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*Someone forgot to tell the groom
The biggest secret in the room*

*She was the first girl that he kissed,
the first perfume he missed*

*First to light his flame,
the first girl to sing his name.*

*But she gave herself away
Before she ever learned to play
Now she can't get away
too soon*

Several folks around town used Pig Farm as shared workspace during the afternoon hours. Siler provided free wifi and coffee hot enough to kill germs.

I moved over to one of the back booths with the laptop from Fats and printouts from a few of the GRL files.

Working from absolutely no basis of information, I had to find Bootstrap and figure out what was behind the daily allegations of fraud.

Or I could go another way and try to find the fraud. That might or might not lead to Bootstrap's identify. But focusing on the fraud seemed the fastest way from here to there. If I could wrap this up early, I could get the \$1 million bonus and celebrate.

A year-long gig working for Fats would be lucrative. But also god-awful stressful. And I am, by nature, lazy and averse to stress.

So I decided to skip a couple of steps and seek out evidence of fraud.

To do this, I decided to create a kind of test.

More than 100,000 individuals worked for GRL as employees or contractors – or as authors publishing through GRL research publications.

In theory, I would subject each individual to a lie detector test. Abracadabra, the results of the tests would point me to the fraudster. Or, if no one failed, Fats could conclude that Bootstrap's emails here harassment and a hoax.

The Pentagon might be able to pull off this methodology.

I could not.

So I decided to create a kind of reverse test. Instead of interviewing more than 100,000 individuals and analyzing the results, I would start with the results and work backward.

I started with a checklist of variables that would be most likely to show up in a test of fraudulent activity:

- Authors whose publications had swung quickly from mediocre content (or rejected content) to newsworthy articles
- Employees who had been passed over for a promotion recently or received a big promotion
- Employees who recently were linked to litigation
- Employees with big swings in personal finances
- Employees with recent real estate transactions

I spent the next couple of hours poking around in the GRL administrative platforms. All of the web pages covering employee benefits, employee assistance programs, staff policies and so on. My login gave me administrative access, so I could also slice and dice files from the private Human Resources portal. At its most detailed, the database contained individual records on every one of the 100,000-plus individuals that might be the source of fraud. With their Social Security numbers, I could link their GRL files to all kinds of data from industry sites that carried out credit checks and background checks. GRL had contracts with many sources of these data, which meant I had found a way to keep this moving.

The idea was to throw all 100,000-plus individuals into a giant sifter. Then shake and rattle everyone around, using the variables above as a screen. I was confident most of the individuals would pass on through.

Every individual would receive a score of 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 based on the number of variables in the screen that showed up alongside their name. So an individual not tied to any of the variables would receive a score of 0 and pass through cleanly.

Individuals hitting on every one of the variable would receive a score of 5.

I would start by telling the sifter to hold onto only the individuals with a score of 5. These would be people with a lot of volatility in their lives of late. This would give me a pool of people posting the highest possible score on my test. So I would be starting with the

results, then doing some reverse engineering to figure out the story of how and why each person had been retained by the sifter.

I ran the methodology by Siler.

He shifted. Put the coffee in his right hand and leaned on the bar with his left elbow. Dumb look on his face.

“I’ll ruminate on that,” he said.

I closed the laptop and zipped the GRL backpack. Woke up my personal phone and punched up the TouchTunes app. Played the entire double album Townes recorded in 1973 in Houston, *Live at the Old Quarter*.

Siler had run lighting and done some work as a guitar tech for Townes in the late 1980s, when we finished up school in Chapel Hill.

Townes was closer to the end than we knew. Siler was along for the ride on the 1990 tour with The Cowboy Junkies.

From the juke box, Dale Soffar wrapped up his opening announcements on the live track, then “Pancho and Lefty” came on. We had about 20 songs to run through before “Tecumseh Valley.” A tune that always make Siler tear up just so.

“Nice,” Siler said. Dumb look on his face.

“Hey, almost forgot,” Siler continued. “Hayes and Ray Wylie are coming through town. They’ve got two shows in Durham. Said they would stop by tonight for a pop. You got a song to pitch? Or you tied up with Fats tonight?”

“Fats is on a plane for New York. Or will be any minute now. She’s meeting with investors and doing a Toady Show gig early tomorrow,” I said.

“Then we’ll make a night of it right here,” Siler said.

He handed me a pimento cheese sandwich.

10

*Magnetic pull, like the moon on waves
Caught in the tide, can't pull away*

High risk, low return
Falling knife, never learn

Bite of the apple, live for today
Eternal judgment, it can wait

She's a bad decision in a strapless dress
She steals from Santa and the IRS

I put the sandwich aside for later. Started a new mug of genmaicha tea. So hot the steam was making my cheeks moist.

I opened the laptop again and logged into my UNC account to go through notes and questions from Mallette about my doctoral defense.

The Ph.D. had seemed like such a big deal 24 hours ago. It was the culmination of this phase in my life. It would be the stamp of approval from academe. Which means absolutely nothing. Except that it does mean something. Just nobody knows what. And it means something different, for sure, now that \$5 million is on the table.

I could hear Mallette's admonishments over and over.

"The best dissertation is a completed dissertation," he would say. "Your dissertation is not the best thing you're going to write. It's merely the first thing you're going to write."

