

MODERATION

By

Kevin Kautzman

12.3.19

Max Grossman
Abrams Artists Agency
275 Seventh Avenue
26th Floor
New York, NY 10001
(P) 646-461-9372
(E) mgrossman@abramsartny.com

CHARACTERS

SHE

HE

SCENE

A content moderation center run by the Contractor on behalf of the Company's ubiquitous social media Platform.

ACTS

I: SEVEN PLUS, Morning

II: BIGFOOT & MUSSOLINI, Noon a Month Later

III: KILLDOZER, Afternoon a Month Later

A NOTE ON THE SCRIPT

-- indicates an interruption

/ indicates overlapping speech

ON CASTING

Best actors for the roles.

Throw moderation to the winds, and the greatest pleasures bring the greatest pains.

- Democritus

And therein lies the threat of cyberspace at its most elementary: when a man and a woman interact in it, they may be haunted by the spectre of a frog embracing a bottle of beer. Since neither of them is aware of it, these discrepancies between what "you" really are and what "you" appear to be in digital space can lead to murderous violence.

- Zizek

ACT I: SEVEN PLUS

Morning. Tapping at keyboards. Chirping of birds. THEY are at their computer terminals. A westward facing window allows sunlight, faint at this early hour.

SHE

I am being a social media content moderator. He is being my manager.

HE

She is being my first direct report. Technically my second. The first one had issues. I am attempting to forget about that loser. I am forgetting.

SHE

I am looking at video of bigfoot. I am wondering why it was flagged. There is a male voice speaking, poorly recorded but audible. And now I am understanding. The voice is claiming bigfoot is a descendent of what the voice is calling “undesirable races.” And I am snickering at how stupid this is despite myself.

HE

I am glancing at her. I am wondering what she is thinking is so amusing.

SHE

I am being seen by the one who is my manager. I am keeping a straight face. I am thinking this insane Bigfoot video would be hilarious if it did not have six thousand upvotes. I am flagging it for removal.

I am looking at the next item in my queue. I am looking at this button in the corner of my screen. It is saying, “bio break.” I am being tempted to tap it, so I can go to the toilets and laugh about the Bigfoot racist. I am deciding not to, as it is my first day.

HE

I am looking at footage of the 9/11 attacks. I am watching a documentary about WTC Seven, the third tower in New York that mysteriously went down that day. I am understanding why this was flagged, but I am uncertain whether this strictly violates the terms of service. I am leaving it for now and moving on. I may even look for it at home through my VPN. I am wondering how the Head of the Company would feel about this video, if he knows something we don't. I am wondering if he has government security clearance. I am realizing he has access to more information than the government. I am realizing governments probably asks him for clearance. Lucky bastard.

SHE

I am watching a video of Mussolini and his what, wife, girlfriend, mistress hang on meat hooks. I am hoping our break will come. I am moving my cursor nowhere, in a loop, nowhere in a loop... a loop... a loop... I am looping...

A soothing sound stops them. The light of their monitors fades.

HE

That's our morning twenty minute break. We get one in the afternoon too. And lunch of course. You catch anything very bad so far?

SHE

Some race baiting. But mild. I think we avoided the race war another day. I removed a stupid Bigfoot video but didn't suspend the account. Just a strike.

HE

Bigfoot?

SHE

It got racial.

HE

Any sevens?

SHE

Threes and fours. Bigfoot was a five, but I removed it for the racist dog whistles.

HE

If you get a seven plus, tap me.

SHE

Physically?

HE

You may tap me on the shoulder.

SHE

And may I have that in writing?

HE

That's not funny. Can we just enjoy a nice quiet break?

SHE

Sure. But I have a question.

HE

Shoot.

SHE

How will I know if a piece of speech is a seven plus?

HE

Doxing. Threats of violence. It's in the handbook.

SHE

What if they're joking? How will I know?

HE

How does anyone know anything?

SHE

What if I mistake a joke for something serious?

HE

Jokes make you LOL.

SHE

Not always.

HE

This is art, not science. The algorithm will flag anything suspicious--

SHE

You aren't answering my question.

HE holds up his hand to her. The birds chirp.

SHE

What?

HE

Don't interrupt.

SHE

Sorry.

HE

If you get a school shooting or a beheading, you know what to do.

Remove. SHE

Suspend. HE

Report. Off with their heads. SHE

Off with their heads, yes. But speech is tricky. HE

Yeah. In a way I'd prefer to see beheadings all day. SHE

No, you wouldn't. HE

No. Right. SHE

This isn't the French Revolution. Yet. HE

That's witty. "Yet." SHE

I'm renowned for my wit. On the Platform. HE

You have many "friends" on the Platform? SHE

Yes. And they all have heads attached to bodies, in their smiling happy Platform headshots. HE

It was a joke. I only mean it would make the job easier. You see a video like that, you report and remove it. I could do that all day and not have to think. Easy. SHE

You'd have to be brainsick to think that would make the job easier. HE

Brainsick? SHE

HE

The psychiatrist is on the top floor. The bestiality is pretty bad. I saw a thing with goldfishes...

SHE

Goldfish?

HE

Two. Goldfishes.

SHE

What did they do with them?

HE

I'd rather not.

A pause.

The suicide livestreams used to freak me out too. But I'm over it. You get numb after awhile.

SHE

Damn. Dark.

HE

What happened to an old fashioned suicide note?

SHE

It's a dying form. Ha ha. No?

HE

No. People don't think about the strangers who have to watch this stuff. They could just leave a note for their loved ones. If they have any.

SHE

People use the technology at hand. And so we go where tech directs. Even to the grave.

HE

Ahh, but tech goes where humans direct it too.

SHE

Does it tho?

HE

“Humans are the sex organs of the machine world.”

SHE

What? Gross. No. We’re barely the sex organs of our own world.

HE

Been awhile?

SHE

Excuse me?

HE

“Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. The machine world reciprocates man’s love by expediting his wishes and desires, namely, in providing him with wealth.” That’s McLuhan.

SHE

What if humans are the wealth of the machine world?

HE

How?

SHE

Content. It’s all content. We’re content too.

HE

I’m malcontent. Ha ha. Pew pew. Finger guns.

SHE

Right. That makes you malcontent content. Maybe that’s exactly what the machines want. Maybe the future belongs to them, and we’re just moderating the present for them.

HE

Except I have free will. We can choose to stop “moderating” at any point.

SHE

Can we tho?

HE

I’ll demonstrate. I can choose to ring this bell right here any time. I am choosing not to ring it right now.

HE holds his hand over a bell on his desk.

SHE

Whatever you say, boss.

HE

Still choosing. Not ringing it. Still.

SHE

Tease.

HE withdraws his hand.

SHE

Now all I can think about is the bell.

HE

I'll make you a deal. I'll ring that bell when you make me LOL.

SHE

I have another question.

HE

Shoot.

SHE

What's the craziest thing you've seen in this gig?

HE

Beyond the goldfishes?

SHE

Dude, what were they doing with the goldfish?!

HE

Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to.

SHE

Poor fish.

HE

Fishes. Two.

SHE
Those poor fish. Fishes. Fish?

HE
Forget it.

SHE
Okay, so what else?

HE
There was a thing with a child. People are monsters.

The birds chirp.

SHE
Yeah.

HE
The conspiracy theories really mess with me. I saw one yesterday that said: aliens bred with Neanderthals and that's how we got humans. And that relates to the fact currency isn't real and we're slaves with smartphones and everyone owes money to some shadow power and nobody can say exactly who except it's Jews every time if you click the third link.

SHE
Jews. Classic.

HE
Sometimes the aliens and Jews work together.

SHE
That's a little on the nose, isn't it?

HE
Cute. "On the nose."

SHE
You didn't LOL tho.

HE
Because it's not funny. People really believe this stuff! And not just the Jew alien thing.

SHE
Like what?

HE
Do you know about the Killdozer?

SHE

No.

HE

After the local council screwed with his business through zoning or something, a man in Colorado welded himself into a tank he made out of a bulldozer and destroyed a government building. When his “Killdozer” got stuck in the rubble, he blew his brains out. Nobody else got hurt, but he did some damage. There’s a day where people celebrate this guy. Killdozer Day.

SHE

Why?

HE

Because he had enough and did something about it. You’ve never wanted to do something like that?

SHE

I’ve never wanted to bulldoze a government building.

HE

Really?

SHE

I still don’t see how we can avoid reporting a joke by mistake.

HE

It’s like this: when you’re out for drinks, you know the difference between some idiot using the n-word, like “Hey, my ninja” and some racist saying, “F you, ninja!”

SHE

Ninja?

HE

Yeah, as in: this is a break, we should be chillaxing, my ninja!

THEY chillax. The birds chirp. From his bag HE reveals and taps a handheld device.

SHE

It’s nice we can hear the birds down here.

HE

There’s a nest or something.

SHE

So the terminals shut down on breaks?

HE

Yes. And remember: we're measured on performance against time. Every keystroke and mouse movement is recorded. They know where your eyes are at all times.

SHE

What if I have to really use the bathroom?

HE

Tap the "bio break" button. You know that.

SHE

And they're timing us?

HE

Of course.

SHE

What if I need to take like a really sticky dump?

HE

Okay TMI.

