

THE DREAM WORLD
COLLECTIVE

Chapters 1-14

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1. Neighborliness

Michael Zenickowitz, known to his friends as Zen, woke up at 4:23 a.m. with a brilliant idea. He left his Sleeping Hammock, which was bolted to the walls in one corner of his bedroom ceiling, and swung along a rope ladder to his Working Hammock, which was bolted to the opposite corner of the ceiling. He opened a worn lap desk, pulled out five beautiful sheets of ivory résumé paper and an ultrafine black Sharpie, and began writing.

Dear Mr. D. in 5B,

I observed you yesterday picking up an empty beer can from the sidewalk, an unexpected reminder that there are humans among us. You are a true gentleman and a rare breed in the rushing anonymity of this city and century. If you would ever like to share a cup of tea, please do not hesitate to knock on my door.

Your servant,

Zen in 3A

This took perhaps a quarter of the page. Zen tore it off and began again on the blank remainder.

Dear Brown-Haired Girl in 5A,

I guess we haven't met yet, but we should. You look like someone who loves life. Whenever I see you it seems like you're actually happy to be you and your glow rubs off. Keep smiling, and stop by for a cup of tea if you ever feel like it.

Zen in 3A

PS - If you happen to like baking, I will show you an unorthodox but highly successful biscuit recipe of my own invention.

He tore this off as well and began again.

Dear Mrs. Valdez,

Thank you for the lovely chat the other day. Your history is fascinating, and it sounds like your husband was a great man. I still need to hear about your years together in Argentina before the war, though, and this time it is my turn to host you. Please come by at your convenience and I will give you a cup of my favorite new Darjeeling blend and, if your timing is good, a homemade cookie.

Sincerely,

Zen in 3A

This completed the first page. Zen started immediately on the second, writing without even stopping to breathe.

Dear Max in 4A,

We passed by the mailboxes the other day and you struck me as an interesting guy. I'm sort of old-fashioned and think neighbors should actually know each other, so if you're ever in the mood for a good cup of tea and gourmet snackage of some sort, come downstairs and see if I'm home.

Zen in 3A

The next was to his floormates in apartment 3B.

Dear Marco and Daniela,

You guys are the best. Thank you for the box of Earl Grey Lavender you left by the door yesterday. I sat on the rooftop listening to the clouds as I drank my first cup—no cream, light sugar, iced, per your recommendation—and it is truly the best iced tea ever. I'm considering setting aside the thirtieth of September as an annual commemoration, complete with festive decorations, dancing, fires, and the release of many small live birds and/or squirrels.

I'm planning another philosophical dinner for Thursday evening. You two are some of my very favorite people, and I would love to have your company at dinner and long into the evening.

In anticipation,

Zen

And so the letters continued, the paper torn rough at the end or beginning of each, one to every resident in the apartment building. When they were done, Zen folded the smooth side

edges of each letter into the center and, using a lighter he kept for that purpose, melted a few drops of sealing wax onto each one and stamped them with a crisp rectangular seal bearing the letter Z.

He swung down from the hammock onto a floor covered knee-deep in pillows, slipped into pajama bottoms and a white t-shirt, waved goodbye to his roommate Alex, who was getting ready for work, and padded barefoot into the hallways to deliver his letters. For the fifth time in the last three days, he didn't notice the paper taped onto his front door.

2. Weird Old Lady Drinks

At the same time, and not too far away, Zen's old roommate Otto van Muenster sat blissfully awake in the screen-lit shadows of his attic room. Otto did not know that he was also Zen's future roommate. He did not have any particular desire, in fact, to be anyone's roommate, though he had no issue with people in principle. Other people, like mushrooms or French films, were all well and good for those who preferred that sort of thing, but best enjoyed outside one's private domain. Had he known that he was about to have not one but several roommates, it would have caused him more than a little distress. Luckily, some changes in life come completely without warning.

Instead, Otto sat contentedly, pizza in one hand as the other flashed over his keyboard, programming on one widescreen monitor, raiding on another, and watching *From Russia With Love* on a third. Otto could type 60 words per minute with his left hand, 90 with his right, and close to 200 on a good day with both.

He was just hitting his groove when he heard a quiet knocking at the door. He tried to ignore it and typed on. After an uncertain moment there was another knock, timid and determined. Otto resisted it, but the mental image of Mrs. Dundenne in her pink nightdress—white hair in curlers, hand hovering, face full of aged concern—was enough to melt a steelier conscience than his.

He finished his line of code, put down his pizza, paused the movie, afk'd, took off his headset, and heaved his body out of the gargantuan beanbag that served him as chair, bed, and sometimes laundry hamper.

Mrs. Dundenne was standing exactly as he had pictured her. She squinted up at him without her glasses, confused and uncertain.

“Otto? I saw the lights under your door.” She framed her words slowly, chewing over each one. “Are you having trouble sleeping again?”

“No, Mrs. D, I just stayed up to take care of a couple—”

“Why don't you come down and I'll make you a nice cup of milk and chamomile,” she continued, feeling for his fat fingers with her cold, fragile hands.

“No, I—” Otto glanced back with helpless longing. His guild was at a critical part of the raid.

They'd need him there casting mass heals. And Sean Connery was about to...well, *be Sean Connery*. He tried to pull away from the bony, clutching fingers of Mrs. D.

“Don't worry, dear. You can sit with me at the table and we'll have a nice warm drink and we'll talk about it.”

The generation gap, Mrs. Dundenne's elderly determination, and her poor hearing combined to make Otto's protests completely ineffective, and he didn't have the heart to forcibly wrench his hand out of hers and...what, lock her out of her own attic apartment? He sighed and followed her downstairs for another earnest one-sided conversation over weird old-fashioned drinks.

3. Painting in the Wee Hours

It was 4:30 in the morning when Sushi started painting. Sometimes she painted this late because inspiration had struck, because she was in the zone, and it was better to paint than to sleep or eat or think. This night was different. She'd gained her second wind at 2:00 and lost it an hour later. She'd used up the last of her inspiration all the way back around midnight, with her boss's voice still echoing in her angry brain: "We'll need this simpler, Maria. Right to the point, smack Joe Schmoe right between the eyes," while the client nodded.

"It's pretty, but we're looking for something with a little more impact. Maybe if we just make the burger bigger and cut out the dancers in the background?"

And then Rose, that little bimbo-headed...bimbo, had chimed in, cooing poison.

"Yes, I really think the background is too busy. After all, people only see billboards for a few seconds. We all know you're a great artist, Maria, but maybe this isn't the place to show it off so much."