Mallette had held appointments in the Department of Sociology and in the School of Journalism. He was unusually gifted. Through his career, his research findings would generate a scholarly article, a mass media column and, in some cases, a textbook. He could write in all three styles for all three kinds of audiences, and he drew up on both quantitative and qualitative methods. He was the leading voice on the role of media in society in the post-Watergate world.

Mallette was 70-years old but the only real choice for the post of chancellor. Given the athletic and academic fraud in recent years, the university trustees ultimately had no choice. They had to select someone who could lead the campus out of the dark period. They waived whatever mandatory retirement rules were in place and begged Mallette to take a five-year contract. His job was to disinfect the campus and make the job attractive enough that a national search would be practical by the time his contract ran its course.

My dissertation was relatively straightforward. I was extending the research on agenda setting – a body of theory and evidence that, in short, held that the media don't tell the

people what to think. But media do tell us what to think *about*. I was drilling into the model to measure the White House's influence in telling the media what to write about.

Most everything was in place. I was a week away from the defense. Not a lot of work left to do. But some loose ends. And I couldn't focus.

This morning I had deposited the first check from Fats, for \$1.25 million, into my checking account at the State Employees Credit Union. Just went through the drive-through window and handed the clerk the signed check and a deposit slip.

I could see through the smoked glass window that my check triggered some meetings. But soon enough she sent the receipt back through the tray.

I was, for a tick of the clock, a millionaire.

Tomorrow I'll write a check for roughly half that amount and send it to the IRS. As freelancer, I've always had to send in my estimated tax payments. Same thing here. Just a bigger number.

Numbers big enough that it's hard to concentrate on the time-series statistics I would need to explain next week.

But the millionaire status couldn't compete with Fats. She filled my mind.

She was back in my life, and she took up most of the oxygen. She's the smartest woman I've ever known. She's the best-looking woman I've ever seen. Not everyone agrees – she has her share of haters on social media. But when she's in my presence, or in my head, she trumps most everything else.

I can't get out of my mind the image of those sweat beads on the back of her neck this morning, her white skin visible under her pony tail.

All I could think about was whether I would end up as anything more than an employee. A friend? Ex fiancé? Something more? Less?

Somehow the \$5 million didn't matter when there was the chance, however slight, that I might kiss her again for the first time in 30 years.

My GRL phone buzzed. A text from her. Then another. Then two more.

"Landed at Teeterboro"

"Headed to see hedge fund guys. They love GRL."

"Have you found Bootstrap yet?"

“Rapson says hello. He says you should be embarrassed that Battle Park kicked your ass.”

Then silence. All I could think about was Fats falling asleep on my shoulder in the planetarium, during astronomy lab freshman year.

A new text buzzed in.

“Is it OK to miss you?”

Wow. What would Townes say here?

“You can miss me for the sake of the song,” I texted back, pulling a line from the steamy night in the Old Quarter in 1973.

“Save me a biscuit,” she texted. And then radio silence. I’d see her next on the Today Show.

Time to switch from tea to rye. Signaled over to Siler.

I closed my notes on Mallette’s questions. The defense prep could wait. Or would have to wait. I couldn’t focus on anything but that pony tail dancing through Chapel Hill.

Unwrapped the pimento cheese sandwich. God, the sourdough bread is perfect.

Queued up some Hayes Carll and Ray Wylie on the juke box. Maybe I could sell a song tonight. One thing for sure: It’s a bigger fucking deal to have Ray Wylie record my song than to put a million bucks in the credit union.

Hayes boomed through the speakers:

*It gets hard out here
I know it don’t look it
I used to have heart but the highway took it
The game was right but the deal was crooked
Lord, make it perfectly clear
It gets hard out here*

I had been playing around with a song about a special kind of woman. One who is both a Baptist and a Communist.

For now, it’s kind of half a song. Or part of a song. Hoping it’s just the right kind of thing to pitch to Ray Wylie and Hayes.

11

*Empties line the Pearlwood bar, a blind man shoots tequila.
The tourists leave in taxicabs, tweaked out by the dealers.*

*Buenos dias, mi amigo, have you seen my friend?
Have you seen the pretty girl who taught me how to sin?*

*Mexican topaz, she shimmers at night.
Her skin is electric and gives off white light.*

*How many stars in Boca del Rio? How many stars in old New Orleans?
How many stars in Nuevo Laredo? How many stars in Sweetwater Springs?*

*How many stars can fit in the sky?
How many stars in Brownsville tonight?
How many stars in Brownsville tonight?*

Tuesday evening in October. Sitting at the bar at Pig Farm Tavern in Chapel Hill. 8:37 p.m.

Having moved from the back booth to the bar, Siler and I were screwing around with a new song. Or lines that might, if we got lucky, turn into a song.

Siler had skills, and he was on his game tonight. Leaning against the bar with his left arm. Coffee in his right hand.

“Snow days,” he said, as if it were the most obvious way in the world to start a conversation.

“What about snow days?” I asked.

“Everyone needs a snow day now and again – a day when you steal a free day,” he continued. “No appointments. No bills to pay. Just free time. You wake up one morning and, boom, you get a snow day. No school. No work. No nothing.”

That rang the bell for me. I remember the excitement of a snow day as a kid. Having my Dad open my bedroom door and tell me school was called off for weather. Translating that to a bonus day for a grown man, now that’s got real song potential.