SHE

Oh come on, man. I don't get the LOL bell for that? Sticky dumps are funny.

HE

I like a setup and a punchline.

SHE

It's creepy, isn't it? The eye thing? "bio breaks." Shit buttons.

HE

The Company knows what it's doing.

SHE

Why record eye movement?

HE

Consider the scale of this. There are tens of thousands of people doing this job right--

SHE

Sure, but that has to be... Sorry. I interrupted.

HE

I appreciate you caught yourself.

SHE

Okay. You were saying. Why are they tracking our eye movement?

HE

This isn't chillaxation. Anyway, you know the answer.

SHE

They're building a dataset.

HE

Yes. But why?

SHE

To birth a true AI that will take over these jobs. Qualitative reasoning. Beyond the uncanny valley.

HE

Is that where we are?

SHE

How do we know the AI isn't already here?

HE

The Company would demo it. Imagine the bump to the stock.

SHE

They'd have to field test it first. Like a Turing Test. But blind, with people who don't know they're subjects. They'll have signed away their rights in some terms of service document.

HE

That's a good point. Nobody reads the terms of service.

SHE

Exactly.

HE

There is no way a secret AI exists. It would require an impossible level of coordination among the makers. A vast conspiracy. Kennedy on LSD. Hitler in Argentina. Kubrick and the moon landing.

SHE

What about the moon landing?

HE

Forget it.

SHE

You don't think we landed on the moon!?

HE

I didn't say that.

SHE

I bet you think the Earth is flat too.

HE

Are you trying to make me LOL? So I ring the bell? Because this isn't working.

SHE

I figure if we talk enough, it'll come naturally. I just didn't realize I was talking to a flat Earther.

HE

The Earth is round. We landed on the moon. And there is no true AI. At least not yet.

SHE

Aha but what if they built a true AI that thinks it's a human? They could set it loose and we wouldn't know, and neither would it. Maybe that's the next phase of evolution. Machines with brains. Feelings. A being able to tell a suicide from an interpretive dance about suicide. Art appreciation.

HE

Machines will never appreciate art.

SHE

Sure they will. They'll know a mistake from a masterpiece, a finger-painting from a Pollack.

HE LOLs for the first time. SHE points to the bell. HE holds his hand over it.

HE

I am so sorry.

SHE

Hashtag me too. What did you study?

HE

Media. I had a difficult childhood.

SHE

LOL. Here's a thought: what if they put two AI together and let them test each other?
Turing Squared.

HE

Way too dangerous.

SHE

Dude, ring the bell already!

HE rings the bell.

SHE

That's nice. It's a nice tone. Where'd you get it?

HE

I used to work front desk at a hotel. I took it on my last day. Back when I was a bad boy.
Now I go by the books. There's not much choice, is there?

SHE

No. Too many cameras. Too many rules.

HE

Speaking of rules. We get two twenties. A thirty minute lunch. Don't leave the premises.
Another twenty minute break after lunch. Do what you want on breaks. Quietly.

SHE

Can I walk the garden?

HE

We work for the Contractor, not the Company.

SHE

They really have a garden, don't they? The Company? At their new campus?

HE

That's the rumor. It's all very hush hush.

SHE

Well where can I walk in here, if I need to move?

HE

Up and down the hallway?

SHE

We could take a stroll to the toilets. Really dig into each other's "gender identity."

HE

You know I could report you for that. Sexual innuendo is forbidden.

SHE

You recommended they hire me. After the interview, the extensive psychometric testing, the second interview, and the one on one?

HE

I saw potential.

SHE

So it would reflect poorly on you to report me for sexualized remarks on my first day. Yes?

HE

You could be reading a book right now.

SHE

I didn't bring one.

HE

So enjoy five minutes alone with your thoughts.

HE uses his device. Tap tap. Chirp chirp.

SHE

What are you doing?

HE

Writing a screenplay.

SHE

Why can you have a personal mobile device and I can't?

HE

You didn't read the handbook.

SHE

Nobody wants to read a handbook. Or the terms of service. Not like they want to read a screenplay.

HE

No! Nobody actually wants to read a screenplay.

SHE

I do. I studied English.

HE

I'm trying to work here.

SHE

If I'd known I could use a device on break, I'd have brought--

HE

After you pass a month of probation, during breaks and in the common areas such as the gender neutral toilet facilities, we are allowed personal electronic devices. The monitors are off so we can't violate a user's "right to privacy" whatever that is anymore. The first time they catch you with a personal device during a work session, you're fired. So don't think about it.

SHE

Did you read the handbook?

HE

Yes. Three times. And that's why I'm on management track. Tech is my career. Screenwriting is a passion I indulge on breaks.

SHE

You get twenty minutes of passion twice a day?

HE

You're used to longer? Sorry, inappropriate.

SHE

No, that's funny. Can I ring the bell?

HE

No. You didn't laugh.

SHE

So what's the screenplay about? Give me your pitch. Come on.

HE

It's a feature about a dystopia in which AI monitors everything and an elite group of managers run the AI and thus control the world. There's a great war between super-elite content moderators: Americans, Iranians, Israelis, Brits, Russians, the Chinese of course and a rogue outfit in Costa Rica. Germany has been returned to a state of feudalism. The past is the future.

SHE

Returned to a state of feudalism?

HE

In the Great War of the Prequels, obviously. And one of the groups (I won't say which, but wink wink it's the Russians it's always the Russians when it's not always the Jewish lizard alien coalition) controls the market on dickpics with an algorithm that knows a dick when it sees it, while the heroic Americans have to deal with racist squirrel avatars using the word "nuts" as code for the international Jewish conspiracy. It's called Dicks and Nuts. Total star vehicle.

SHE

You're teasing me.

HE

What?! No. I already have the title for the sequel. "Dicks and Nuts Two: Erection Night."

SHE

What's it really about?

HE

A romantic comedy set in a sub-basement office. He's a struggling social media content moderator. She's new. Her first day. He has a past, a dark side that's only hinted at and maybe he's starting to become unhinged by the job. He's hearing things. Like birds that aren't there. Or maybe the birds aren't even real.

The birds chirp.

SHE

That doesn't sound romantic or comic.

HE

That's where the humor is. The awkwardness. The fact he's losing his mind and falling in love at the same time. It's a metaphor. You know what that word means?

SHE

Dude.

HE

It ends in death. Also a metaphor.

SHE

Do you know what that word means?

HE

Death? You'll have to wait and see. It might end in a murder suicide. But comic. A lot of physical humor. They're not just sitting at their desks doing content moderation the whole time. That would be hell to watch.

SHE

So let me read it.

HE

It's not ready.

SHE

Just a peek.

HE

I'll invite you to the table read when it's ready/

SHE

I bet it's funny. Come on, let's read a scene quick/

HE

I said it's not ready hey, no!

Something physical happens, violent but somehow ambiguous. SHE invades his space. HE jerks her arm.

SHE

Wow. Fine. Ow. Damn!

HE

I'm sorry!

SHE

It's okay. Jeeze. Man. Don't be so sensitive.

HE

Are you okay? I didn't mean...

SHE

No, yes, it's fine. I invaded your space.

HE

Bring a book.

A pause. SHE rubs her shoulder. The birds chirp.

HE

I hope you won't file a report. I need this promotion to management.

SHE

Aren't you my manager now?

HE

It's... yes but it's a trial. I'm sorry. This isn't going well. I need this to go well. The last guy quit after his first day. I need you to make it past probation. One month to probation and then another month as a "real employee." Then it's my review and I get my bump, and I need my bump.

SHE

Why?

HE

You can't tell any of the others, but I know somebody at the Company.

SHE

Wow really?

HE

So if the Contractor makes me a manager, there's a job for me at the Company on their management track. Just please do your job for two months. What's good for me could be good for you. I could recommend you to them.

SHE

That'd be amazing.

HE

I need to know tho: why are you here really?

SHE

I want to be tech.

HE

You want to be tech?

SHE

In tech.

HE

That isn't a reason. Nobody is in tech to be in tech. Damn it! This is distracting. I'm just trying to write one great line here.

SHE

What's it about?

HE

What love is.

SHE

Love is a loaded gun.

HE

Love is a loaded gun. That could work...

SHE

Nah it's garbage, sorry. Let me think... Love is the zero and the one. Love is somebody who sees you despite firewalls. Love is the birds chirping for what, for what reason, for love of something even tho we're in a deep basement and there shouldn't be birds chirping. Love is moderation. No. Love is excess. Wait, that's it. It's both, which means: love is a perfect joke, and the joke's on you. But you don't mind. That's what love is.

A gentle sound calls them back to work.

HE

I like "love is a loaded gun."

SHE

No. Don't go with the first thing that pops into your head.

HE

It wasn't my head that popped into. Hey, you want a drink?

HE reveals a flask from his on-brand tech-worker satchel.

SHE

Sure? Thanks. Wow. What is that?

HE

Cajun vodka. Keeps me loose. Let's go. They don't pay us to talk pretty.

SHE

Can I tap you on the shoulder if I have a question?

HE

Yeah. Just... don't startle me again. And don't try to grab my device.

SHE

I'm worried about what I'm going to see this session.

HE

Let's make another rule: you can ring the bell if you see something that's just too much to cope and you need to see the shrink. That way you won't have to physically touch me. So we can avoid any further, um, incidents.