So she'd started nearly from scratch, again. Made the burger bigger, higher contrast, brighter colors, bigger words.

YUM YUM YUM it's a #\$\$@%*N' BURGER, read one of her frustrated revisions around 1:30, and her roommate Summer had come home then and laughed a darkly cheerful laugh at the design and said something friendly and sarcastic about ad agencies, and Sushi had agreed and thought again about quitting the internship.

But she'd pulled herself together, even though she'd thrown sixty hours at it already just this week, because the deadline was three days ago and this had to be done and walking away from her first job would be résumé suicide.

By 4:20 the billboard design was dumbed down enough to make even the dullest shake-sucking, phone-yapping driver unthinkingly crave a burger, and Sushi had saved it with a snarl of disgust and sent it with a polite one-line e-mail to her boss and their client, and found herself blinking at the computer screen, knowing she had to paint.

By then that sickening wee-hours feeling had settled into her gut, where you can't quite decide whether you should sleep or just push through, and she felt the quick stabs of panic at the thought of tomorrow, when she'd actually have to function like a grown-up again.

Her painting felt like nothing to her at that moment, and it was terrible. For six months she'd been working on a series of dreamy landscapes to enter in the big competition at the Gallery At The End. They were life to her, better than chocolate and fast red convertibles and sun on naked skin.

In one a parade of elephants marched through a narrow dusty road while confused Arabs hung out of their windows and snatched their laughing children out of the way. Another looked like a brilliant lake high in the Alps, except what looked like a lake reflecting sky was really a huge hole in the landscape, with the distant mountains connected by a frail bridge of earth and dragons banking and swooping through the dizzying starlit gap. Her favorite so far was a painting of giant butterflies attacking a stampede of panicked rhinos, pummeling them with huge soft wings and carrying them off into the hazy sky.

Now she was finishing a painting of the inside of a clock tower, where a blind old man hammered at the elephant-sized cogs while one lazy apprentice gazed out over a moonlit cityscape and another hung from the highest gears like a monkey, making faces at scattering birds. She'd poured her heart into it, laughing at the mischievous little boys and delighting in the details of the tiny flashing bird wings, the domes of the city beyond, and the earnest focus of the old blind clockmaker.

Now, in the dullness of sleep-deprived night, it was just shapes and colors. She settled into work on one of the boring parts, the shadowy back corners where ropes and gears and bells loomed indistinctly, painting with grim determination because this was the only time left to her and the deadline was just days away.

4. Muffiny Dilemma

Alex sighed as he unlocked the front door of CafeNow and ground his eyeballs into his skull. 4:45 in the morning, again. He fired up the CD player. As usual, the album they were making trendy that week was sophisticated but not snobby, calculatedly unusual, just accessible enough to let everyone feel like they were part of the elite that *understood* this sort of thing. Macchiato music.

He went through the opening routine like a golem—not automatic like a robot, not numb and clumsy like a zombie, just methodical, unstoppable, driven by the line of words in his head: *How would you like to be the new GM?*

Over and over he heard Steve, the guy from Corporate. He'd asked blandly, with a smile like he was doing Alex some sort of favor. *How would you like to be the new GM?* Up at ungodly hours every day and night. Responsible for everything in the store. Direct liaison with Corporate.

Alex fired up the espresso machine and brewed himself a double shot, swallowed it in one scalding, bitter gulp, and made a face. Screw coffee. He didn't even like coffee. Bitter liquid energy, nothing more. *How would you like to be the new GM?*

He began assembling product: muffins and scones, cups and lids, trendy CDs, coffee journals, coffee mints, coffee bars for the coffee-holic on the go, flavored coffee stir-sticks. Alex laughed a dark laugh, green eyes flashing as he arranged the coffee mints. It would be a very secure job, great benefits, big bonuses if he could keep the store running well, which he could. Minimum one-year commitment, of course, after all the special training they'd give him, but in this economy that's practically a benefit, Steve had pointed out like a salesman.

Right. Job security. After all, who needs a life when you've got money, health insurance, and career potential? He wondered how many people had started their careers accidentally, like this, meaning to do something great and then tripping over a great benefits package.

He opened the refrigerator for some soy milk, and paused at the sight of an untidy little cling-wrapped bundle of muffins and—squash? He laughed softly as he lifted the note beside the bundle, written in his friend Summer's rebellious scrawl.

Dear Alex,

Please please please don't move these. The squashes are from Mrs. Gaptine's garden, totally organic homegrown deliciousness, and the muffins are her secret 12-grain recipe. Our customers will eat them up. —Here there was a tiny sketch of a monster chomping muffins.—I know it's technically against the rules, but you know they'll catch on and make us money, and you'll be the best person ever in the world.

*Peace and sparkles,
Summer*

He laughed again, somewhat despairingly, ran a hand through his soft brown hair, and sighed. All this, and then there was the problem of Summer.

5. Elves and Mushrooms

The cool morning air swirled around Summer as she knelt in the dirt, releasing handfuls of bait shop earthworms into the wild. Matty, a little girl in green overalls, helped enthusiastically. Matty's older brother, Simon, watched with the solemn caution of a bookish seven-year-old.

"Fly, little worms!" cried Summer. "I mean—burrow! Let the earth be enriched by your castings. Enjoy our yummy dirt. Avoid the early birds."

"Don't get eaten, worms!" Matty shouted at them through cupped hands.

They were in a vacant lot in downtown Thornfield, Minnesota, surrounded by the relatively short, friendly office buildings that marked the town's skyline, such as it was, against a background of beautiful gray clouds. Curvy paths made of broken bricks wove through invitingly untidy explosions of plant matter. Herbs, flowers, and vegetables were mingled together with an artful sort of carelessness. In one corner, some enterprising children had built flower beds out of old rocks and, in one case, a fence of half-buried bottles.

A hand-made sign read: Elves and Mushrooms Community Garden. They had let little Ellie Gutierrez name the garden, because it was her birthday when they made the sign.

"Hey there, kids!" called an old man's voice.

"Morning, Mr. Jack," Summer called back, then turned around. Mr. Jack was a skinny old man, with skin the color and texture of old leather, a cap, a cane, and suspenders.

"Hi Mr. Jack!" shouted Matty. Simon waved silently, his big eyes fastened on the old man.

"We got worms!" The little girl waved a handful to demonstrate. A couple worms fell onto Summer's dreadlocked blond hair. Summer laughed and began fishing them out.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Mr. Jack, very impressed. "What are they for?"