We noodled around with ideas and kept pouring rye, kept waiting for Hayes and Ray Wylie to show up. Kept the mood going by filling the juke box with their songs. We cycled through “Drunken Poet’s Dream” three or four times, amazed by the lyrics these two guys put together.

“Not sure ‘Snow Day’ can compete with that,” I said.

“If that’s the bar to clear, we can stop writing,” Siler said. “But everybody needs a B side. Let me text Hayes to see where they are.”

It was getting late, and we weren’t getting any smarter. Timing was good to pitch something to the guys.

“Well, shit,” Siler said, looking up from his phone. “Those Texas crooners are in Durham, all right – Durham, New Hampshire. I told Hayes he owes us a chance to pitch a song, having stood us up tonight like a bad prom date.”

Siler took a gulp of coffee and then a sip of rye.

“So what do we have?” he asked me. I was the one working at the laptop to organize lyrics.

“How you gonna pitch a song from here to New Hampshire?” I asked. “Neither one of us is going to sing this into a phone.”

“We’ll text a few lines at a time. Hayes is at his phone now. He says he’ll take a look. What do we have?”

“Start with the title: ‘I Need a Snow Day.’”

Then I fed him a few lines at a time.

*I can’t say I don’t have care in the world
I’m driving carpool for junior high girls*

*It’s she-said and he-said and bubblegum rap
There’s a Jamey Johnson CD I want to unwrap*

*There’s gotta be a better way
God I need a snow day
Just a little time to play
I Saw the Light*

Siler worked the text editor. Hit send. Didn’t wait for a reply.

“What’s next?”

*Grievous Angel with the sunrise
Whiskey River sharp at noon
Folsom Prison happy hour
Then crank up Dublin Blues*

*The honey-do list is eating me up
Got a Ray Wylie CD waiting out in my truck*

*Where are Pancho and Lefty when a man needs a drink
Kenny Powers is laughing as I fix the sink*

“Really?” Siler asked. He stopped texting. “You’re going with the Kenny Powers line?”

“It makes me laugh,” I said. “Tell him Kenny Fucking Powers knows the difference between Durham, New Hampshire, and Durham, North Carolina.”

Siler went back to the keys.

“Any more?” he asked.

“Repeat the chorus. Or repeat anything. Shit, I don’t want to pretend to tell those boys how to write a song.”

Siler was quiet, staring at his phone like he was willing a pot to boil. “She Left Me for Jesus” came on the juke box, and I was amazed again at Hayes’s talent.

Siler’s phone buzzed. He looked up from the text.

“Hayes wants to know the name of that biscuit place you like so much. He’s hungry,” Siler reported.

“Well, there are a couple. But they’re both 800 fucking miles from where he’s sitting right now. How long has he been on the road this year?” I asked.

Dumb look on Siler’s face. Waiting for an answer.

“Tell him the place is called Time Out, and it’s open 24 hours a day. Ask him if he wants a song about biscuits.”

Siler worked his phone some more. He looked up.

“Hayes says Ray Wylie likes that we mention him in the song,” Siler reported. “But that we should pitch this one to Taylor Swift.”

Siler looked down again when a new text buzzed in.

“Ray Wylie wants to know if it’s true that you have a song about a chick who’s a Baptist and a Communist. He’s going to be pissed off if he doesn’t get first look at that one.”

OK, perhaps the night isn’t lost.

“Oh, and Ray Wylie says there’s never been a good song about biscuits. And if there is going to be one, it’s going to come out of Texas, not Chapel Hill.”

It’s a hard life out here.

12

*I’m planting Christmas trees, one leg down the hill.
Sixteen hours away from home, and I am working still.*

*The sun is rising overhead, and the water pail is dry.
There’s a long blue ridge above the trees, and it stretches to the sky.*

Back at the Gimghoul Road guest house just past midnight, I tried to re-organize my schedule for Wednesday before going to sleep. But I wasn’t going to be able to sleep, anyway. So I sent myself an email with a to-do list.

Three big items for Wednesday.

1. Run my analysis on the 100,000-plus GRL names and see how many people scored a 5 on my test.
2. Focus for a couple of hours on my dissertation defense preparation.
3. Mail a check for \$625,000 to the IRS.

I was awake. I had a stamp. So I worked the list in reverse. Wrote the check. Printed and signed the estimated tax paperwork. Sealed the envelope. Walked out to Gimghoul Road, past the big Tesla in the driveway, and dropped the payment in the post box.

I was no longer a millionaire.

I could see Orion in the north sky. Fats's new house was dark. Footlights illuminated the stone pathway past the big house and around to my place. The cold air felt good.

I got back to the desk and checked of my item number three. Then remembered I did have another task to do, and added it to my list.

4. Watch Fats on the Today Show.

About four hours of good sleep. I woke up at 5 a.m. My alarm buzzed at 5:03 a.m. I'd never had a drink of whiskey in the morning, but I wanted one then. Seemed like the only thing that would ease the pain of losing half my fortune overnight.

I put my hand on the bottle of Bulleit Rye. I ran my finger across the green label. Swallowed hard. Decided to go with the tea, instead, knowing lunch would come along soon enough. Put water on to boil. Texted Fats.

"What did Bootstrap say today? Please forward me the email," I wrote.

"Quiet this morning. No email from Bootstrap. Has the brilliant Lassie James solved this case already?" she texted back.