SHE

Oh. Okay. Thanks...

HE

I'll set it here between us, and that way I'll know. Okay?

SHE

Okay.

HE

You'll be fine.

SHE

Can I ring it once for luck?

HE

I'd have to make you LOL first. With a joke. That's the other rule of the bell. Come on, we need to get back to work.

SHE

I want to ring the bell.

HE

Do you like Dumb Dad Jokes?

SHE

Dumb Dad Jokes?

HE

Yeah, like the stupidest jokes you know?

SHE

Maybe? I'd have to hear one.

HE

I heard this one on the Platform, on International Dress Like a Pirate Day.

SHE holds her hand over the bell.

HE

So a pirate walks into a bar with a giant wheel on his crotch. He squats into a stool on the bar and the bartender looks at his parrot, then at the pirate's one good eye. The bartender slaps a shot of rum onto the bar and says, "Mr. Pirate. You know there's a giant wheel on your crotch?" To which the pirate replies: "ARRRRRRRGH. It's driving me nuts!"

SHE rings the bell.

SHE

Ha ha ha. Argh! It's driving me nuts.

HE

No no. AAAAAAAAAAARGH! The key is the pirate sound.

SHE

AAAAAAAAAARGH! It's driving me nuts!

HE

There you go. Okay, we better get back to work.

THEY turn to their work, headsets on, monitors ablaze.

HE

I am looking at a series of images.

SHE

I am looking at a confusing political rant.

HE

I am scrolling through images and find something that is suspect and has been flagged for removal I consider it/

SHE

I am not believing this is my job, to see and report on these things, it doesn't seem real/

HE

I am flagging an image for removal, and another. This account has never posted anything suspicious, so I am annotating the issue and moving on/

SHE

I am reading a thread relating to a political issue. Humans do not get along. I am wondering how anybody has this much time to waste on the Platform. But that is not my job/

HE

I am wondering how she's doing. She's being right there. I am worrying about what happened. I am wanting another drink/

SHE

There has to be a better way to make a living than this but I don't have any other options and anyway I wanted to get into tech this is technically tech. Is it? I don't know it's a job and it is occurring to me I don't in fact know what love is. Love isn't a loaded gun. Stupid.

HE passes her the Cajun vodka and SHE drinks. HE takes it back and drinks. HE puts it into his bag.

SHE

I can't believe this is a job.

HE

Somebody has to do it.

SHE

I am staring at my monitor. I am doing nothing, which feels now like being nothing. I am being aware they are tracking my eye movement. I am in my uncanny valley.

HE

I am looking at what appears to be a beheading from a year ago. Somewhere with sand. I've seen this one before... or have I? It is not really mattering. It is a ten, and that is that. I am being thirsty. I am wondering if I am thirsty because I am looking at a desert. I am looking at blood. I am watching the video well past what's necessary to file a report.

I am watching the sinews and the bone come apart, and I am watching the head come off. I am being helpless to change this. I am thinking about the Company's rooftop garden.

HE has another drink of the Cajun Vodka.

SHE

I am considering the next brief. Something about a developing "situation" air quotes in London. And... this is a video with puppets so obviously somebody is making a prank.

SHE stands in shock.

HE

People on their knees. A tourist or a journalist or both or you do not even know. It is the eyes that are the worst. A head coming off you can see in a butcher shop. But they are begging with their eyes. Or they are crying for their mother, never their fathers. Why is that? I am watching this.

I am watching it like you would watch paint drip to the ground. I am not feeling anything.

I have seen it all. I am doing my job. Nothing shocks me

SHE

I am seeing something,
a video. I am seeing something
Worse than
I am removing my headphones. I am
standing back from the terminal. I am wondering
how humanity is this broken. I am unable to look away
I am programmed to look, I am trained

HE

I am wondering this: you know how a beheading is going to end, so why post the whole thing? I am answering my own question, and the answer is fear. They want to remind us they exist, because they feel forgotten. But so are we. Not unlike the suicides. Same impulse. Same need. To be seen is to be remembered is to exist at all.

SHE

I am covering my mouth with a hand. I am preparing to ring the bell with my other hand.

HE

Anyway it does not matter.

A 10 is a ten and I am flagging it and suspending

some people do not deserve to live
I still do not know what love is
but maybe I am learning

I am glancing at my direct report
And it is good to have someone here
I like her, yes
I decide I am liking her
She is making me less brainsick somehow
Now I am flagging the beheading account and what is she doing nobody told a joke...

SHE rings the bell. HE turns to her, headphones off.

HE

Nobody LOL'd.

SHE

No. I don't think--

HE

No. No way. You need to see the shrink? On your first day?

SHE

Yes...

HE

You're messing with me.

SHE

No.

HE

This is the job. You went through training last week. If you don't like it, there's the door.

SHE

Please, just... I think... I can't. I am so sorry.

HE stands from his terminal and goes to hers. HE taps at it. HE stands back. HE returns to his terminal, sits, and takes a drink. Another drink. HE offers it to her. No.

HE
It's bad.

SHE
I told you.

HE
I need you to not quit.

SHE
Dude. Is that real? Dude. Look at me.

HE
I don't know. It could be a hoax. I'll need to do a deep dive.

SHE
I need a bio break.

HE
Okay. Just... tap the "bio break" button, escalate it to me and I'll mark it up.

SHE
When I come back can that not be there?

HE
Toilets are down the hall. Please come back. You got unlucky. And it's probably a hoax. Fake. Okay?

SHE
Okay.

HE
Take a bio-break, and talk to the shrink if you have to. It won't look good on the first day, but I'll explain the severity in the report here.

SHE
Thank you.

HE
Thank you for the line.

SHE
What?

HE

“Love is a loaded gun.” It’s good.

SHE

It’s garbage.

HE

Please don’t report me. This job is my life. I am this job.

SHE

I appreciate that you’ll... thank you. For handling that. I can’t. It’s too... I need to ease into this. And I already feel brainsick.

The birds chirp.

HE

Talk to the shrink. But please, come back. If not today, tomorrow. This is important work. The brainsick passes. You get used to it. The human mind can get used to anything. Even this kind of thing. That’s probably what’s wrong with us... why we need to be replaced. Why we’re so busy building our own replacements. We’re too adaptable. Isn’t that ironic? It got us here, and it’ll be our downfall. That we can endure so much.

SHE

Yeah. Yeah maybe... I’m gonna go.

SHE exits. HE goes to her terminal and looks. The birds chirp. HE finishes his Cajun vodka and leans over the terminal, staring, until HE snaps to and goes to work.

Remove. Suspend. Report.

END OF ACT

ACT II: BIGFOOT & MUSSOLINI

Noon. HE is alone at his terminal.

HE

I am flagging an account for doxing a journalist. This is an immediate suspension, because extremely valuable and highly educated, well connected human lives and reputations are at stake. I am making annotations. I am having a career in “tech.” I am being a “tech worker.” I am wondering if I am lying to myself. I am suppressing that thought. I am thinking about the task ahead of me.

I am human and alive and this is my life and I’m delaying slightly and looking at the “bio break” button but I don’t need one and I have a sneaking suspicion they have sensors in the extremely inclusive toilets. I am wondering if I am being paranoid.

I am realizing what this is about is that I don’t want to take a bio break right before lunch because it looks like I’m extending my lunch “artificially” and that would be a red flag and I can’t have that. So I am reading the next brief. I am watching a video about 9/11. I am flagging it as a potential problem and will come back to it after lunch. Because it is almost time for... almost, not quite, almost and... there/

A soothing sound signals lunch. HE leans back in his chair. SHE appears.

HE

Don’t take bio breaks right before lunch.

SHE

I’m a lady but I still take dumps.

HE

No. Ladies don’t dump.

SHE

I’m a lady who dumps is what I am. I’m a lady lumberjack. I dropped a giant log.

HE

Okay, can you just not talk about your bowel movements?

SHE

Timberrrrrrr!

HE

Do you need to see the shrink again?

SHE

It was an extra sticky dump tho. So I really had to get in there and dig around. I washed with that chalky hand soap but I'm not sure it did much.

HE

Please stop.

SHE

But it's my monthaversary. Honor my stinky truth.

HE

Explain women to me.

SHE

That's simple. Men are afraid women will LOL at them. Women are afraid men will kill them.

HE

Okay. That's women. Now explain ladies to me.

SHE

How much time do you have?

HE

Lunch just started. So thirty minutes I suppose.

SHE

It'll take an hour at least, and I'll have to charge you.

HE

Please tell me you brought that book.

SHE

Oh I finished Mein Kampf last night. I'm onto the sequel but I forgot it at home.

HE

There's no sequel to Mein Kampf.

SHE

There is tho. I found it on the darkweb. It's written in Spanish. Very weird. Very dark.

HE

I hope you're using a VPN.

SHE

It's called Su Lucha. Your Struggle. The goal is to finish the book before you blow your brains out. Total beach read.

HE

Yeah. Normandy.

SHE rings the bell.

SHE

Ha ha! "Normandy." Nice. Pew pew. Finger guns.

He is on his mobile device again.

SHE

What are you doing? Hey! Dude! Put the device away and look at me. You can't stare at screens all day.

HE

Watch me.

