

LOST
IN THE
SYSTEM
A NOVEL

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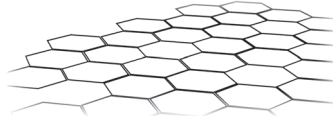


NEW YORK

LONDON • NASHVILLE • MELBOURNE • VANCOUVER

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PART ONE

GUILT TRIP

I wake to shrill, repetitive blasts.

Hmmm. I have an alarm clock today.

It crashes to the ground as I fumble for the device in the darkness. The whole room moves at a different speed than me and my stomach lurches, warning me that last night's dinner is on its way up for breakfast. I fall from the bed, unsteadily rise to my feet, and stumble toward what I hope is the bathroom. The after-effects of biotransposition are in full force, and I barely make it over the toilet before what looks like falafel comes tumbling out. Hugging the porcelain stabilizes me until the spinning stops.

Once my faculties are under control, I straighten up and turn on the light. As is my usual course, I rinse my mouth out in the

sink and look at what I am wearing. You can tell a lot about a person by their sleeping attire.

“What am I modeling this morning? Matching blue and gray pinstriped pajamas. Cotton. Ugh. I bet he color coordinates his sock drawer.”

Lacking enthusiasm, I shuffle into the bedroom to find out who I will be today. My real name is Smullian, an unfortunate moniker given to me by my mother. Its origins have something to do with a pirate and a stolen barrel of Zevekan gin, but I digress. I’m a grifter by trade—that’s a con man in your parlance. At least, I used to be a grifter until the coppers pinched me. The Powers-That-Be decided to sentence me to 1000 days Life Modification Therapy so that this humble criminal can “Learn the value of an honest day’s labor and empathize with my victims.” Simply stated, I’m a different person every day. In 776 days, all I’ve learned is that some people don’t keep their bathrooms in logical places—there’s no better way to start the day than mopping up vomit.

The closet causes further dismay. Golf shirts, all in muted colors, are arranged together followed by an inordinate number of khaki pants. At the back of the closet lurks suits, all navy. At least twenty shoe boxes sit on the floor.

“This guy keeps his shoes in the boxes, and I’m certain these hangers are equidistant from each other. He’s either an accountant or a government employee—or worse, a government accountant. This guy never gets laid.”

I am not looking forward to my day. If it were possible, I’d call in sick, but *They*, The Powers-that-Be, would know. I don’t want any time added to my sentence.

“Keep your head down and your nose to the grindstone, Smullian my boy. One boring suit and an equally boring tie, comin’ up.”

To satisfy my curiosity and to cover his pedicured feet, I open the sock drawer. Sure enough, the navy ones are all neatly bundled on the left side of the drawer. The brown ones occupy the middle, and the athletic socks fill up the right. Unexpected, but not surprising, are three blue and white headbands.

“Tennis or jogging?”

I want to call my host something other than “This Guy,” but his wallet is nowhere to be found. It’s probably downstairs in one of those caddies by the front door along with his keys, cell phone, and some loose change.

Grifter 101 starts with reading a mark, and this guy screams, “Please, take me for everything I have.” In another day and another time, I’d be able to play him like a violin. But, instead, I must embody him, this poor schlep that wouldn’t know a good time if it went marching past him with blazing trumpets and bright orange pasties.

I’m not a bad guy. I have rules. I don’t grift anyone who can’t afford it or who doesn’t deserve it. I provide a public service, teaching the population-at-large not to be as gullible as lemmings. Security consultants show corporations gaps in their defenses. I show people gaps in their financial planning. This one time I ran a scam raising money to save the endangered Quilla moths of Banta Five. Of course, Banta Five had been eaten up by a black hole three years earlier, but none of the schmucks bothered to do any research. I rolled it in hand over

fist with that one. Financial Planning Lesson One: don't make decisions based on emotion. Or take the trouble to pick up an Astral Directory before contributing to a cause on a colony you've never heard of.

But I digress. Stepping away from the dresser, I give the room a once-over. Neat as a pin. Not surprising. Neutral colors and only a couple of wall hangings adorn the walls.

"Sheesh, would a little color kill this guy?"

Instead of a side table next to the bed, there's filing cabinet. A tasteful filing cabinet with highly polished dark wood and brass fittings, but it's a filing cabinet, nonetheless. It's position next to the bed means this guy's idea of settling down for a good night's sleep involves paperwork. I pull it open to peruse the files and see what other info I can glean about Joe Boring. The first tab says, "Pro Bono."

"Not only does he work in bed, but he does it for free," I mumble. "This guy is the worst. What kind of person gives away their skills and talents? A sucker, that's who."

I glance through the first folder and find out two things of value: this guy is in fact an accountant, and his name is Marvin Shoemacher.