"Earthworms are important for the ecosystem," explained Simon seriously. "They can add nutrients and help plants grow better and their tunnels help break up all the dirt. That's what my book said."

Summer nodded.

"It's true. He was showing me yesterday. We decided we'd better add some earthworms to our garden."

“Grow, flowers! Grow! Grow!” chanted Matty, running in circles among the plants.

“The zucchini are getting ripe, if you want any,” Summer offered.

“I suppose I could use a couple,” said Mr. Jack. “My Martha makes the most delicious vegetable soup you ever had.”

Soon Mr. Jack had moved on, Matty was hopping down the path like a frog, and Simon had settled himself under a little lemon tree with his bug book. Summer gave a contented sigh. Her pocket buzzed. She rolled her eyes and flipped open her phone.

“Blast!”

She turned to Simon.

“Simon, do you know where your mom is?”

“She was going to visit Mrs. Martinez, I think.”

“Let’s go find her, ok? I need to be at work in fifteen minutes.”

“Ok.” He folded up his book and climbed out from under the tree.

“Matty, we have to go find Mommy, ok?”

“But I want to look at the bugs!”

“You can do that later. We have to go.” She grabbed Matty’s grubby hand, which tried to pull away. “Now,” she added, more harshly than she’d meant to. Matty started wailing. Summer sighed and towed the bawling girl along the path as Simon trundled behind them, reading as he walked. Summer rummaged frantically in her backpack and wrestled her regulation coffee shop visor over and around her tumultuous hair one-handed.

“Do you have a job yet, Simon?” she asked.

“I’m seven.”

“Lucky,” muttered Summer.

6. Promotion

Sushi's alarm rang at 7:50. She'd slept 78 minutes.

She swore.

She rolled over, fumbled around for the clock, then realized she'd put it across the room before bed so she couldn't snooze it, because this was 10 minutes before she had to be at work. She got up, pulled on some clothes, brushed her hair, grabbed a cookie, and ran out the door still buttoning up her shirt with the cookie clamped between her lips.

A short, brisk walk later she was in the office. As she reached her half-cubicle, Rose, the other intern, brushed past her with a smirk and a self-important flip of her perfect hair. Rose's desk was empty.

"You're late, Maria," said the boss, by way of greeting.

Bite me.

Sushi held back her temper with some effort and instead asked, "Did you get the new design?"

The boss sighed.

"Yeah, about that."

"What?" She couldn't stop a swirl of swearing from running through her head.

"Look, it's just not working. The client's decided to go in a different direction."

"Again?"

Warning look from the boss. She was too tired to care.

"I'm putting Rose in charge of the project. You'll be answering to her from here out."

"Wait, but she's just—"

It started to fall together. The empty desk. The smirk.

"You didn't..." She started swearing again in her head, more intentionally this time.

"She's been given the permanent position. We'll be happy to renew your internship again so you can be in consideration for the next round of hiring."

"Another year? But you said I'd—"

"You've got potential, Maria. If you can just learn to reign yourself in a little, maybe it'll go better for you next time."

“But I’ve been here more than two years already! You can’t—“

“I’m sorry, Maria. Just stay at it. We’re not firing you.”

He changed tone, now that that was settled.

“I’ll have Rose send you the next round of mock-ups once she’s talked it through with the client.”

“No.”

“What?”

“I quit.” She started gearing up for a rant, then shrugged. They could figure out why. They’d have time to regret it when they figured out how much of the real work Rose did.

“Good luck with Rose. I’m sure you’ll all be watching her career with great interest. Lots of assets there. Hope she learns some design skills on the way.”

“Maria—“

She glanced back, following the boss’s warning gaze. Rose was standing behind her, turning pink. Sushi let a sarcastic smile spread across her face as she looked Rose’s perfect body up and down with a long, luxuriant gaze.

“Looks like you’ve got everything it takes to get ahead in the business world, babe.”

Rose’s eyes hardened.

“Wow, talent and people skills,” she retorted. “No wonder you’ve gotten where you are so quickly.” Rose smiled, not sweetly. “It’s ok. Maybe I’ll give you a call if I find a project you can’t screw up too badly. Some of us need all the help we can get.”

“Yet, sadly,” replied Sushi evenly, “some of us don’t get all the help we need. Professionally, if you know what I mean.”

“Ok, ladies,” broke in the boss. “Maria, maybe if you just—“

She cut him off with a fierce gesture.

“Not interested.”

Sushi whirled toward the door.

“And my name is Sushi,” she snapped as she walked out.

7. Brilliant

Zen was on the roof, deep in his colorful hammock, with a travel mug of limeade in a hanging drink holder he'd rigged up, writing on a lap desk under a dramatic cloudy sky. He'd already done some serious writing that morning: an article interpreting the latest fad vampire novels as a sort of capitalist manifesto; a book review of a recent literary novel, *The Pendulum's Dilemma*; a third revision of his short story about a man who forgets how to read; and a few recipes for a cookbook he was starting to assemble. His three query letters for the day sat on the rooftop under a brick, ready to be mailed.

Now he climbed out, ruffled his pale blond hair in an absentminded way, and started pacing the roof, mumbling to himself, trying to figure out a concept that had been yanking at his innards for weeks now. He clattered down the fire escape and wandered out to go see Summer and Sushi.

A few burly guys in black t-shirts were moving books and boxes and cushions out of the building, leaving them in a big pile on the sidewalk. Zen waved vaguely as he drifted by.

"What's going on?"

"Guys in 3A got evicted."

"Oh, interesting, interesting. Say hi to them for me."

Three blocks down the street, he rang the doorbell for Sushi and Summer's apartment. Sushi slammed the door open.

"What?"

"Hey, you have any of that good pondering tea left? Put some on. There's ponderings afoot."

"Not now, Zen." She was already back at her easel, painting furiously.

"Cool, cool." He trundled into the kitchen, preoccupied with his thinking, and started making the tea. From the next room Sushi yelled at him.

"Go home!"

"Sure. Here's the thing. Why do we have jobs? Anyone, I mean? We complain about them so much. What do they even do?"

"Damned if I know. I say we just torch the place and go home."

“You ask anyone why they work if they hate their job so much, and they’ll say they need the money, right?”

Sushi kept painting like she was hoping Zen would disappear if she ignored him. Zen continued.

“But all you get for the money is stuff. What if you could get the stuff without the money?”

“That’s burglary. Hard jail time.”

“No, if you just had fun making whatever you like making, and you traded it with people who wanted it.”

“That’s a medieval peasant system of barter. Plague. And overlords.”

“What about living together with the other people and working together to make the stuff, everybody does the part they want?”