SHE

You're gonna miss out then.

HE

On what?

SHE

I got you a present.

HE

For what?

SHE

My monthaversary.

SHE has a little "moon lamp" with a figurine glued to it.

SHE

It's a moon lamp. I superglued a spaceman on it.

HE

Why?

SHE

So you can accept we landed on the moon.

HE

I never said we didn't land on the moon!

SHE

Here, let me turn it on. See?

SHE does with a tap. It lights up. SHE taps it off.

SHE

Don't let the conspiracies get to you, boss. It's not worth it.

HE

The moon landing footage was staged. That's all I meant. When you look at the stills and video you can't see stars. You can see flares from the lighting rigs. It doesn't make sense. It's clearly a sound stage. Look it up at home. I'm not kidding. Even the shadows look wrong. They come at crazy angles. You can see the wires in a bunch of the shots.

SHE

Wires?

HE

To fake low gravity! And they didn't include stars because astronomers would have done an analysis and called out their bullshit. It was a psyop against the Russians, and everyone else. The greatest magic trick of the 20th century. Maybe they landed on the thing, but certainly most if not all the footage was staged. You know NASA lost the telemetric data? For the missions to the moon?

SHE

No.

HE

Yes! So we're meant to believe we landed on the moon but don't have the mathematical records of the voyages.

SHE

You got all this from videos that were flagged from removal?

HE

Yes? So?

SHE

We're supposed to report on this stuff and remove bad info, not get sucked down a rabbit hole.

HE

Yeah but once you see this stuff it's hard to go back. Don't you think?

SHE

I'm never going to believe in Bigfoot.

HE

No, but there's actual... Look up chemtrails. And flouride. They're calcifying our pineal glands. Our third eyes. Flouride lowers IQ!

SHE

Okay, calm down.

HE

Fine, yeah. Thanks for the moon lamp.

SHE

Let's see it in action.

SHE stands and flips the overhead lights off, and the room changes under the light of the moon lamp. SHE sits.

SHE

So can we talk about the elephant in the room?

HE

Which?

SHE

My probation.

HE

Yes. Well I'm disappointed. Not in you. In the system. I can't make sense of it.

SHE

"Performance concerns" they said?

HE

Yes.

SHE

Aren't my numbers fine?

HE

Fine, yes. A little low TBH. But not so bad you shouldn't pass probation. You can't keep taking bio breaks right before lunch.

SHE

When nature calls, she roars.

HE

It affects the score if you're not at your terminal before a break.

SHE

I could bring diapers and let rip. They do that at the Company warehouses.

HE

This isn't a Company warehouse.

SHE

I can't control when I have to go.

HE

It looks like you're cheating the system.

SHE

To what end?

HE

Perhaps you're writing a screenplay.

SHE

Aha! I am actually. How'd you know?

HE

Everyone's writing a screenplay! Turn the lights back on. Now.

SHE

I started writing it after my first day I just didn't say because I wanted to get into the second act and--

HE

Okay, I don't care. No. Don't give me your pitch. Don't.

SHE

It's about a young woman who gets a low rung tech job because she has to support her dying mother.

HE

Low rung?! At least it's a rung. At least we don't live in a tent beneath an underpass! Turn the lights back on!

SHE

Her mother is dying from cancer. And they need to reconcile before she dies. You like it?

HE

I do not care. Get the lights so I can finish lunch.

SHE

You do it. I won't be spoken to that way.

HE stands. His shadow is long against the wall. HE stares at it, frozen.

SHE

What? Dude? Stop staring. Dude. Are you okay?

HE

I don't like my shadow. Never did. Creeps me out.

No birds. HE stares. SHE stands and turns on the light.

SHE

Okay, man. Okay. It's okay. Is that better?

HE

Yes. Thanks.

SHE

You want to talk about it?

Silence.

SHE

How's your screenplay coming then?

HE

I'm not writing a screenplay. Turns out I never was. I'm next level.

SHE

So what are you writing?

HE

It's an interactive VR experience. More like an event that's also an interactive social media game on the Platform. Super meta.

SHE

Is this the one about the Russian squirrels or the romantic comedy?

HE

I combined them.

SHE

You're writing an immersive VR romantic comedy game for the Platform that features Russian Squirrels as villains?

HE

I'm merely a vessel for whatever genius flows through me. I sail the seas of our alienating zeitgeist. You're in the presence of greatness.

SHE

You're nuts.

HE

Nuts are squirrel currency. They went off the gold standard long ago but didn't buy into the fiat currency scam. You can look it up online, at home, on a VPN.

SHE

I don't have a VPN.

HE

Get one.

The birds chirp. HE pecks at his food.

HE

Why aren't you eating?

SHE

I'm on a fast.

HE

What? Why?

SHE

My body is a template. Temple. My body is a temple.

HE

It hurts me that you didn't pass probation. I told my contact at the Company you'd be thriving. Are you thriving?

SHE

Ask again after my fast.

HE

Have you tried leaning in?

SHE

Like physically? Here. I'm leaning.

HE

Lean harder. Lean until you feel something.

SHE

I'm going to tip over.

HE

Great. Now I can tell them you're on your way to thriving because I'm teaching you how to lean in.

SHE

Make an excuse. Say my mother is sick.

HE

Is she?

SHE

Isn't she? How would you know? How would the Company?

HE

They know everything.

SHE

Ah, but "how does anyone know anything?"

HE

Touché.

SHE

You think they'd check that deeply?

HE

Yes. Their business is information. We volunteer it in order to “get connected,” and they sell our lives back to us at a premium, with layer upon layer of algorithmic manipulation.

SHE

Yes? So?

HE

So we are the product.

SHE

It’s not foolproof. I’ll make a post or two asking people to “pray for my family.” Could mean anything. How’s that?

HE

You’d lie for me? On the Platform?

SHE

My mother is actually sick. She just doesn’t post about it. She’s very private.

HE

Okay. Wink wink. Nudge.

SHE

I’ll post something about it if you’ll pray. Will you pray for my family every night, until she is well again?

HE LOLs and LOLs and rings his bell.

HE

Pray for your family... ha ha ha. Thoughts and prayers. Hashtag thoughts and prayers.

SHE

Okay, all right. It’s not that funny.

HE

You aren’t hungry? Have a bite.

SHE

No, thanks.

HE

I get it. Gotta exercise some discipline. I took a break from drinking a month ago. After your first day. It got out of hand. I might quit for good.

SHE

Good for you.

HE

I even got a coin. Here.

SHE

You joined a support group?

HE

Oh no no no. I don't do IRL groups.

SHE

What about friends? Do you do IRL friends?

HE

My friends are on the Platform. It's less messy. This whole fleshbag IRL thing is so gross.

SHE

Where'd you get the coin then?

HE

I had it minted and shipped. See on one side it says "congrats" and on the other it says "keep writing your experiential VR romantic comedy game with the Russian villains, you're a massive winner, bro."

SHE

Wow. Yeah. I see that.

HE

So about your probation. I think it was the psych visit on day one. And the excessive bio breaks.

SHE

I will attempt to control my biological functions.

HE

It's the psych visit too. First day before lunch. Red flag.

SHE

I came back the next morning.

HE

You want a prize for that?

SHE

Did they consider what I had to see?

HE

What we had to see.

SHE

Well did they?

HE

They read my report.

SHE

Did they look at the video?

HE

Of course not. We look so they don't have to.

SHE

Well they should have to. We're not machines.

HE

Prove it.

SHE

Okay, enough of the AI bullshit!

HE

You started it! On the first break of your first day! Which is exactly what an AI would do!

SHE

What?! Why?!

HE

To trick me.

SHE

Be serious. We're talking about our careers here. You and I aren't machines, and leadership should have to be subjected... if they're going to pass judgement on us about how we react to a thing like that, they should have to see it too.

HE

No. It's our job to look at that stuff. They assess our performance. That's their job. That and the total dominance of the population through enough personal information and blackmail material to make a mobster blush.

SHE

That's cynical.

HE

No, it's realistic. Zoom out and consider what they achieved. They got people to self report to a central electronic system. How'd they get billions of people to do that, you think?

SHE

Primal need. The need to feel included.

HE

It's fear. The Platform is built on fear. Fear of missing out. Fear of being forgotten.

SHE

Whatever. Leadership here should have to see the same dark shit we do if they're going to judge us for getting brainsick.

HE

Leadership isn't going to personally audit every extreme video we report. Imagine the impact on their productivity!

SHE

Productivity?! What do they produce?

HE

These jobs! They have important meetings with the Company. They need to focus on the Big Picture. They have Summits to attend. Conferences. Soft skills to master like, ahh, active listening. They have to smile on demand and make it look easy!

SHE

Watch me smile. I'm smiling. It's easy!

HE

You look like you want to tear out my throat.

SHE

How about now?

HE

Okay, better. Now I believe it.

SHE

It's easy.

HE

Our job is to watch the ugliest of the ugly and write detailed reports so they don't have to. It's a classic division of labor. If you don't like it, there's the door.

SHE

You know what? I'd rather not have a half-baked "performance review" during my thirty-minute midday break. Thanks.

The birds chirp. HE eats slowly.

SHE

Did you see the shrink? Last month? After the thing?

HE

Too busy. I'm focused on the future and my award-winning VR game script.