The genmaicha tea was good. I queued up Emmylou's album *Red Dirt Girl* on my phone and set it to play on a loop. Opened the laptop to get back to the GRL work.

My GRL analysis was simple. It was the data cleaning that was tedious and time consuming. I had to append files, concatenate files and create crosswalks between unique identifiers for 100,000-plus individuals in multiple databases.

I started with the primary Human Resources portal and created a clean database all of the HR information in one place, tied to each individual's record. This covered the hiring date for employees and nature of the relationship for contract workers, consultants and authors. It covered any HR events, including pay raises, promotions, disciplinary events. I included anyone who had worked for GRL over the past year. For some individuals, the firing or resignation date was included.

Next I linked this up to the database of GRL publications. GRL publications included everything from peer-reviewed scholarly journals to online blogs. Some of the most obscure, sophisticated science in the world was published through GRL outlets. This required large editorial staffs, networks of peer reviewers and researchers hungry to publish. There were also pop science publications tied to multi-media GRL outlets that had exploded in the past year.

By matching up author names to publication histories going back five years, I created variables that tracked the number of submissions and whether the submissions were accepted for publication or rejected. From this, I was able to create a variable for each researcher who had submitted content. The variable would sort researchers into three

groups. One group I labeled “Consistent” – this grouping included researchers whose publication track record had held steady. A second group I labeled “Supernova” – this grouping included researchers whose publication track record had soared. For example, a researcher would land in this group if he or she had received rejection letters from third-tier journals five years ago but now had headline-making articles in the most competitive journals. GRL’s media arm issues news releases for the most eye-catching articles published, in large part to spoon-feed the news media a layman’s translation of the science. Authors whose articles received this kind of treatment leapt ahead in their careers instantly. A third group I labeled “Ambersons” – this grouping included researchers whose publication track record had withered.

I was interested in any kind of big swing. But most of all, the Supernovas. Assuming fraud, not sour grapes, was more of a danger to Fats, the Supernovas were researchers who could be trading on false data for personal gain. Someone from the Ambersons pool could be pissed off about the arc of their career. They could be harassing Fats. But if they were cheating, landing in the Ambersons pool meant that they were doing it poorly.

Having linked up the HR data and publication information so I could match up every individual record, I connected this to online security services that performed credit checks, background checks, financial reports and so on.

Just before 7 a.m. my phone buzzed with a text. Fats was at the NBC studios.

“See you on the television in a half-hour,” she wrote.

Then: “Rapson asked if it’s true that you have a song about a woman who is both a Baptist and a Communist?”

“Ask him if he’s buying songs today,” I wrote back. “Tell him there’s a bidding war for this one.”

I turned down Emmylou and turned on the TV. Found the Today Show. Used it as wallpaper while I kept cleaning up the GRL databases.

13

*I became a country DJ
Learned the songs of Willie and Merle
Worshiped at the Church of Hank
Then I heard the Red Dirt Girl*

*The grievous angel haunts my sleep
Shows me the devil and the deep blue sea
I fell in love with Emmylou
I don't know what to do*

Wednesday morning in October. Guest house on Gimghoul Road. 7:29 a.m.

The Today Show comes back from a local weather break, and Rapson is seated across from Fats. They are both in white leather chairs. She is wearing all black. Her black hair is down. Her skin glowing.

Rapson introduces her as “the first celebrity scientist of the 21st century.”

He doesn't call her Fats. He says “Dr. Holly Pike is a modern-day combination of Albert Einstein, Jonas Salk and Marilyn Monroe. You're inventing designer medical treatments that improve our quality of life while finding cures for disease in developing nations – all while landing on People Magazine's list of most beautiful people and inspiring a generation of young girls to pursue science.”

His first question: “Aren't you setting yourself up for a fall, being all things to all people?”

Fats smiled.

“My blessing is timing. I learned breakthrough scientific techniques at a time in history when technology allows us to transfer this work from the drawing board into real-life applications. And for some people, all I represent is a cure for baldness. Would you like a prescription?”

Rapson, laughing.

“Not today. But your treatment for baldness is what I'm getting at. How do you balance time and money invested in a cure for baldness with time and money invested in curing deadly diseases? And how do you balance either one with a shoot for People Magazine?”

Fats, now serious.

“I'm the face of Gimghoul Research Labs, but working with me are more than 100,000 really smart, dedicated people. I can't do it all – and would never try. But together we can make this work add up to more than the sum of the parts. At any speck on the globe, at any time of day, we have a GRL lab somewhere in the world working on a solution that will make somebody's life better tomorrow than it is today.”

Rapson, leaning forward.

“So what’s the highest priority for you, personally, across all of this work? I know you’re in New York meeting with investors. What are you focusing on?”

Fats.

“Today, Gimghoul Research Labs is announcing a global partnership with Apple. Over the next year, we will be rolling out a series of i-health innovations that give people more information about their health than ever before – and, more important, innovations that give people more control over immediate solutions. The i-health innovations will marry consumer technology with state-of-the-art science.”

From there, Rapson poked around more to get information on i-health. Fats mentioned “trade secrets” a couple of times and kept to the talking points. In a flash, the Today Show was back to weather.

My phone buzzed with a text from Fats.

“So?”

“I can hear the investors writing checks now,” I wrote back. “GRL + Apple = cash.”

“See you tonight,” she texted.

Then: “Can we get biscuits?”

No need to reply. Fats can get whatever she wants.