“Hippie commune. Funny-smelling deadbeats. And possibly plague again.”

“Ooh, and sitars! I love sitars!” Zen strummed a huge air-sitar. “Braunmm.” He flopped onto the ground, cross-legged, and took a thoughtful sip of his tea. “What if we made it deadbeat-free?”

“Pfff. With hippies? Good luck.”

“Not with hippies. With us. We figure out crazy brilliant ways to have fun and make stuff we need, or money, or whatever. We could pull it off. Look, what are we all busting our butts at work for? Retirement? Why not just have the fun now?”

“Hmph.” Zen could tell Sushi was growing interested despite herself. “What kind of fun?”

“All the stuff nobody does because they have to be back at work by Monday, or they’re too tired from all the meetings and paperworks, or too nervous because they’d get fired.”

“Or because their unprintable bosses are soul-sucking bastards who can’t recognize real talent with two hands and a flashlight, especially when those hands are busy ogling—” She whacked paint at the canvas. “—blond—” Whack! “—wench—” Whack! “—interns!”

Zen was slightly taken aback.

“Yeah. Or that.”

“Ok.” Sushi stepped back, suddenly calmer. “Let’s do it.”

“What?”

“Do it. Make a commune. That’s the thing, right? Everybody’s always talking about how awesome it would be to do something awesome. Do it. I’m in. Let’s go.”

“Huh.” Zen took a long sip of tea, pondering this. “We’d have to get the others in on it.”

“Summer’s in. She’s always trying to do this kind of thing.”

“Dude! We should get Otto, too. He could be our official technomage!”

“What about Alex?” asked Sushi.

“Harder. He’s all...responsible. We’d have to find something that would really shake up—
Wait a minute.”

“What?”

Zen grinned and finished his tea in a great gulp.

“3A is us. Brilliant!” He turned to Sushi. “By the way, would you mind helping me move some things? I think it’s starting to rain.”

8. Advancement

Alex leaned against the wall, despite his better judgment. Steve walked into the back room.

“Professional bearing, Alex,” Steve reminded him.

“Sorry.” Alex straightened up and tried to look...busier.

“Have to set a good example for the underlings,” laughed Steve in a corporate attempt at camaraderie.

Summer exploded into the back room, a tangle of backpack and visor and blushing apologies. Steve eloquently raised his eyebrows.

“I’ll—“ Summer hesitated, stowed her backpack under the coat hooks. “Go wipe the tables? Sorry to interrupt.”

She brushed past them to go out behind the counter. Steve spoke up.

“Time card?”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Summer turned back to punch in, avoiding his eye. She flashed a pleading glance at Alex as she went back out. He returned it, sympathetic but pained. *What can I do?*

“She may have to go,” observed Steve once Summer was out of earshot.

“Nah, she’s all right most of the time.”

“Seriously? I mean, did you see her there?”

Steve laughed, and the disrespect in his tone annoyed Alex.

“What? Late? That happens to all of us sometimes. No big deal.”

“Not you. See, what I like about you is that you really understand what it takes to run a successful business.” Steve’s attempt at flattery was jarring, too transparent.

“I guess. But Summer’s a good worker. She cares about people.”

“Right.”

“I’m serious. She’s made friends with practically every customer who comes in during her shifts. She generates incredible brand loyalty.”

Putting it in those terms made Alex feel a little dirty, as if the real point of good relationships was to generate business and not the other way around. But he had to use whatever was most likely to get through to Steve. One glance at his boss’s sympathetic grimace

showed him it hadn't worked, though.

"Look, I know she's your friend, Alex, but she's got to go."

"No, it's cool, man. I'll work with her. You know, give her a warning, make sure she straightens up. I've handled this sort of thing before."

"We've tried that already. She's just not working out."

"Steve, I can—"

"Sorry, Alex. If you're going to advance here, you need to show me you can put the store first. I'm telling you, as your boss. You need to fire Summer."

"Really? Just like that?"

"She had her chance."

Alex felt himself getting angry.

"Don't give me that, Steve. You can test me all you want, but don't bring a perfectly good worker's job into this."

Steve sighed.

"I've already made my assessment of her. She is going to lose her job, Alex. The only real question here is how much you care about yours."

"I see."

"It's not so bad after you get used to it. Firing people is just one of the necessities of the job. You'll understand once you've been in higher management for a while."

"How did you get into this line of work, Steve? Is it what you planned for in college?"

Steve laughed.

"No, I studied to be an architect, if you can believe it. Guess I was just in the right place at the right time. Corporate kept moving me up in the ranks, salary, benefits, the whole thing, and I certainly wasn't going to turn down a living like that. Pretty much the same as you, really."

"Wrong," said Alex. Steve glanced up, uncomprehending.

"What?"

"You're wrong. I'm giving my two weeks' notice."

"Over Summer? Alex, she's already gone."

Alex shrugged. Steve smiled his broad, ingratiating smile.

"Ok, you know what? Don't even worry about her. I'll take care of that myself."

“No, Steve. Sorry. I’m...going to head out. Mandy’s got this shift under control.”

Alex hung up his apron and found Summer wiping tables furiously.

“They’re going to fire you,” he said. “Just thought you should know.”

Summer looked up sharply.

“What?”

“Sorry.” He held her eye for a long moment, then smiled sadly. “It’s ok. You don’t deserve them.”

Alex walked out into a light drizzle, and laughed.

When he arrived at home he found a buzz of activity, with Zen and Sushi and several neighbors carting books and electronics off the sidewalk, and covering a huge tumbled pile with tarps, garbage bags, and Zen’s hammocks. Zen and Sushi were each hauling one end of a big trunk.

He grabbed Zen by the shoulder.

“What’s going on?”

Zen laughed a trifle nervously.

“We got evicted. Destruction of property, apparently. I’m not sure what he’s talking about.”

Sushi broke in.

“Maybe your hammocks bolted all over the walls? And the fire pit in the living room?”

“That was solid brick!” Zen protested. “And Alex made it all...smart. It didn’t even get hot on the outsides.”

“Yeah,” Sushi shot back, “And I bet it did wonders for the hardwood floors.”

Alex just stared at the pile of all their earthly belongings, then laughed darkly and spread his arms wide.

“It’s a brand new day, gentlemen,” he announced in an odd voice.

“And ladies,” Sushi corrected him.

“And ladies,” agreed Alex with a curious, almost sinister smile. “Tickled Pig, anyone? Drinks are on me.”

And he stalked off into the rain.