SHE

You won an award?

HE

Not yet. Positive thinking. Ha ha. Finger guns. Pew pew. Leaning in. Pew pew.

SHE

Pew pew.

HE

See it. Be it. Live it. I could start a coaching program and become a "thought leader." Charge \$800 an hour to tell you to smile more, but backed by decades of neurolinguistic programming. You have to want it. You have to own your smile. Own it, be it, see it. OBS. That's catchy. OBS.

SHE

Sure. But what was the thing we saw on my first day? Was it CGI or/

HE

If I wanted to talk about it, I'd have brought it up by now!

SHE

Stop talking over me! I don't interrupt you!

HE

You're my subordinate! Do I need to get out the Org Chart?!

SHE

I want to talk about the thing we saw on my first day. It's been a month, and we haven't said a word about it. It's not normal.

HE

You don't want a performance review over lunch. I don't want to talk about the thing we saw.

SHE

Was it a hoax?

HE

Would it help if I told you it was?

SHE

Can I see your report?

HE

No. Let it go.

SHE

Fine, okay. I'm sorry. It's just hard. I feel very alone. You know?

HE

You had very bad luck on your first day.

SHE

We're not paid enough.

HE

Who is? It feels... sometimes it feels like they're running an experiment on us. It's not about the money. It's about something bigger. Makes you want to do something drastic.

SHE

You sound like a video we'd remove.

HE

You going to flag me for removal?

SHE

You know you can see the shrink same day, right?

HE

I do know. You know how I know? I read the handbook. Read the handbook!

SHE

I went a few times...

HE

I didn't know that.

SHE

She says I need to compartmentalize. She says meditation. I've tried. My mind races. I haven't slept well lately. I have weird dreams. I try melatonin but it doesn't help. Chamomile tea. I'm worried about what I might see next every time I complete a report. I'm worried about whether I'll make probation next month. It's hard to cope, and I think it's just the way things are and then I think some humans have it much worse and what am I complaining about. It's not fair a visit to the shrink affects my numbers.

HE

It's not our job to think about fair.

SHE

Well who's job is that?

HE

The Company. Their C-Suite. Upper management. Their consultants with the Behavioral Psych PhDs and the speaking tours and the books. The Real People with the organic food and acupuncture and private coaching sessions and whatever else they can afford that we can't.

SHE

And you want to join their ranks. To see the garden.

HE

I want security. I'm human.

SHE

Prove it.

HE

Are we back on that?

SHE

You can't prove it, can you?

HE

Use your eyes.

SHE

A male human being. Prove it.

HE

You want me to whip my dick out?!

SHE

That wouldn't prove anything.

HE

It'd prove plenty, thanks.

SHE

Then I'd definitely have to report you.

HE

You didn't file a report on me? Did you?

SHE

I did not file a report.

HE

If you did, tell me. I can't get a bad review before the Company makes its calls over here.

SHE

I did not file a report.

HE

Did you tell anyone?

SHE

The shrink?

HE swipes the bell and moon lamp from his desk. HE throws his chair, and keeps throwing it. HE is throwing it.

SHE

But that's not... that's confidential. It is confidential, isn't it?

HE

She works for the Contractor!

SHE

Yes, but it must be confidential!

HE

YOU NEVER READ THE HANDBOOK!

SHE

Calm down.

HE

I'm calm.

SHE

This isn't calm behavior.

HE

It's my fault. I should have made you read the handbook. I should have sat here and watched you read it during a break instead of all this clever back and forth killing time bullshit.

SHE

Calm down.

HE

If this is a game to you, if this is somehow leverage...

SHE

What I tell the psychiatrist is confidential, right? It has to be.

HE

Unless she perceives a threat to safety.

SHE

You understand behavior like this is frightening. Don't you?

HE

I didn't touch you. Just now. Today.

SHE

And?

HE

Sorry. I'm just... I get one shot to move up to the Company. They have a long memory, and they only hire the best. My record isn't spotless. You understand?

SHE

Yes.

HE

I'm working on it. Okay? I'm brainsick and it affects me adversely sometimes. I am sorry I'm not "well adjusted" to this corporate hellscape we inhabit.

SHE

I did not file a formal report on you.

HE

You didn't pass probation either. And you told the shrink about the incident on your first day.

SHE

My career doesn't exist to serve yours.

HE

Except it does. And mine would serve yours if you'd let it. We could have solidarity, instead of whatever this bullshit is.

SHE

Please, get your chair and sit in it. Please. You're scaring me.

HE

I apologize. I'm upset. I'm very upset. It's difficult. This is a difficult situation.

SHE

So sit down and finish lunch. Sit. Sit! Now finish your lunch. Come on.

HE maneuvers the chair back into place but does not eat.

HE

I lost my appetite.

SHE

So give it to me.

HE

You said you're fasting

SHE

Stress makes me hungry.

HE

This is lunch and dinner.

SHE

You offered it.

HE

I offered you a bite. And I go to the Company store. This isn't the peasant garbage they feed the diaper jockeys at the factory.

SHE

So give me a bite.

HE digs in and holds out a fork for her to eat off. SHE does. The birds chirp.

SHE

This is what Company food tastes like?

HE

Only the best.

SHE

How do you get in?

HE

We're allowed to shop at the Company store twice a quarter. You'd know if you'd read the handbook.

SHE

This tastes good.

HE

At the Company offices they provide food. Like this. They have everything you could want. Sushi. Actual fishes. And not farmed fishes. Fishes from the ocean. Indian food. Italian food. Coffee. Decaf coffee. Whatever you want. And you don't pay. It's part of comp. So you make fuck your mother money and don't even pay for lunch. They finally invented the free lunch.

SHE

Nothing's free.

HE

Sure it is. You just have to change how you see the arrangement. Drink the Kool-Aid. The Company rules the world. May as well be on their good side.

SHE

You really want that?

HE

More than anything. What's the alternative?

SHE

Look at me and tell me why you want to join the Company. Come on. Practice for your interview.

HE

I want to connect the world.

SHE

I don't believe you.

HE

I want to connect the world. I really do. How's that?

SHE

Say it with a smile.

HE

I want to connect the world.

SHE

Why? Why really?

HE

I never felt connected. Like with other humans. People.

SHE

Oh. Well everyone feels that way sometimes.

HE

Not the way I feel... felt. That. That's why the Company's Mission is so great. Nobody should be left out, left out of history or... like the flow of things. I felt like an alien.

SHE

You're painfully normal. I'm sure you'll get the position... Just... maybe see the shrink and get an interview coach? And promise me you'll stop... throwing things.

SHE finds the moon lamp and puts it back on his desk.

HE

I didn't mean to throw a shit fit. I'm sorry. I'm under a lot of pressure.

SHE

Where'd the moonman go?

HE

He's on a soundstage somewhere, working with Mr. Kubrick.

SHE finds the bell and returns it as well.

HE

I know my brainsick is showing. But I'm not actually crazy. It's... you know we can't be certain they're not running an experiment on us? How could we know? It's like the AI question. We couldn't know. I don't know. Are you a machine? You don't even know. You can't. Nothing is chance, even what appears to be.

SHE

This won't help my insomnia.

HE

Talk to the shrink.

SHE

I'm talking to you. I keep having this dream.

HE

Am I in it?

SHE

I don't think so...

HE

Then I CLAP do not CLAP fucking CLAP care. CLAP.

HE reveals his phone and taps at it.

SHE

Give me some more of that Company food. I'm hungry.

HE

No.

SHE

In my dream...

HE

Shut up. Nobody cares about somebody else's dream if they're not in it.

SHE

I am watching

I am watching Bigfoot and he is very lonely

He looks like... well he looks like you now I think about it

HE

Bigfoot looks like me?

SHE

Yeah, I'm just realizing...

HE

Okay, you've got my attention...

SHE

And Bigfoot, he's..

strange, he just wants to fit in with us, with humanity

He wants to be one of us

He wants a "meaningful job"

Because that's how you fit in

That's how you get along

He's a lot like

You actually

Afraid of his own shadow

So at noon bigfoot goes to the employment office
and the only job they have for him
is in World War II

And there's Mussolini
and his girlfriend or wife or mistress or
whatever

And his body keeps falling off
the
hook

Somebody has to put it back
Some body has to do that so
That's a job for Bigfoot

And that's how the creature, that fantasy creature
Finds his place
He hoists Mussolini's corpse back onto the hook

Over and over and over, and when I wake up
it feels like I haven't slept at all, because Bigfoot hasn't and can't and might never sleep
again, not really, not the way you can when you know things are okay, and cared for, and
the world is going to be all right, when you know you can always escape into the woods
and maybe somebody will catch a quick glimpse of you but never the whole of you, that
you'll never be reduced to a series of images, to somebody else's idea of you reduced to
your digital echo, which isn't the real you at all. A shadow reflected from something that's
not even there.

In her silence, the birds chirp.

SHE

You think they're tracking the birds too? Like the sound of the birds chirping?

HE

People say the birds are part of the tracking. The government replaced birds with
surveillance drones years ago.

SHE

That's insane.

HE

Try and prove they didn't. You can't. Like the AI thing.

The birds chirp.

SHE

Can we stop all these games and just talk? Like real people?

HE

What games?