"Marvin, really?"

I thumb through the rest of the file. They're all taxes. Most people consider filling out tax forms a form of torture, something to be avoided and postponed at all costs. Marvin does it for free. What a schmuck! I read through the names because names are part of the trade. I try to find identities for my alter egos that are a good blend of average and exotic. If a name's too bland, it seems fake. Too exotic, it sticks out. The files in the cabinet yield: Boles, not

bad. Carter, how many of those in the known universe? Gondeck, a risk. Hawthorne—

“I am Father to the Fatherless,” booms out of nowhere.

I jerk around fast, almost pulling a muscle in my back. “Who said that?”

The room is empty. The voice sounded like it was right on top of me, but no one stands there. Nothing in the room indicates a roommate. Haven’t heard anything either. Roommates make noise. There hasn’t been any grunts, bumps, or clanks. It is silent.

“I am Father to the Fatherless.” Again, like there’s a PA in here.

I hop up and do a check double check of the closet and bathroom. Empty. Dashing down the stairs, I perform a thorough search of what I now realize is a small condo. Even as I comb the space and try to process the strange voice, my mind notes that a condo makes perfect sense for our boy Marvin. It’s practical and inexpensive. *His life motto, I’m sure.*

The hunt turns up no one. This could be some kind of bizarre practical joke, but Marvin doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who’d have friends capable of imagining and perpetrating something like this—a disembodied voice uttering a senseless phrase. What would be the point? Plus, a prank on this level would require a recorder, hidden speakers, or maybe a wireless system. Regardless of the unlikelihood, I modify my search for hidden electronics. Again nothing. *Strange.*

“Who said that?” I demand, hoping the perpetrator will speak again and give me another clue. The house and the jokester are silent.

I go through the files to see if it happens again. Boles, Carter, Gondeck, Hawthorne, Phoenix. No disembodied voice.

“I bet this is related to Life Mod. They are projecting my consciousness across the centuries. Weird things could happen. Some kind of glitch. I wish I’d thought of this before I wasted time running around like galluden after a kwit.”

This explanation satisfies me enough. I’m not one to worry over things that don’t have a direct effect on my health and well-being. You can’t survive as a grifter if you’re a worrier. People can read anxiety, and, once they do, they’re less likely to trust you with their hard-earned coin. I brush the incident away with the ease of a horse using his tail to swat a fly and get on with my boring day.

I predicted a caddy with Marvin’s wallet, keys, and change would be by the front door. I am wrong; it’s in the kitchen. The wallet tells me more about who I am for the day—Marvin Shoemaker of Jacksonville, Florida. His business card confirms he is an accountant and gives me his business address. The two hundred dollars cash nestled inside brightens me up. It saves me the time spent figuring out a pin code. Not that I can spend all of it; again, *They* monitor transactions. If *They* find spending is beyond what is “necessary for the due completion of the course of the host’s conventional and logical daily activities,” I get more time bouncing from person to person. It is my humble opinion that regurgitating every morning for 1000 days is punishment enough.

“Wheat germ extract and some kind of stinking protein shake,” I mutter when I open the fridge. “Uh-uh, having to consume that would be cruel and unusual punishment. Marvin’s arteries aren’t going to harden in one day. I’m stopping at McD’s.”

You might be wondering how a simple grifter like me would be able to do the “conventional and logical daily activities,” of a 1000 different people. *The Exhaustive Lexicon of Twentieth and*

Twenty-First Century Labor Practices was downloaded onto a chip in my brain. However, I've found in my 776 days so far, it's not as exhaustive as we twenty-fourth centurians think. Yak herding, for example, is not in there (and milking one of those beasts is a lot harder than you might think). However, a job does not make a person. To replace a person, really be them, takes innate creativity and spontaneity, two qualities I possess in abundance. I will personify buttoned-down Marvin, and no one will be the wiser.

Along with the not-so-*Exhaustive Lexicon*, I was also downloaded with *Phraseology, Jargon, and Mores of Twenty-First Century Earth*. This is how I learned about things like McDonalds and Grande Fat-Free Frappuccinos, not that I drink them. A cold Coke in the morning goes a long way to soothing the after-effects of biotransposition.

They chose the twenty-first century because humans weren't yet using the full potential of their brains, making brain-hitching easy. Actual time travel is inaccurate and dangerous. You could be aiming for Detroit, Earth and end up on Detriate, a planet in the Aerial system—home of the largest lava sea in the universe. People in my century go to the past or the future by residing in the brains of someone living there already. Also, the tech on Earth in the 2000s is "sufficiently primitive to deter reprogramming of the Life Modification system." That's a prison break, in your jargon.