9. Overload

“Eat implosion, hellish wriggly thing!” cried Otto over his headset. The monster reared up, unleashing an aggressive new wave of attacks as its damage level grew critical. Otto’s fingers flew over the keyboard as he shouted at his guild-mates to—

Everything went black.

“Hab SoSlI’ Quch!” he bellowed. Sometimes only Klingon could express the full depth of his emotions. He lumbered to his feet and struggled down the tiny stairway to the ground floor. Cloudy sunlight glimmered through the windows, making him realize suddenly how bleary and generally crusted he felt.

“Frikkin’ sunlight,” he muttered. The heavy old-fashioned curtains were the one thing that made his room livable.

Mrs. Dundenne was in the kitchen, nervously puttering with an unresponsive toaster oven. Otto popped his head through the door.

“Everything OK, Mrs. D?”

“Oh, Otto! I’m so glad you’re here,” she quavered. “Something seems to have gone wrong.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. D,” he replied wearily. “It’s just the fuse again. Remember? This happened two days ago, too.”

“Oh dear. Well—” She hesitated, struggling for a solution. “Can I make you some dandelion tea and we’ll sit and wait for the lights to come back on?”

“No need for that!” cried Otto, jerking back involuntarily. “I mean—We just need to replace the fuse. Fuses. Lots of them again, I bet.” Whoever had done the wiring in this house apparently had no real understanding of electricity. Or safety. Although to be fair that had probably been back in the time of Lincoln.

Otto fumbled in the upper cabinet for a box of fuses. It was a good thing Mrs. Dundenne was a hoarder, he reflected. He wasn’t sure if they even made this kind of fuse any more.

“You know,” he ventured, “you should really get the wiring in this house checked out. I’m pretty sure it isn’t safe. At all.”

The elderly lady reached up and patted him on the shoulder, as if comforting a child. “Don’t you worry your head about such things, Otto. They’ll have the power back on in no

time.” She gave him a wink. “Why don’t you just take yourself a sasparilla from the icebox and go back outside for a while?”

Otto raised an eyebrow. “Ok, Mrs. D. I’ll...be back in a little bit.”

With a perplexed shake of his head, he crept downstairs into the small, musty bare-cinderblock basement, clutching the thin box of ancient fuses. Old washer-dryer fixtures stuck out of the wall where Mrs. D’s machines used to be. Her daughter and son-in-law had come to move them upstairs so she wouldn’t have to go down into the basement any more.

Cobwebs tickled his neck and arms, and he stumbled over something tangled and indistinct. Maybe an old mop. It was hard to tell in the dingy light from the upstairs door. The antique fuse box was made of brittle black Bakelite. He began the delicate operation of removing the cover without breaking it off, then squinted inside to try to see which of the old Edison screw fuses were burnt out. He removed them deftly, then stood trying to juggle the old fuses and the new fuses and the box, muttering intently to himself.

“Lessee, 15 amp in the thingy. Wow, toasty! Now get the thing in the other thing...” He heaved a sigh. “You are not a happy fuse box.”

Ten minutes, three shocks, and a forehead bruise later he was back upstairs.

“Did you have a good time with your friends, dear?” asked Mrs. Dundenne as he shuffled wearily into the kitchen.

“Sure. I’m just gonna—go upstairs for a while.”

He logged back on double-time, but by then the raid was toasted and he was in no mood for guild drama. Instead he cranked up the *Return of the King* score and plugged in his soldering iron. In minutes he was deeply embroiled in his latest secret project, trying hard not to think about Mrs. D, this house, and above all, wretched ancient fuses. But deep down a voice kept nagging.

This is not working.

10. Conspiracy

Summer wiped the table furiously, lost in thought. Alex's voice rang in her ears. *They're going to fire you.* What was she supposed to do with that? Talk to the boss? Wipe faster? Her jaw tightened in frustration. And then there was the way he'd looked at her, that long moment of fierce green eyes. She felt her cheeks growing warm. No, he couldn't—could he?

"Shut up," she muttered under her breath. This wasn't the time. She brought her attention forcibly back to the present. So they were going to fire her. She looked around the store. An idea began to brew. Grabbing her stash of muffins and squash from under the counter, Summer sidled up to Mrs. Tepples, a plump, grandmotherly woman with a flowered dress and a cloud of soft white hair.

"Hi Mrs. T," she greeted her friend with a sunny smile.

Mrs. Tepples glanced up and her face brightened.

"Summer, what a pleasure to see you."

"I have a favor to ask. It may sound a little silly, but it would mean a lot to me."

The old lady's eyebrows rose.

"What is it?"

Summer leaned down and spoke in soft, conspiratorial tones, her eyes darting to Mrs. Tepples' face. Mrs. T looked confused at first, then cocked her head uncertainly as Summer grew earnest. There was a long moment of decision, then, with a secret little smile, Mrs. Tepples gave a quick, tight nod, and squeezed Summer's hand. Summer left her a few squashes and a muffin, and moved to another of her customer friends, a skinny, geeky young man named Franklin.

"Free muffin, Franky?"

He peered up at her through square black-rimmed glasses.

"Right on." As he reached out for the muffin, she yanked it back.

"Wait, it's gonna cost you."

He hesitated.

"I thought you said it was free."

"Not money. Moves. You in?"

Franklin eyed her suspiciously.

“I’m listening.”

Again she leaned in, spoke in rapid, hushed tones. Franklin began to chuckle slyly.

“All that *and* I get a muffin? I’m so there.”

“Good.” She passed him the muffin with a single slow nod. “Just wait for the opportune moment.”

She moved on to Jerry and Danno, an artsy, middle-aged couple who had been regulars from before she started working. She’d immediately fallen in love with their sarcasm and silliness and free spirits.

“Hey boys, ready for a brand new adventure?”

“Honey please, I’m taken,” said Danno.

“Then listen to this.” And once again she muttered the plan, and wide smiles broke out on their faces.

“This will be better than our Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers routine at the Christmas talent show,” cried Jerry. “Just give us the signal.”

“Thanks, guys. I knew I could count on you.” She planted a peck on Danno’s cheek and tossed them a couple muffins.

She continued through the store, giving out muffins, squashes, furtive smiles and murmured instructions to customers and coworkers alike. Every few moments she glanced back to make sure Steve was still in the back office, then giggled. He’d never know what hit him.

11. Freedom

Zen exchanged nervous glances with Sushi, wondering what was wrong with Alex. He was usually the stable, responsible one. Sushi met his eye and answered before he spoke.

“I’ve got this operation under control. Go see what’s wrong with Alex.”