SHE

Tell me something real. Tell me a dream.

HE

I don't dream.

SHE

Then tell me something real.

HE

Real?

SHE

Something you really believe.

HE

I don't have beliefs. I only have disbeliefs

SHE

So what do you disbelieve?

HE

I disbelieve the official nine-eleven story.

SHE

Why?

HE

Ask most people how many buildings came down in New York City, they'll say two.

SHE

Isn't that right?

HE

Three.

SHE

Oh. Yeah. Right.

HE

Sleight of hand. A trick. A media trick. WTC one, two, seven. Most people don't remember seven, or more precisely they don't know seven happened. There's no video of plane wreckage at the Pentagon. There's no video of a plane even approaching the Pentagon. These are just the obvious things.

SHE

So what'd they do with that plane? And the people?

HE

How much time do you have?

SHE

You do dream. This is a waking dream. A nightmare people on the Platform make real. It's a myth.

HE

Do some research. At home. On your VPN.

SHE

We're meant to flag and remove the nine-eleven conspiracy videos. Right?

HE

Yes.

SHE

Are you?

HE

Depends on context.

SHE

Give me the rest of your lunch.

HE

What? No. I'm saving it for dinner.

SHE

I want it. I'm hungry.

HE

Aren't you fasting?

SHE

My fast is over. And I want to eat your lunch.

HE

You can't have it.

SHE

So let me get this straight: some "shadow power" brought down WTC Seven?

HE

Maybe.

SHE

Who was it? Israeli intelligence? The Jewish alien coalition?

HE

I wouldn't rule anything out.

SHE

I wonder what management would think about that... Give it to me. I'm not asking again.

HE

Eat your free lunch and shut your trap.

SHE eats his lunch, smirking, sniggering.

HE

You're LOLing at me.

SHE

Dang, this is good. I bet it's expensive.

HE

It is. Leave a few bites for me. I don't have any groceries at home.

SHE sets the container down.

SHE

Answer a question for me, and be honest, and maybe I'll save you some. Okay? Okay. I'm HR. Tell me why you want to work for the Company.

HE

I want to connect the world.

SHE

Don't just repeat our mission statement back to us. Tell me why you really want to work for the company.

HE

I want to connect the world.

SHE

You want the tasty food. You want the security. You want the status.

HE

Please leave me something for dinner.

SHE

Tell me the truth one time and maybe I'll save you a bite.

HE

I don't want to do this job anymore. I need to move to a better job.

SHE

It can't be just about you. Give me your "why"?

HE

My "why"? Because I'm losing my goddamned mind. Nobody should have to do this as long as I have. I can't get stuck here. And neither can you. Let's get through this and I'll help you come up to the Company once I have a foothold.

SHE

How long will that take?

HE

Maybe a year.

SHE finishes his lunch and belches.

SHE

Burrrrrp. Oh, that was good.

HE

You're not a lady. You're a pig.

SHE

No. I am a lady. Say it.

HE

Or what?

SHE

I'll report you for sexual harassment and violent, threatening behavior.

HE

You're a lady.

SHE

Curtsy to me.

HE

I don't curtsy, I bow.

SHE

Curtsy, or I report you.

HE

Don't be sadistic.

SHE

This is no longer a safe space for me until I see you curtsy. Go ahead. Stand up.

HE does.

SHE

They told me about the last guy who had my job. What actually happened. Now curtsy. Deeper. Deeper. Lift your skirt. There you go.

HE

Who told you about the last guy?

SHE

They. The others.

HE

Oh "the others." What did they say?

SHE

He didn't quit his first day. He made it a whole month. You lied. Why?

HE

I didn't want to freak you out.

SHE

Did he really bring a knife?

HE

More like a machete.

SHE

Why did he bring a machete?

HE

Somewhere, at another facility I think in Berlin or Detroit or the Valley, it was just a rumor but we heard somebody brought a gun and threatened a manager. Word got around. He got paranoid. He claimed he “needed a way to defend himself just in case.” I don’t know what good a machete would be against a gun but.

SHE

I guess it’s better than nothing.

HE

This job isn’t for everybody.

SHE

No shit. What do we do if there’s an active shooter?

HE

For the final time: read the handbook.

SHE

Okay.

HE

You know I seriously thought you were an AI sent to test me.

SHE

I promise you I am human.

HE

Are you tho?

SHE

Stop staring.

HE

I truly thought you were AI one night, in bed, alone, late at night, wondering about my life and that day, your first day, what went wrong, where I messed up. I entertained the thought, that you’re a machine and I’m a guinea pig in an experiment and you’re my Turing Test. From the Company, vetting me for the job with them. You know?

SHE
You have to the shrink.

HE
I'm still your boss. Don't forget that.

SHE
I need a bio break.

HE
Lunch is almost over.

SHE
It's a number one. I'll be quick.

HE
Don't fall in.

SHE goes to the door and flips off the light. HE taps the moonlight on.

SHE
I'll be back in exactly the amount of time it takes a real human lady to use the toilets.

HE
That could mean anything.

SHE exits on a "bio break," leaving him in the dark with only a bit of sunlight from the lonely window, and the Others. HE stands and considers his long shadow off the window. HE walks haltingly and turns the light back on, then returns to his desk. HE goes into his bag and reveals his device. HE turns it onto the audience and takes pictures, with the flash. One, two, three. We must remember to post this on social media with #moderation to promote the show. The birds chirp.

From his bag HE retrieves a handgun. HE waves it around and tells dumb jokes, recording himself with his phone.

HE
Hey, guys. Just livestreaming here on my lunch break. My subordinate is using the gender neutral toilets like she always does before breaks. She's a bit of a cheat but I think she really likes me. I think I've got a shot. A lot of sexual tension.

If I can get promoted to the Company, I'll make enough money I can take her out and tell her she doesn't need a job anyway. I'll provide for both of us. Do it the right way. Tell her I want kids. I have to take it slow tho.

Anyway I'm gonna give you your daily dose of dumb dad jokes. Are you ready? Did you hear about the restaurant on the moon? Great food, no atmosphere. Ha ha ha ha. What do you call a fake noodle? An impasta. Heee heee ha. I just watched a program about beavers. It was the best dam program I've ever seen! Okay I don't have much time until my direct report comes back but I'm glad I got to check in. Upvote and share this channel if you like what I'm doing, thanks!

HE puts the gun back into his bag. The birds chirp. SHE returns in a rush.

SHE

Are we still on lunch? Did I make it?

HE

Barely.

SHE

Told you I'd be fast. You know scientists say having a pee is like one tenth as good as an orgasm. It's science, because the clickbait says so. What do you think of that?

HE

I think scientists need to work on their orgasms.

The birds chirp.

SHE

So I have to tell you something. The Company has a program for women.

HE

A program.

SHE

An advancement program. "Lady Tech Stars." It's a fast track to management at the Company. I've already won it and they haven't even announced the winners.

HE

How does that work?

SHE

Positive thinking! Finger guns. Pew pew. I told you I was a lady.

When's the deadline?

HE

Yesterday.

SHE

You applied?

HE

Of course.

SHE

You could have told me.

HE

And you could have told me.

SHE

About what?

HE

The "Lady Tech Stars" program.

SHE

As someone who identifies male, that program was not on my radar.

HE

Well I identify as a lady and I applied. I have a good chance. Because my mother has cancer.

SHE

Bullshit! That is just bullshit!

HE

A sound calls them back to work.

If you throw another fit, I'm going to have to report you.

SHE

I know you're lying about your mother your mother isn't dying of anything. If you get into the Company on some affirmative action... I swear to God I'm going to lose my--

HE

SHE reveals a mobile device and points it at him.

HE

You're not allowed to have that. You didn't pass probation. The terminals are coming online. Come on, don't. You can't have that on right now!

SHE is recording. Then SHE turns it to show him the screen.

HE

Put it away.

SHE

Look. See.

HE

No. What?!

SHE

My mother. There she is with her wig. There she is without it. Chemo is a bitch.

HE

Put it away.

SHE puts the device away.

HE

Let's get through the afternoon. No more drama?

SHE

What drama?

HE

You're cute.

SHE

I know. And that's an inappropriate thing to say. Especially after what you did just now over lunch.

HE

I'm sorry.

SHE

I accept your apology.

THEY turn to their terminals, wireless headsets on.

SHE

I am watching a young uhh white male enter a mosque and oh I have heard this joke before. A white supremacist, a Rabbi and an Imam enter a mosque. There is no punchline. It is just gunfire BANG BANG BANG and death ugh ah oh please help and it plays on an endless loop suspension removal report off with their heads.

HE

I am observing

a shadow

I can't do this I can not do this job, not when I am this brainsick and she is fuck me I think I am maybe in love with her now and I do not know why
I am am not, I am that I am not that I am my shadow and...

SHE turns to him and removes her headphones.

SHE

Hey? Are you okay?

HE

I am. I am not. I am that I am not. My shadow is, that I am not. And so I cannot be, not really. Not real. Argh, it's driving me nuts. Ha ha. Argh. It's driving me nuts. Ha ha.
Aaaaaargh.

SHE

Hey. Take a bio break if you need...

HE rings the bell once, twice, again, ringing and ringing.

SHE

Are you okay?

HE turns to her and sneers.

