Optimus Prime commanded, his last official order. *But, I said, we'll need...*, The Bear replied. Mayor Prime put up his right hand. *Leave it*. He then held forth his left hand and on it was a tightly folded note. The Bear read the small print; it said: *For Jenny Mews*. Optimus Prime dropped it in the cookie jar. The Bear thought his boss was taking a clear risk. Leaving the note, and the cookie jar (and whatever else) meant the town's memory of them, the town's memory of their administration, might survive. *Of course*, Optimus Prime countered, *if we bring along these things, then our risk is that our own memory of this town might survive*. The Bear shut the refrigerator door, returning the night kitchen to its comfortable darkness. Optimus Prime opened the back door, and the pair of them stepped out into the night.

Together the two men pedaled, riding atop the same tandem that they had rode more than a year earlier, on the day that Optimus Prime agreed to run for office. As they glided past the row of kiosks, the merchants hardly blinked their weary glass eyes, not at all surprised or distressed that their mayor and his confessor were absconding. Together, they pushed harder and sped over the hollow walks that covered their now-forgotten canals. They crossed town square without even time to fully inhale and exhale once. As they crossed the path of the light rail, they spared no time to look either left or right. Finally they came to the tent – several stories high at its tallest point, but fully hidden by the stretching nighttime shadows of the surrounding hills – and together, they slammed on the brakes. They ditched the tandem behind back, as the only way to continue was on foot.

Their progress through the hills was simple and steady. Several hours into their hike, Optimus Prime paused. He had found Danger Mouse, curled up, but wide awake, in the dirt beneath a bush. The mayor asked The Bear to open his backpack. He pulled out two cookies. The Bear protested; he said, *But we'll need all the help...* Optimus Prime held up his hand and shared his provisions with Danger Mouse. The lost traveler accepted his mayor's gift. While he ate the cookies hungrily, Optimus Prime and The Bear marched on toward the town limits.

Before daybreak they had made it to the other side of hills, never to enter their town again. But sitting on the counter of Optimus Prime's former kitchen was the cookie jar, and secure under its lid was definite proof that he and his friend The Bear had once lived in the town, had once run the town, and nothing anyone said or thought could make the evidence disappear.



## **Under the Tent**

IT WAS TO BE THE FINAL Tuesday Gathering. Some people knew it; some people didn't. It really didn't matter that evening, because the Crisis had reached such an advanced stage. Anyone who wanted to cross the hills could leave town as easily as taking a walk in the park. Optimus Prime, The Bear and others had long since fled and there was no leadership, inept or otherwise, to speak of. Still, the instincts of those who were left brought them under the tent that one final time. They were all there when the clock struck eventide, no matter what panic the world around them was in.

A dais had been set up, and, impossibly, somebody had the presence of mind to string bunting along it. Of course, it remained empty, as the town no longer had an administration to occupy the seats of honor. The people filed in and settled down on their regular seats. Some looked high up into the tent's cavernous ceiling. It was obvious from the spots of black that the rips and tears in the canvas had grown large enough to let the heavy night sky fall through. They knew that the ladders would never again be extended to patch the holes in their shelter. As the final Gathering's beginning drew near, they noticed the seats of those who were already gone. Refusing to allow their absence to be so insistent, the people in the back moved up and filled in

the gaps. It was an unseasonably chilly night, but they left the tent flaps open, should anyone show up late.

Once everybody had settled down, the tent was a satisfying and whole scene. The slight translucence of its canvas allowed it to glow over the completely dark town that surrounded it. There was the trace of silhouettes, people together once again, as a single community. And at the top of the tent's highest pole was a flag, a long, red banner flapping in the sharp winds. They had often said it would be a beautiful sight if they placed a flag atop their tent. And now, for the first time, the flag appeared, for their final meeting. It might have been an awe-inspiring sight, but there was no one outside the tent to witness it.

With everyone inside the tent, the town was a wonderful place to rob. The residents were hidden away, and the buildings and streets sat quietly abandoned. Blown debris collected unchecked in the corner of town square, while the wind rattled the hollow walks that had once been the canals. The kiosks shivered behind locked shutters and under tarps pulled taut. And the hills stood still, protecting the outside world. A thief would have had his pick of bounty, should there be anything worth taking.

Under the tent, people waited for the session to be called to order. The time to gather came and went and nobody took a seat behind the dais. They waited for someone else to assume leadership, but no one had been left behind to do it. They heard a rustling toward the rear and, when they turned around, they saw a shadow slipping out. The exit had begun. In no particular manner, they wandered out in ones and twos and threes. The last few witnessed the empty seats left to calcify and hungrily enjoyed the final puffs of the tent's icy air. When they stepped outside, they were no longer together; there was no town to return to.



## **Epilogue: The Roast**



WHEN IT WAS ALL OVER, a group of them sat down together to enjoy a hot roast. With their home gone, they had nothing to say to one other, nothing to share. Still, in regular turn, they speared the burnt meat and tried to enjoy it immensely. But their normal, natural routine of surviving from morning to morning had been ruptured, and they were at a loss as to how best approach the decorated platter.

The event may have seemed more congruous if anyone, even The Bear, had showed up to share a few words, to give a shape to what had happened, if Optimus Prime had popped in to reminisce. But, they were left on their own. At one point, Hacksaw Jim asked Rainbow Brite to pass the butter. And she did. But he didn't have the heart to use it.

The roast sat, sweating onto its paper doily. Benvereen pulled out a brown diary and began to scratch away. No one thought him rude; they were glad for the distraction. His wife stood up to leave, and Benvereen ran after her, leaving his diary behind, on the clean white tablecloth. Punky Brewster picked it up and began to write until her watch alarm beeped. Polite, as always, she excused herself. Each person at the table, feeling

the weight of speechlessness, found a reason to write or a reason to leave. The roast continued to lay uneaten.

Voltron picked up the book and began to jot down a few notes, a few memories. When he raised his head, a few minutes later, he was sitting alone, just him and the cold roast. He stood up and the waiter began to clear the table. The young man had done a good job, so Voltron handed him a nice tip. *You're good at what you do*, he let him know. The waiter stood straight and said, *Oh no, sir. This is only my day job*. Voltron asked him what it was he really did.

*I'm a collector, sir.*

Voltron stepped out into the afternoon sun. He wasn't three steps from the door when the young waiter burst out behind him. Waving Benvereen's brown diary in the air, he shouted, *You forgot your book, sir*. Voltron waved him off and kept walking. He said: *Keep it. It's yours.*