Zen put down his end of the trunk and ran after Alex. Behind him Sushi belted out orders, whipping the band of helpful neighbors into shape. Zen caught up with Alex as he strode fiercely through the drizzle.

“You ok, man?”

“Sure.” Alex’s smile was dark. “Never better.”

It was odd to see him like this. Alex was more of a worrier than Zen. Almost anyone would be. But the mood that dominated Alex’s life was one of brisk competence. Zen had seen his roommate confident, calculating, sometimes relentless, but never...sinister. It was as if something had snapped inside him. It made Zen nervous. He tried again.

“You’re freaking me out here. What’s up?”

Alex ignored the question. “Do you think everybody hits this point?”

Zen could tell it wasn’t really a question and focused on keeping up with Alex’s ferocious pace.

“Everyone’s looking to be so comfortable,” spat Alex. “All these happy people with their happy jobs and their piles of cash. Is that all it is? Money?”

Zen raised his eyebrows, startled. The rain was growing heavier, and Zen started wishing he’d brought something. Alex turned to him abruptly.

“What are you going to do with your life?”

Zen shrugged. “Write.”

“You’re lucky. You already know that, and you’ve got the skills to make it happen.” Alex said this without bitterness or flattery, just a simple statement of fact.

“Why, what are you going to do?” Zen asked.

Once again Alex ignored his question.

“We’re the minority. Do you get that? There are people out there who can’t even afford to think about this. Making a difference, doing what they love, nothing. There are whole

countries out there grinding every day just to make ends meet. And even the people who do think about it get sucked in, stuck just making money.” He snarled. “Screw money.”

Zen grabbed him. “What happened to you?”

“I quit my job.”

“I thought you were getting promoted.”

“Yeah. Exactly.” Alex gave a bitter laugh. “Middle management at CafeNow. Not exactly what I want to do when I grow up.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“Explore.”

“Like, *National Geographic*?”

“Maybe on the way. But there’s something bigger out there. We’re not made for cubicles. We’re *not* made for money.”

Zen hurried along, worrying. He was hardly one to jump to the practical, but—

“We’re here.”

Alex’s voice cut into his thoughts. They passed down a short flight of sticky steps and under a very old but very sturdy sign bearing the image of a pig with a quirky and strangely compelling grin and “The Tickled Pig” in curly pink letters. The pub was warm, full of a cozy, beery atmosphere that felt welcoming after the wet afternoon. A few patrons were scattered throughout the room, enjoying the Pig’s robust English lunch menu. Alex slid into an empty booth and ordered a whisky. Zen ordered a rum and coke. Alex looked around, his mood warming.

“This is good,” he said. “You know what we’re going to do? We’re going to sit and have a drink and figure this thing out.”

Zen nodded. “Also we can sort out where we’re going to live next.”

“To new beginnings,” Alex toasted.

“Cheers.”

12. My Cue to Exit

Summer looked around. A ruffle of glances, nods, and quiet acknowledgments ran through the shop. Now it was just a matter of time. And not losing her cool. She gave her long blond dreadlocks a nervous shake. Steve popped his head out and beckoned her into the back room, a combined kitchen, storage room, and office.

“Summer, can I talk with you for a minute in the office?”

Here goes.

“Sure,” she smiled.

She joined him in back. Steve sat in the manager chair. Summer stood in front of him, arms crossed, heel tapping, trying not to show her emotions. Steve got right to the point.

“It’s not working out, Summer.”

“You’re right.”

Steve jerked forward slightly, confused.

“I’m sorry?”

Summer’s delicate pink lips twitched with hidden laughter. *Sucker.*

“You guys really aren’t doing a very good job,” she explained. She waved a hand vaguely at the store. “I don’t think this whole...thing is going to work out.”

Steve was still completely lost. Most satisfying.

“What?”

“Your store. It’s dead. I like the conversations people have here, but—you’re not taking it anywhere. There’s no *vision*, you know?”

Steve tried to steer the conversation back to familiar territory.

“I don’t think you understand. We’re going to have to let you go.”

Summer nodded nonchalantly.

“Makes sense. What else?”

“I don’t understand.”

“No, you really don’t seem to. See, I think you’re missing the value of the human element. Too calculated. Too corporate. You know?”

Steve smiled, the narrow, prissy smile of someone who knows the right answer.

“I think we’ve managed to project a pretty friendly atmosphere, actually.”

“Yeah, exactly. Project. Do you even hear yourself any more?” Summer rolled her eyes. It was almost a relief to get fired. Talking with Steve always made her despair for humanity.

“Look, Summer,” Steve continued. “I know your ideas about community and the greater good, but we’re running a business here. We have a very specific image we’re working to put forward. I know this sounds cynical to you, but the whole system has been fine-tuned by experts, field-tested, and it works, Summer. We have a system, and it gets results. And frankly, I don’t see why you’re against that. People come here and they relax, they talk with their friends, they get good work done.”

“And you make tons of money,” added Summer.

A quick expression flickered across Steve’s face, the equivalent of a shrug.

“Is that a bad thing?”

She gave him a long, considering look.

“Do you really know any of your customers, Steve?”

“I hardly—”

“Do you even know your neighbors?”

Steve bristled.

“Now look, this isn’t about my personal life.”

“But it is!” cried Summer. “This is your life, right now.” She emphasized each word. “Your personal life. You’re going all these hours without connecting to anyone, without changing anything. Do you start really living when you go home each night? That’s when you live the dream? Why not live it all day long? And if this isn’t your real life, what is? When is it going to start?”

Summer was used to getting carried away by her passions once the conversation turned in a certain direction. But here she could tell she’d pushed too hard. Steve grew quiet. Angry quiet.

“You’re fired,” he said, using the one unbeatable defense he still had.

“Do you really not see it? You could revolutionize this store!”

“You have to learn to follow the rules, Summer.” Now he sounded almost sorry for her, like a villain regretting how great an ally in crime the hero could have been.

“Why? So I can—”

“So you can make a living and fulfill your responsibilities, Summer.” Now it was Steve’s turn to get carried away. “All your ideals would be great if they made any real difference, but they don’t. You’re living in a dream world. Until you can learn that the system works you are not going to have any effect on the world. That’s just how it is.”

“You’re wrong,” she shot back. “All the system does is dry out your soul and make you think you’re successful when all you’ve got is a pile of damn money. You want to see results? Bottom line? The system versus the people? Watch this.” She shouted out to the counter. “Hit it, Jimmy!”

Suddenly the store’s background music went silent. Summer examined her nails for a long moment, waiting for Jimmy to plug in his music. Then, reverberating over the store speakers, came a shimmering harmony of voices:

We built this city...