HE

You know I could report you for harassment too? Then you'd never be a Lady Tech Star.

SHE

I know. I'm sorry. Please don't.

HE

You ate my lunch and made me curtsy.

SHE

I thought we were having fun.

HE

Fun?

SHE

Yeah. Passing the time?

HE puts his headset on and turns to his monitor.

SHE

Finger guns. Pew pew? Pew? Pew...

HE

Shut up and do your job.

END OF ACT

ACT III: KILLDOZER

Afternoon. THEY are at their terminals. On her desk is a fishbowl with two goldfish(es).

SHE

I am watching a video of a bulldozer destroy a building. Oh, I am realizing this is the Killdozer he told me about. Apparently it is Killdozer Day. These people are being crazy. Killdozer Day. But I am being unable to look away.

HE

I am listening to a voice. It is saying:

SHE

Project MKUltra, also called the CIA mind control program, is the code name given to a program of experiments on human subjects that were designed and undertaken by the United States Central Intelligence Agency—and which were, at times, illegal. Experiments on humans were intended to identify and develop drugs and procedures to be used in interrogations in order to weaken the individual and force confessions through mind control. The project was organized through the Office of Scientific Intelligence of the CIA and coordinated with the U.S. Army Biological Warfare Laboratories. And I am listening to a voice. It is saying:

HE

The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They have greatly increased the life-expectancy of those of us who live in “advanced” countries, but they have destabilized society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world.

SHE

The MK ULTRA operation was officially sanctioned in 1953, was reduced in scope in 1964, further curtailed in 1967, and recorded to be halted in 1973. The program engaged in many illegal activities, including the use of U.S. and Canadian citizens as its unwitting test subjects, which led to controversy regarding its legitimacy. MK Ultra used numerous methods to manipulate people's mental states and alter brain functions, including the surreptitious administration of drugs (especially LSD) and other chemicals, hypnosis, sensory deprivation, isolation, verbal and sexual abuse, and other forms of torture.

HE

The continued development of technology will worsen the situation. It will certainly subject human being to greater indignities and inflict greater damage on the natural world, it will probably lead to greater social disruption and psychological suffering, and it may lead to increased physical suffering even in “advanced” countries.

HE

I am suggesting she flag this video for removal and the account for suspension.

SHE

I am unsure what to do with this video...

SHE removes her headphones, reaches over and taps the moonlamp on. HE removes his headphones.

HE

What?

SHE

I got a Killdozer video.

HE

It's Killdozer Day. They're harmless. Libertarians. You can smell their mother's basements from here.

SHE

We're in a basement.

HE

Yes, but we're professionals. There's central air.

SHE

There's a voiceover on this video which I think violates the terms of service. Listen.

SHE puts her headset on his head, and HE hears it.

HE

He's reading Ted Kaczynski. The Unabomber. Let me see. Yeah, I take it back. This is a white separatist account. I've heard this guy a thousand times. He's reading old Teddy's manifesto: Industrial Society and Its Future.

SHE

Okay, but it's still just speech. And old Teddy wasn't wrong, was he?

HE

Right or wrong doesn't matter. It's about context. He's reading this over video of a guy bulldozing a government building. And this is a racist organization dedicated to the overthrow of "Zog." Use your eyes. It's a giant dog whistle. The dogs are freaking out.

SHE

Zog?

HE

Zionist Occupied Government. There are Nazis are all over the Platform. You kill one of their accounts, another pops up. It's a game of whack-a-fascist. Have you heard about the Gashwaffen?

SHE

Gashwaffen?

HE

Gash. Vagina. Waffen. Vagina weapons. White women who want to breed European children in support of the future ethnostate. Look it up.

SHE

Slow down. Aren't Jewish people white?

HE rings the bell.

HE

Ha ha. Wow. Okay, you win. Wow. I can't top that. Ha.

SHE

It's not funny.

HE

I can't top that. Ha. Best one liner ever. "Aren't Jewish people white?" Wow.

SHE

Some Jews are "white." Right?

HE

Tell that to the Gashwaffen.

SHE

Okay, well the video is removed, account is suspended. And I've filed my report.

HE

Off with their heads.

SHE

Off with their heads.

A sound signals afternoon break, and the monitors shut down. HE handles the moon lamp, turning it round in his hands, tapping it on and off. SHE feeds the goldfish(es).

SHE

Last break on Friday. We're in the home stretch.

HE

Yep. Oh, check it out.

HE taps off the moonlamp, reaches into his bag and reveals a large cupcake.

HE

It's a fancy cupcake. From the Company store.

SHE

Ooo. What's the occasion?

HE

I got a candle too. It's here somewhere... Aha, voila. And wine, and plastic cups.

SHE

You're drinking again?

HE

In moderation. We're celebrating!

SHE

What are we celebrating?

HE

You made probation!

SHE

What?!

HE

Congratulations.

SHE

Oh, amazing. Thanks. That's so great.

HE

You can use a device on breaks starting next week!

SHE

Yay for me!

HE

Upper management will tell you on Monday, but I figured why wait the whole weekend?
Just act surprised.

SHE

I can do that.

HE pours wine.

HE

A toast to the newly minted, official Junior Content Monitor.

SHE

This is too much.

HE lights the candle and turns out the lights. Shadows fly.

SHE

Why'd you turn out the lights?

HE

It's more fun with the candle.

SHE

Aren't you scared of your shadow?

HE

I saw the shrink four times this past month. And I've been meditating. The government spy birds don't even bother me so much anymore. And I'm pretty sure the Earth is round after all.

SHE

You're funny.

HE

Plus I'm heading toward my shot with the Company. I want to put my best foot forward, and that means self care and taking mental health seriously. Okay, make a wish.

SHE

It's not my birthday...

HE

There's a candle so you have to make a wish.

SHE pauses and blows out the candle.

HE

What'd you wish for?

SHE

It's bad luck to say.

HE

So how's your mother?

SHE

She's doing better actually. Can we turn the lights back on?

HE

Oh, a miraculous recovery? I'm so glad.

SHE

Turn the light on. Now. Please.

HE does.

HE

Better?

SHE

Yes. This was... it's sweet of you, the cupcake.

HE

I'm a sweetheart. Here. More wine. It's from the Company store. Only the best for my number one direct report. Can I ask you a personal question?

SHE

Sure...

HE

What are you doing this weekend?

SHE

No plans. Why?

HE

Just asking.

SHE

So, ah, what are you doing this weekend?

HE

Working on my stage play.

SHE

Your what?

HE

Oh the VR screenplay game concept is a stage play now. It was a stage play all along.

SHE

Like live theatre?

HE

Yes!

SHE

Gross.

HE

No, it's great. The ancient hologram. Highly ironic.

SHE

Is there money in stage plays?

HE

It won't matter once I'm at the Company. It's not all about the money. It's about status. Fame. Parties.

SHE

How about personal expression? Speaking your truth? Telling the story only you can tell?

HE

Whatever. Wow. You're... that's hilarious. You're on a roll.

SHE

So what? Is it the same idea? With the Russian squirrels?

HE

No. Now it's the romantic comedy about content moderators who fall in love, even tho they're losing their minds. They're falling in love and losing their minds at the same time, because of all the shit they have to deal with and how unjust and horrifying the world has become and they're a part of it and finally impotent to change anything but get this... I bet you can't guess what saves them.

SHE

Please tell me it isn't... It's not love, is it?

HE rings the bell.

HE

Oh you're good. You did study English. So do you like it? My idea?

SHE

I think maybe it needs a better ending.

HE

You don't think love saves them?

SHE

No.

HE

Why not?

SHE

Nobody will believe it.

HE

You're wrong. People love workplace romance nonsense. She's his direct report, and he's a little rough... a little on edge. You know? Brainsick but cute. And despite that he makes a series of romantic gestures, gets called up to the Big League at the Company, and she realizes how much she misses him after he's gone. It's called "Love is a Loaded Gun." What do you think?

SHE

I think you're a pathological liar.

HE

The title's a bit trash. You're not getting a credit, so don't ask.

His monitor comes to life.

HE

It's a trashy title but it's catchy. You need something that grabs people and says, "Hey, come and see my stage play and invite me to an amazing party afterward where there's organic food and wine the people speak in complete sentences until they pair off and form these incredible IRL relationships." And nobody brings out a device, for one evening. And we are free from the tech overlords again, if only for a moment.

SHE

Parties are nice.

HE

I'm reaching for the stars. Pew pew. I'm gonna shoot the stars from the sky and stage another moon landing. Pew pew. Finger guns. I might shoot some Lady Tech Stars too, if they get out of line.

SHE

That's not funny.

HE

It's a metaphor.

SHE

I don't think you know what that word means.

HE

Sure I do. It's when one thing stands in for something else. When something takes something else's place, basically.

SHE

It's more than... Hey. Your monitor is back online. See? Break's not over, is it?

HE

No. I have... Oh. Ahm. This is weird. They want to see me upstairs.

SHE

Right. Important management business?

HE

Doesn't say.

HE taps a button on the live monitor and jams the corn back in the wine.

HE

This is the good stuff. Gonna save some for later. How was the organic cupcake?

SHE

Very good. Thanks again. You're a good boss, boss.

HE

I'll be back soon.

HE exits, leaving his bag. SHE drinks her wine.