Muted the Today Show. Turned up Emmylou. Went back to my GRL data. I had to carry out some test-runs of the analysis, using small random samples of the data. These tests would reveal any glitches in coding and any failed linkages between the disparate data sets.

Once I find and tie up all of these loose ends, the first cut on the analysis should move in a hurry.

14

*She writes me letters about places she’s been.
She stopped off in Paris, and she’s going again.
New England in spring, then it’s Europe for fun.*

*Drinking wine by the liter, and soaking up sun.
She's seeing the world and making dreams true.
It reminds me I'm here, and I'm missing her too.*

I needed a change of scenery and needed a spot without a beer tap or a whiskey well.

For the first time in many years, I dug out my key to a carrel in Davis Library and spread out to prep for my dissertation defense.

Immediately, I did what every grad student does in a carrel. Went fast asleep.

At 4:30 p.m., my phone blew up. The buzzing nudged me awake.

Two voice mails from Mallette.

Fats had called four times and texted six. The first messages were playful.

The last one, not so much.

"You do work for me, correct?" was all the text said.

Mallette said he wanted to catch up tomorrow after the University Day celebration wrapped. Nothing about my defense, he assured me. Something new, related to a faculty matter, where he said "I would benefit from your expertise."

Right behind it there was a second voice mail from him:

"Let's meet in The Pit," he said, referring to a gathering spot at the center of campus. "October is my favorite time in Chapel Hill. All meetings should be outside."

I called Fats.

She was at the Gimghoul Road house. She didn't find me at the guest house. Siler reported I was not at Pig Farm. And she did not welcome the mystery. She wanted a report on Bootstrap.

I told her I would have a first report by Friday. That seemed soon enough.

She was heading to Pig Farm. Told me to meet her there.

I said, sure, give me one hour.

I spent the time going through my notes from Mallette, for the dissertation defense, which was now less than a week away.

This would be the first doctoral defense anyone could remember chaired by the sitting university chancellor. A defense is usually a private academic meeting of no interest to the community. This one, however, was of great interest. I would be seated with Mallette and other members of my committee on a stage in Gerrard Hall, one of the oldest building on campus.

Gerrard sits next to South Building, location of Mallette's new third-floor corner office.

The university community was invited to attend. It was more of a celebration of Mallette than an affirmation that I would clear the bar to take a Ph.D. Which was fine with me. Put all the spotlight on him.

I had to be ready to explain my use of a methodology known as "autoregressive integrated moving average" – or, for short, ARIMA modeling. The method helped me determine whether the White House was setting the agenda for national news media or whether the reverse was occurring.

I had to explain how my work advanced the body of knowledge in "agenda-setting theory," a question that extends back to the rise of mass media in the 20th century. The scholarly testing of agenda-setting ideas dated back to the 1968 presidential election, when researchers in Chapel Hill gathered evidence of the news media's influence over voters.

In the end, the public nature of the defense should help me. I would hope that having a student meltdown at a doctor defense would reflect poorly on the committee members themselves. So it was in their interest, as well as mine, that it all go well.

That rationalization would have to do.

I headed to Pig Farm.

15

*Rich man counts his dollar bills, the wealthy counts his time
Rich man holds his cash for thrills, smart man tracks the chimes*

*Flip flops pass for magic slippers, at the beach house at Lahaina,
Sunblock scrambles GPS, so the office cannot find you*

*The clocks are frozen like the drinks
Stuck on Happy Hour
Fading fast bikini strings,
Stuck on Happy Hour*

Wednesday afternoon in October, bleeding into evening. Sitting at the bar at Pig Farm Tavern in Chapel Hill. 5:02 p.m.

I'm at a back booth, laptop open. Multiple GRL databases running. I briefed Fats for about 45 minutes, giving her an explanation of my methodology and explaining why, for now, this approach is better than others.

She asked 100 different questions. I could see the CEO wheels turning. She challenged me to articulate multiple scenarios of what might happen and how we would proceed from there. As a scientist, Fats lived in a world of bright-line findings. As a CEO, she knew there really were no yes-or-no questions. It's more about how she managed feedback and found opportunities in whatever situations materialized. She refused to be locked in to a single course of action that limited her options.

By 6:30, Fats was racking up the pool table. Nine-ball. For some time, she kept peppering me with questions, even as she knocked balls around the table.

When that faded, Siler made a biscuit run. We ate at the bar. I was on my second mug of hot tea. Siler was jacked up on coffee.

From her bag, Fats pulled a 1963 bottle of Macallan. Set it on the bar. Spun the bottle around for us to see.

"We're celebrating, boys," she said. "Tomorrow I get one of those fancy academic gowns and hoods and get to sit up on stage with real-live scholars. There was a time, mind you, when we were all in Connor Dorm not knowing how to get through drop-add."

Siler pulled three glasses from the overhead rack.

Fats poured.

"It's good to be home. Too much history between the three of us to spend any time ... " Fats paused, her voice trailing off into a silent, personal recollection.

"Just too much time," she repeated.

Siler lifted his glass, as a toast.

“To ‘too much time,’” he offered.

Glasses clinked. We put the whiskey to our lips. Siler poured his coffee in the sink. 1963 Macallan allowed no companion.

“Who’s performing tonight?” she asked.

“Jefferson Hart,” I replied. “Local guy. Great talent. Has a new hit with ‘Marigold.’ I’ll send you the video.”