We built this city on rock and roll...

Steve let out a confused exclamation.

As the first guitar chords hit, Summer burst out of the office door like a rock star and pointed at Jerry and Danno. Suddenly they were up, snapping their fingers in time like gangsters on Broadway, cool and controlled. Then, at the same moment, they burst into a flamboyant, brilliant dance routine. Summer laughed with delight. She knew they’d been in musicals, but she’d never seen them in action. They were *good*.

Dancing out to join them, she pointed at Franklin. With a grin, he burst out of his seat and started dancing nerd-moves in time with the beat. Next they danced over to Mrs. Tepples and Summer helped her up. Much to Summer’s glee, the stately old woman started clapping and swaying to the beat along with them.

“Ok, very funny, guys.” Steve wasn’t amused. “Jim, put the music back on.”

Jimmy ignored him. He vaulted over a clear spot on the counter, struck a dramatic kneeling pose, and, jamming furiously on his air guitar, sang, “They call us irresponsible, write us off the page!”

One by one, more customers got up until only a handful were left in their seats, watching or clapping and singing along. The dancers made their way to the door. Franklin was doing the Sprinkler. A tall black man Summer had never met before was breakdancing. Mrs. Tepples was clapping and nodding, walking in time to the beat. Yet with their moves synchronized to the

same beat, the effect was not chaos, but a magnificent, fluttering, spontaneous harmony.

When all but the last three were out the door, Jerry and Danno suddenly turned back and hoisted Summer into a glorious flying position for a last look at the store, then wafted her down and twirled each other out the door.

She looked Steve in the eye, giddy with joy. He was stuck between outrage, confusion, and sheer neural meltdown. Summer gave a small bow, saluted, and turned and leapt out the door, feeling as free and wonderful as she ever had.

The crowd on the sidewalk was cheering and laughing, exchanging hugs and high fives. They greeted her with a great whoop when she appeared. Summer was overcome with a sudden rush of love and gratitude.

“Thanks, everyone. You guys were great!”

“Are you kidding?” cried Franklin. “That was awesome! You’re my new hero.”

Mrs. Tepples gave Summer a tight hug.

“Thank you, Summer. I feel like a little girl again.”

Summer looked out over the small crowd. Customers, friends, but now they were something more: comrades.

“I’m going to miss you guys.”

Jerry shrugged.

“So come back and see us.”

Summer made a face.

“I hate coffee.”

Everyone laughed. Summer swept an arm out down the street.

“Shall we?”

There was a confused moment of hesitation in the crowd.

“Oh, I’ve still got my latte in there,” Danno pointed out.

“Yeah, I wasn’t actually planning to *leave*,” added Franklin.

“Oh, right. Obviously.” Suddenly Summer felt like a fool. What had she expected? “Well, I’ve got to get going. Thanks, guys.”

She watched everyone troop back into the store, back to their laptops and overpriced cappuccinos, then sighed and turned away. *Yeah, totally made a statement there. Way to beat the Man.*

She kicked a rock.

Bugger.

13. Options

Alex leaned back contentedly in his booth at the Tickled Pig. Beside him, shelves of board games and a tumbled pile of newspapers added to the pub's cozy atmosphere. The air was filled with the warmth of fresh bread and melted cheese and good beer and the murmur of a few mid-day lunchers. Sometimes setting made all the difference. Steve was always talking about how CafeNow "projected a pretty friendly atmosphere," but putting CafeNow up against the Tickled Pig was like comparing Apple Jacks to warm apple pie.

Zen leaned forward intently.

"So what now?"

Alex thought about it.

"I've always wanted to try my hand as a builder. Furniture, house repair, renovations."

"You'd be good at that."

"I am good at it," Alex corrected him.

"Oh yeah, I forgot. You're old."

"Yeah."

Alex thought back over the two years he had spent as a contractor's apprentice before college. His boss, Lee Darwin, was a good leader and worked his men hard. He'd trained Alex to try his hand in lots of areas so he could get a feel for the jobs he'd be supervising others in: electrical work, plumbing, bricklaying, framing, painting. They'd even discussed the blueprints and architectural principles behind the work, and Darwin seemed close to offering Alex a permanent position before Alex suddenly decided to get a college education.

"Can you just go back to Darwin?" Zen asked.

Alex considered it. They hadn't exactly parted on the best of terms. In retrospect he'd probably been too brash, especially after all the favors Darwin had done him.

"Maybe I'll just take some time off, think things over."

Zen brightened.

"Yeah, this could be good. We can do anything right now. I mean, you don't have a job and I'm just freelance at the moment and we don't have to worry about rent and utilities."

"Yup, free as a frikkin' bird. Nothing to worry about now!" Alex gave a harsh laugh. "Why

do people even bother with homes in the first place?”

Zen was entirely oblivious.

“Exactly! We can try something totally new. We can be peddlers, traveling from city to city in a rusty old pickup, peddling our wares and swapping stories.”

“Peddling our wares?”

“Or long-distance free-form delivery boys! Any package from anywhere to anywhere. Figure out how much to charge on a per-job basis. You can do that part. You’re good with money and—” He waved a negligent hand. “—reality and all that.”

“Zen, be serious for a second.”

“I am! When are we gonna have another chance like this? We could hit it big, go for the gusto, off on another whirlwind adventure!” Suddenly Zen sat up straighter in his seat. “I forgot to tell you. We’re starting a consortium. Or commune. Sushi and I were talking about it.”

“A commune?” Alex tried to keep the dubious note out of his voice, but Zen’s rapid-fire crazy schemes could get a little tiring after a while.

“Yeah,” Zen continued. “The why-wait-for-retirement commune. Just figure out what we love to do and do that.”

“I see,” said Alex. “And do you know where this is going to be? How you’ll pay the bills?”

“That’s just it. The only reason this doesn’t work for people is that they don’t commit to it. If you had nothing tying you down at all, could you figure out a way to make a thousand dollars in a month?”

Alex considered it. It was an interesting concept, he had to admit.

“So get part-time work and stuff?” he asked.

“No, you figure out what you love and only do that, but do it hardcore and make it support you. I mean, if you like the jobs, fine. The point is to be living your actual life all the time. Don’t split it up—boring grind all day and a real life you come back to afterward.”

The idea seemed to be clarifying in his mind as he went.

“Yeah! That’s it. One rule: Live your actual life at all times. Don’t just get through anything.”

Alex shook his head.

“The problem with that is you’ll always have hard parts to get through. It’s a basic part of life.”