SHE

Ugh. Stage play. What year is it? He's insane. Totally batshit crazy. Brainsick.

SHE rings the bell. SHE finishes her wine. SHE swirls the glass. SHE considers his bag.

SHE digs into his bag and reveals the wine. SHE pours a little, more, too much. SHE corks it and returns it to the bag, freezes, staring. SHE stands back. SHE leans. SHE pulls the enormous handgun from the bag.

SHE

Oh. Whoa boy. Whoa. Whoa doggy. Whoa nelly. Whoa whoa whoa.

SHE sets the gun into the bag and returns the wine. SHE gulps her glass of wine and sits frozen. HE returns.

HE

When were you going to tell me?

SHE reaches for the device in her bag and fumbles it as HE speaks.

SHE

Tell you what?

HE

Put the device away. You're still on probation. It's not official until Monday.

SHE puts her device back.

HE

When were you going to tell me?

Tell you what? SHE

You got into the program. HE

I found out yesterday. SHE

You put in notice? HE

It starts in two weeks. SHE

You're gonna be a "Lady Tech Star?" HE

I am a "Lady Tech Star." It's a mentality. I'm leaning in. Look, I'm doing what's best for my career. There was an opportunity, I went for it. Self interest. Human. SHE

Did you tell them about your sick mother in the application? HE

Umm yeah? They want stories like that. The story only you can tell. And pity stories. People love to pity. It makes them feel superior. That's what people want this days. Anything to feel superior. They'll pay for it. They'll give you the world if you bow to them at the right time, in the right ways. SHE

I don't bow. I curtsy. HE

I'm sorry about that. It was degrading. SHE

Did you stage that photo? With your mother and the chemo and the wig? Like the moon landing? HE

What? SHE

Is that photo staged?

HE

How dare you ask me that?

SHE

When did you report me?

HE

I didn't report you.

SHE

I need more wine.

HE

HE pulls wine from his bag. HE considers the bottle.

You drank some of my wine, you sneak!

HE

No...

SHE

Yes! Just like you ate my lunch. And just like you reported me behind my back. I'm not stupid.

HE

I did not report you.

SHE

Doesn't matter. I'm off management track. They're putting me back in rotation up on three. In the open plan area. Back to the mines for another year at least. Maybe forever.

HE

I'm sorry.

SHE

I think I need... well I definitely need to finish writing my stage play now.

HE

That's a good idea.

SHE

Your leaving hurts me very badly. You and your "special program."

HE

SHE

That's not true. That I got into a competitive program should count toward you, not against you. You made a good hire. It just didn't work out.

HE

You're leaving. You're the second direct report they gave me. The first one brought a machete. Now you're leaving after only two months.

SHE

You had bad luck.

HE

I'm cursed. Or they're experimenting on me. Both.

SHE

You'll be okay...

HE

No. I get it now. I'm not Bigfoot. I'm the goldfish.

SHE

See that's a metaphor.

SHE

What? No. I'm being literal.

The birds chirp. The goldfish swim.

SHE

You're paranoid.

HE

No. They're running an experiment on me. And you're part of it.

SHE

Dude, it's only an experiment in the sense that... this digital world, with all this tech, well everyone's a part of the giant lab they're running...

HE

It's inhuman.

SHE

What you feel is normal now. Even the people running this experiment are a part of it. It's social engineering on a scale beyond one person's comprehension.

It's normal to feel alienated. If you didn't feel alienated, you'd be truly brainsick. You just can't take any of this personally.

HE drinks the remaining wine from the bottle.

SHE

You should meditate. See the shrink. Make some IRL friends.

HE

I'm not even a goldfish. I'm the goldfish's shadow...

SHE

Dude, look, I'll put in a good word for you. At the Company. During the Lady Tech Stars program. It's a fast track to management at the Company. Two years tops. Then you can join me and I guess we'll connect the world or whatever. And you can bring the bell and we'll LOL about these times. We'll look back on this time and LOL about how crazy it was. We'll tell dumb dad jokes! Argh, it's driving me nuts...

HE

I know you reported me.

HE sets the empty wine bottle back into the bag.

SHE

I really didn't... Please. My mother needs me.

HE

You don't have a mother. You're a machine. And you've been LOLing at me this whole time.

SHE

We were having laughs. Killing time to get through this insane job. At the end of the day it's just a job, dude. If you don't like it, there's the door. Right? That's what you tell me.

HE reaches into his bag and reveals his mobile device.

HE

You're right. Just a job. Let's shoot a selfie. Celebrate your big day. I never want to forget this special day for you. For us. You passed probation with the Contractor and became a Lady Tech Star at the Company on the same day. It must be a first. You're a real pioneer. Here. Get close. You like that angle? Does it please the lady?

SHE

Whatever.

HE wraps his arm around her and takes the picture.

HE

We can do better.

HE puts his cheek against hers.

HE

You're not smiling. Smile. Come on. Anyone can smile on demand, right? Aww, come on. You're going to need this when you're at the Company. There. Oh. I think I see it. Bigger. With teeth. That's better. Good girl. That's great. We look cute. We could be a couple. Like a real human couple. We could get married. Have the one or two children allowed by our economic status. Maybe three kids since you're a Lady Tech Star, but wait no, that'd hurt your upward trajectory at the Company we can't have that. Wait, I know! We'll get a doggo to love!

SHE

You don't know what love is tho.

HE

Sure I do. Love is a loaded gun.

SHE

Stop saying that.

HE

Okay, you got me. I'm not actually in love with you, because how can I be? I'm a subject in a vast and impersonal social engineering experiment run by technocratic elites who've hijacked the economy and are using us to build our own replacements. Maybe I only think I'm in love with you, like that AI who thinks it's human? Who knows? But I'm going to look you in the eyes and say I love you now anyway, for the drama of it. You ready?

SHE

Please don't.

HE

I love you.

HE rings the bell and LOLs.

HE

The look on your face! Ha ha ha. It's just an idea for my stage play. That they fall in love. The content moderators. I'm playing it out right now. Like improv. Ha ha ha.

SHE

I'm sure it'll be great.

HE

I'll tell you a secret. I finished it. I drafted it. It is done. I just need a title. I wanted to call it "The Goldfishes" but that's silly.

SHE

Call it "Moderation."

HE

No. I'm going to call it "Love is a Loaded Gun." But I need your permission to use that title. Do I have your permission?

SHE

Yes. Okay. Fine.

HE

You're not getting a credit.

SHE

No, it's okay. I don't want one anyway...

The birds chirp.

HE

Well that was fun. I need a bio break.

SHE

Don't fall in.

HE takes his bag with him and exits. SHE stands, staring at her long afternoon shadow, frozen, when: blackout. A video appears.

HE livestreams himself.

HE

Hey, everybody. So I'm uploading a draft of my manifesto to the TOR server.

It's kind of a screenplay that turns into a VR game that turns into a stageplay that turns into a manifesto about the way technology has already turned us all into machine people, and we haven't even noticed and most people don't care and humanity has pretty much been made into a global resource, a commodity, to serve hidden masters who in turn serve the big inhuman machine which is the un-sacred simulacrum of real life which doesn't exist anymore and maybe never did but we'd never know because our instincts are so eroded. I wrote this all down in a note.

Oh and there are some dick jokes too in my stage play manifesto so people can have a LOL. A spoonful of sugar and all that. I was gonna call it "Love is Loaded Gun" but that's garbage so I think I'm going to call it "Moderation." You'll get it when somebody puts the play on. I hope you guys will remember me on this day, like Killdozer guy. You know? Remember me. That's all I want. It's "Moderation Day." Hashtag "moderation." Anyway okay I'm going off script now. I'm uploading this good old fashioned note as well, for the record.

HE lets the note drop to the floor.

Please note: I didn't shoot up a mosque or a school or a synagogue or a sorority house or a Garlic festival or a country music show or a rap release or a Broadway show or a retail superstore or a cinema or a softball game or anything. I'm not violent.

Please make copies of this video and my manifesto and spread it and save it locally so I don't disappear into their memory hole. I know you guys will do that for me. Because the Company will remove this, almost immediately. Which is crazy because this is great content, right? I bet you think it's a joke. It's not a joke. I am not a joke.

I am not a machine. And neither are you. And I'm not going to be brainsick anymore. I'm taking a bio break. So, ladies and germs. Thanks for tuning into my livestream. I hope you've enjoyed all the great content I've produced over the years! I hope you like all the dumb dad jokes! I'm going to go out with one of my favorites. Here we go!

So a pirate walks into a bar with a giant wheel on his crotch. He squats into a stool on the bar and the bartender looks at his parrot, then at the pirate's one good eye. The bartender slaps a shot of rum onto the bar and says, "Mr. Pirate. You know there's a giant wheel on your crotch?" To which the pirate--

The video cuts out. A gunshot. Darkness.

A sound as at the top of the play signals the start of a working session.

Her monitor comes to life. His remains dark. She sits at her monitor and taps at the keyboard. She taps, clicks, and removes another video.

SHE

Argh. It's driving me nuts.

She taps the moonlamp on. She taps the moonlight off. She taps it on again. And off again. The birds chirp. On her desk, the goldfish(es) swim under her monitor's uneasy electric light. The bell is gone.

END OF PLAY