“He’s on at 10,” Siler said. Switched from leaning his left arm on the bar to his right. Dumb look on his face. “You hanging around?”

“Not tonight,” said Fats, finishing her whiskey. “I have a video conference with Tokyo later. Heading to Mallette’s residence now for a reception with other honorees. You boys are my excitement for the night. The Macallan is yours. My gift to you. Squares us for 30 years of neglect.”

Fats kissed me on the cheek as she got up from the barstool. It was so quick and familiar. I wasn’t sure if I dreamed it or if it happened. She waved goodbye over her head as she walked away.

Siler poured me another one. Poured himself another one. It was going to be another long night.

A couple of beats after her exit, Fats opened the door and stuck her head in.

“Oh, yeah – you still owe me a link to that song about the Baptist and the Communist. Tomorrow night,” she yelled. A directive, not a request.

She was gone again. Off to rub shoulders with donors and scholars.

I finished my biscuit. Siler threw her half-eaten meal in the trash.

“You not going to Mallette’s?” he asked me.

“What? And leave you here alone with the Macallan?” I said.

Then: “Nah. He invited me, but I passed. It’s her night.”

Jeff came in the back with a couple of guys and began tuning guitars and testing the mics. I punched up “Marigold” on the juke box. He came over to catch up. Turned out he’s playing a bill with Hayes and Ray Wylie in Atlanta next week.

“Tell them they owe me one,” Siler said, relaying the life lesson about Durham, New Hampshire, and Durham, North Carolina.

“Hayes sent me some lines from ‘Snow Day,’” Jeff said.

I waited to gauge his reaction.

“Good stuff there, Lassie,” he said, returning to his guitars. I took another sip of whiskey, bolstered by the admiration of a successful songwriter.

“Should make a great video for Taylor Swift,” Jeff said, laughing.

Well, so much for “Snow Day.” I guess everything will be riding on the Baptist and the Communist.

16

*She loved Miss Patt and Blue-Eyed John, cranking lonesome whippoorwill.
Now on Key Biscayne, she dreams about it still.*

*Dreams about the Ryman, roaring Rocky Top.
Banjo angels haunt her sleep, choruses won't stop.*

*She's the Queen of Whiskey Glam. Jack Daniel's meet Kate Spade.
She always wins at Twister. She played the Turf back in the day.*

Jeff played late. We drank late. He performed a set of Tom Petty covers and got a lot of the pretty girls up dancing. Rare to see dancing at Pig Farm. Girls in tight jeans and boots can turn any surface into a dance floor.

Several of the dancing girls closed down the place. Siler left the bar a mess, locked the door and invited a few of us back to his house in Carrboro. On a lark, I tried the number in the GRL phone for the black car. It was there in six minutes.

“Grilled cheese,” he announced when we entered his place.

Siler had the place to himself. Carla was up at their Valle Crucis vacation home, where the Pisgah and Cherokee national forests connect in the mountains. Carla spent as much of the season there as she could, meditating under the spell of the mountains and hosting an autumnal equinox get together for friends. It was spiritual. So every fall, with

Carla reviving her emotional self, Siler hosted a series of late-night bacchanals to overwhelm his physical self. He was quite good at it.

I dialed up Tom Petty tunes on my phone and plugged it in to Siler's system.

Like all good late-night parties, the energy level settled a bit. Two of the girls sat down at Siler's coffee table and cranked up a game of checkers.

Siler's neighbor, Sam, who always showed up for late-nights, came in the back door and opened a bottle of Grgich fume blanc. Siler put thick slabs of Velveeta on rye bread and got the sandwiches sizzling on the griddle. I sank into a burnt orange overstuffed chair and watched SportsCenter with the sound muted and the closed captions turned on. Jeff came by with his bass player.

Siler brought me a sandwich, and I tore off bites of the charred bread and dripping cheese, stuck in a trance between drunken sleep and conversation.

I dreamed of the defense next week, sitting at the round table in Gerrard Hall and having Mallette and the committee pass the cover page of my dissertation around and sign it. Which would confer the Ph.D.

I chatted up the checkers girls without hearing anything they said in response. For one of them, I read her palm. Something I learned at a New Orleans solstice party years ago. Told her how her love line would lead her to happiness in a frigid climate or take her on a journey of sadness and love loss in a warm city by the water. Palm reading is all about giving the client choices. Palm reading isn't about destiny. It's about given the client permission to imagine options she didn't know existed. She told me she'd buy a coat.

Fats did that for me. When I was with her, I imagined doing things that would not otherwise occur to me. Everything seemed possible with Fats. Even gravity became optional when Fats was smiling at you.

My mind ran off to the GRL analytic models I was getting ready to run. Could I find the needle in the haystack? I liked the feeling of depositing GRL million-dollar checks into the credit union, from the drive-through window.

The only thing better is filling out a deposit slip for song royalty checks. I had been hoping to pitch Guy Clark on "She's a Baptist and a Communist." I hear it in his voice. Had a fuzzy conversation with Jeff about recording a demo.

Perhaps a new song about reading palms.

That dizzy feeling was winning. Put my head back on the big chair. Closed my eyes. Left the checkers girls to contemplate arctic love versus tropical pain. I faded away, a former millionaire, full of whiskey and Velveeta, uncertain what lay ahead. A week ago

my course was so certain. Now chasing Fats around the world sounded more fun than anything else. Unless I could get more Texas musicians to record my songs.