"I guess." Zen deflated. "So what's the rule?"

"Know what you want and keep working toward it?"

"Too dry," said Zen automatically.

"Know your passion, then?"

Zen laughed.

"There it is."

Alex grinned. He could feel the weight starting to lift. The zest of an exciting new venture was starting to leak into him.

"So are you in?" The glimmer of inspiration had returned to Zen's face. "We can figure out the details as we go. Sushi's doing it, and she says Summer's in."

Alex had to admit it sounded like fun.

"It's a cool idea," he conceded. "I'll have to think about it, though."

Zen grabbed him by the collar.

"What? Think about it? You just quit your job so you could chase your dreams!" He gave Alex a sharp slap. "Now wake up, drink that whisky, and join my consortium."

Alex laughed out loud. Zen was the most laid-back person he'd ever known. It was like getting slapped by a sleepy koala. And Zen was right. He laughed again, a clear-eyed sense of freedom rising up in him.

"You're totally right! If not now, when?"

Zen gave a satisfied nod.

"Also?" Alex added. "Never hit me again."

Zen examined his reddening hand. "No worries there, chisel-face. Tough love *hurts*."

14. Escape

Summer strolled through a neighborhood of evenly-spaced homes and tree-lined streets wet with the light rain. Some of the yards were perfect, some cluttered with toys or strange gardens. The professors from St. Karl, the nearby liberal arts college, threw an interesting element into the neighborhood.

Her mind wandered back to her days as an environmental studies major, rooming with Sushi, skirmishing with the boys or inventing games and recipes together late at night. Games ran in Otto's blood, and Alex had a special genius for concocting revitalizing blends to get through a night of studying. He'd even proposed one of his non-alcoholic drinks as a menu addition at CafeNow. It was a brilliant drink, bright and clean with fresh-squeezed oranges and pomegranate and mint and...only Alex really knew, but a few sips was enough to change your perspective on life and a tall glass of it had once pulled her out of a full-blown depression.

Steve had rejected it, of course. Not bad, he'd nodded. But we get our menu from headquarters. And that brought her back to Steve, the face of corporate idiocy. Who could think wasting Alex was a good policy? She could still hear Steve's prissy boss-voice. You just need to learn to follow the rules, Summer.

Yeah, she snapped in her mind, just become a cog and nobody has to bother thinking.

Pulsing inside her was a hunger, desperate and constant, to find a set of people where she could be herself, thinking people who would pay attention to each other and take care of the world and laugh and eat and fight together. She'd tried it before, but somehow even in the organic-vegan-environmentalist circles of Thornfield she'd never really fit in.

I'm too abrasive, she told herself. Always pushing my ideals in people's faces. I need to just settle down a little, fit in, play by the—

Her mind recoiled in sudden horror from what it had almost touched. Steve was in her head. A shudder ran through her. It was to avoid just those moments that she had come here. She needed to get on her knees, get her hands in the dirt, just forget everything and help beautiful things grow for a while.

One of the houses on the street stood out as abandoned, a strange sight next to the well-kept houses all around it. It was a quirky old house—the old-fashioned porch and a round

tower at the corner always made her think of long summer evenings and secret passageways and friendship and adventure. And there was a sweet garden out back. She wondered sadly who had left a house like this abandoned.

Summer slipped through the gate and wandered to the backyard, enjoying the quiet neighborhood sounds. The backyard was mostly overgrown weeds and a few tumbled branches from the cherry and oak trees that ringed it. A small arbor was now drowned in rampant but dying vines. There was one patch of rich brown earth with delicate sprouts where Summer had cleaned up the weeds and begun to plant a few months ago. She pulled out the gardening tools she'd stashed under a big bucket and continued extending the patch. Whenever she'd cleared enough space she carefully planted a few more winter squash seeds from a packet she'd brought along.

She knelt in the wet dirt, relishing the sensual pleasure of letting herself get muddy, lost in the sensations of the thick earth packing and breaking up under her fingers. Her tensions began to drift away. She could almost feel the tender plants growing. A sense of living connection settled into her bones, a connection with the plants, the earth. She heard a few ladies walking by, laughing and talking, and smiled.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing back there!" An old man's angry voice snapped into her calm. She started and looked up. Above her an angry face peered over the high fence, long and square with eagle eyes and bushy white eyebrows. Two hands clutched the fence like they were pulling the man up onto his tiptoes so he could look over. She stared at him wide-eyed, without words.

"Get out of there, you pesky brat! What are you doing messing with that place? I ought to call the police!"

Summer jumped up and wiped her hands quickly on her jeans.

"I was just—I come here to garden sometimes. It's abandoned. I don't think anyone minds."

"Don't tell me it's abandoned, you little twit! What do you mean, no one minds? I mind! Don't go trespassing, ruining peoples' gardens." He gave a disgusted grunt, and muttered, "Little criminals nowadays." A knobby finger stabbed toward her, snatching her attention. "What's wrong with your hair?"

Summer automatically fingered a dreadlock, turning pale.

"I—"

“Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.” The man shook his head. “Disgusting,” he spat, then, more loudly, “Get out of here.”

Summer started shifting from fear to anger.

“Why?” she asked defiantly.

“Don’t you talk back to me! I’ll get you arrested! I’ll get all of you arrested!”

“All of who?”

“I told you not to talk back. Young people,” he grunted. “No respect for other peoples’ property! Hell in a handbasket.”

“I care about this property!” protested Summer. “I’m trying to improve it! See?” She pointed to the plot she’d cleared. It was clean and well-tended, sprouting fresh life, an oasis in the dirty yellow tangle that covered the rest of the yard. “You don’t want to live next to a dump, do you?”

If she’d thought he was angry before, she hadn’t seen anything yet. His hand slammed against the fence. Suddenly livid, he yelled, “Don’t call this a dump. It’s not a dump! It’s—” His voice choked off, clenched tight by emotion. Then he continued more flatly. “Eh, why bother. Just gonna tear it all up anyway.” It was hard to tell if he was talking to himself or to her.

“That’s no reason to abandon it in the meantime,” she argued.

He turned back as if remembering she was there. Now only his eye and a shock of white hair showed above the fence, as if he’d wilted back down. “You’ve got two minutes to get out,” he said without energy and disappeared behind the fence as he turned away. “Then I call the police.”

Fighting tears of anger and frustration, Summer gathered up her tools, threw them violently into the bucket, and marched off the premises. When she looked back there was no sign of him except—maybe—a flicker of motion at one of his empty windows.

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Thanks for reading!

— Ben