Jeff picked up a guitar and sang the acoustic version of “Marigold.” It was the last thing I heard before the world changed.

17

*Say a prayer for all the ghosts
Who cannot find their home
Wandering the Boulevard
Condemned to cry alone*

*Say a prayer for travelin' mercies
Say a prayer for misspent youth
Say a prayer for all the lies you told
and all the people that you used*

Thursday morning in October. Sitting at the bar at Pig Farm Tavern in Chapel Hill. 9:07 a.m.

Whatever comes after numb, I was experiencing it. Everything I ever knew, the last three hours tossed it out the window.

Chapel Hill police were banging on Siler’s door at 6 a.m. Mallette’s executive assistant, Rose Bynum, knew I would be there and sent them.

Rose had arrived on campus early. University Day required all hands on deck. She was ready.

Rose parked at the planetarium and looped around through McCorkle Place on her way to South Building. The Silent Sam memorial, a bronze statue honoring Civil War dead, had always been a touchstone of good fortune for her. She would touch the granite base and say a quick prayer. More times than not, it seemed, good things followed.

She wanted a good day today, for Mallette. For his inauguration. For the university that was desperate for his leadership.

When she approached the statue, she saw a body collapsed at the base. She ran to it. Then she recognized Mallette, and she collapsed. Minutes later, she was able to dial 9-1-1 on her cell. Sirens woke up the town. News helicopters followed. Within an hour, the governor had postponed University Day. The University's Board of Trustees convened an emergency meeting.

The police fetched me because Rose said I was next of kin.

Every stage of grief hit me at once. I was angry at everyone and no one. I didn't believe it. I sobbed. I slammed my hand against the table. Given that I'm not, in fact, a blood relative, I had to scramble to find a contact for Mallette's daughter, Pearl. She was in Maine. His wife passed three years ago.

The Chapel Hill mayor immediately called the FBI. I heard whispers. This was no heart attack. There was something like a knitting needle rammed into the base of his skull.

My old editor from the Post, J.C. Houston, called me and asked if would write a piece.

"Soon. Maybe. Not yet," I said, and hung up the phone.

Siler opened his place as sort of an unofficial hub for friends, and law enforcement made the spot a command post. Every booth was occupied. Every stool, also. Enough computers and monitors to make the place look like a TV production studio.

Rose had been admitted to UNC hospitals, suffering from shock.

Fats texted me when she saw the breaking news on the CNN crawl.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"Yes," was all I could write. I did not elaborate and could not.

I was still in my Wednesday night clothes. Sitting at Pig Farm and waiting to be interviewed by a state investigator. A block away, on the quad, several thousand students and local residents had gathered. The crime scene was taped off. On the periphery, the people gathered began singing "Amazing Grace." I could hear the collective voices from the upstairs bar where I sat.

I thought back to my sophomore year, when I landed in Mallette's newswriting class. I didn't know anything about newswriting. Worse, I was ignorant of the severity of my deficit. The only good thing, Mallette said, is that I had no bad habits to break.

"You have no habits at all," he said. It was never easy to tell if he was smiling.

Mallette taught us AP Style, where to put the commas and where to put the semi-colons. Writing an AP lead was like learning to bake a cake. Follow the rules.

He also taught us more. Mallette challenged us to question how we know what we know. We signed up for journalism. He taught us epistemology. Getting an expert sound bite was never enough. Even finding a statistic from a reference librarian was not enough. On the continuum of absolute ignorance to fist-pounding certainty, Mallette demanded, figure out where you are sitting when you tell the public that you know something.

Mallette gave every one of his students laminated cards, small enough to fit in a wallet.

On one side of the card was printed the North Carolina open-meetings law. We were taught to hand that card to any public official who tried to close a meeting.

On the other side of the card: "Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable."

Mallette, whose own reporting had freed five innocent men from death row, lived that every day. The university faculty had become comfortable. Too comfortable with mediocre academic performance and outright fraud, in some departments.

When Mallette agreed to take the corner office in South Building, a lot of us believed those comfortable people were about to feel some affliction.

I heard my name.

"James Battle?" a voice asked.

A man approached on my left. Dark suit. White shirt. Red tie. Wing tip shoes. Hair cut above his ears and the smell of 1955 shaving lotion.

"Inspector Gerald Pauley," he said, offering his right hand.

We shook.

"Call me Gerry," he said.

Then: "Who paid you \$1.25 million to kill Mallette?"

18

*You'll find him on the front porch swing
Whittling stick and Pearl in the can
He runs the county from that porch*

Like he was chosen God's right hand

I froze.

I'm certain I gave off a million cues of guilt. I was anxious to speak to the FBI or state investigators, or someone. We had to catch Mallette's killer. Nothing else mattered.

Now, in the span of five or 10 seconds, I was processing all the variables that probably put me at the top of the list of suspects.

I couldn't speak.

"You taking the Fifth?" Pauley asked. "Didn't figure you for a coward. At least not right out of the box. Everyone tells me you're a smart son of a bitch. Don't you want to try to outsmart me?"

"Detective ..." I began.

"Inspector," he corrected.

I took a breath. Drank more tea.

"Inspector," I picked up, "thank you for getting your team out here this morning. I need you, the University needs you, we all need you to catch whomever killed Mallette. I did not kill him. I did not kill anybody. Let's talk this through so you can devote your energy to more productive leads."

I stopped.

Pauley looked at me. Didn't speak. Didn't blink.

"Gimghoul Research Labs paid me \$1.25 million. Fats – uh, Dr. Holly Pike hired me to carry out research. That's the reason for the money. Has nothing to do with Mallette. I'm on the payroll. Dr. Pike will confirm that."

"I have three questions for you," Pauley continued.

I nodded.

"One, why is your name all over Mallette's calendar?" he asked.

I explained that I had been working with Mallette for three years. I was a doctoral student, and he was my advisor and my committee chair. We were old friends, with a

student-mentor relationship that developed into a friendship as time passed. While Mallette was a professor, I had worked as his research assistant. With Mallette becoming chancellor and my dissertation defense next week, we were meeting regularly. Our last meeting was about planning for the defense next week.

Pauley kept staring at me.

“Oh, he invited me to his home last night, for the reception with University Day honorees. I did not attend. I was here with Siler, Jeff and others. Slept at Siler’s house, after we closed here,” I said. I assumed he wanted an alibi.

“What about today’s meeting?” Pauley asked.

I rewound conversations from the past couple of days. Finally remembered the voice mail from Mallette.

“I was working in Davis Library yesterday. Mallette left me a voice mail asking to meet today, after the University Day events wrapped. He asked to meet in The Pit. Said it was not about my dissertation. Something about wanting my input on university business,” I said. “That’s all I know.”

“Second,” Pauley rolled on. “What are you doing for GRL?”

I gave the Inspector a superficial summary of the assignment from Fats. That she hired me, essentially, for an investigative reporting job. To figure out if any of the researchers are using the GRL publishing outlets to line their own pockets. I didn’t mention the harassing emails from Bootstrap. Waited to see how much detail he demanded.

“Third,” Pauley said. “What do you know about a person or a project named ‘Bootstrap’?”

I swallowed. I wanted a shower. I wanted more whiskey. I wanted Mallette to be alive and to protect him. Or to be far away from here and forget it.

“I don’t know anyone named Bootstrap,” I said.

Pauley had that look on his face, like Siler. He didn’t blink. He didn’t smile.

“But you’re the second person this week to ask me about Bootstrap. It came up when Fats – Dr. Pike – hired me. One of the reasons she suspects research fraud is occurring at GRL is that she has received emails alleging the fraud from someone using the name Bootstrap. It’s not clear if the emails are revealing authentic fraud or if the emails are merely sour grapes, or harassment,” I said.

I explained that I had been on the job for only a couple of days, and I had been focusing on ways to detect fraud – if it exists – through the GRL publishing platforms. I had not done anything to pursue Bootstrap.

“Have you spoken to Dr. Pike?” I asked.

“Hate to use a cliché,” Pauley said, “but I’m asking the questions here.”

“Yes, sir.”

19

*You can't touch it, you can't see it.
But you can't help but feel it.
When the mountains kiss the history of the sun.
There's a spirit at your fingers,
When you close your eyes it lingers.
It weaves in through your heart, it is the one.*

Pauley's tone changed. He went from chilling to curious.

“So what do you think Bootstrap means here?” he asked me.

“Until this morning, I had been assuming that Bootstrap and the GRL fraud, if it exists, may not be related. I thought it likely that the name was a random handle for whomever was sending Dr. Pike the emails. Less of a code or signal than a mask. A mask that's both convenient and meaningless. My priority, for the GRL job, is to find the source of any research fraud,” I said. “I don't think the person sending the emails was committing the fraud.”

Pauley signaled to Siler to pour him coffee. He took the stool beside me. His look invited more.

“With what you're telling me now, my guess – and it's only a guess – is that Dr. Pike spoke to Mallette about the problem. A recent email to her from Bootstrap raised the potential of telling Mallette about the supposed fraud. Dr. Pike and Mallette had grown close in recent months as Fats – I mean, Dr. Pike – got more re-engaged with the University. The school, obviously, saw dollar signs when she entered the picture. I'm sure the fund-raising guys were turning cartwheels when she came back into town.”

“What exactly did Mallette say to you about the meeting he wanted today?” Pauley asked.

“His voice mail said not to worry, nothing to do with the dissertation defense. He said there was a faculty matter he wanted to discuss, and ‘I would benefit from your expertise.’ I remember that line because it made me laugh. The guy had more expertise than anyone I knew,” I said.

“In his desk calendar, Mallette had your name written down for 3 p.m. today, in The Pit. Beside your name he had written ‘Bootstrap’ and underlined it twice,” Pauley said.

I hoped his willingness to share the information was a sign of trust. And an indication that I would be helping him solve this – not about to be arrested.

“This is new information,” I said, and it changes things in both directions. “For me, it means there is some connection between Bootstrap and the UNC faculty. It also means that we should pursue some connection between Bootstrap and Mallette’s murder.”

“We?” Pauley interrupted.

“The most important thing right now is that I help you find the killer,” I said.

“Tell you what,” Pauley said, wincing from the bad coffee. “You keep cashing million-dollar checks. Keep studying for your big test next week. Keep writing your songs. I’ll do the investigating.”

I’m exhausted. I’m in shock. I’m scared. Now I’m pissed off.

“Am I a suspect? Because if I am, it’s an indication to me that you’re wasting your time,” I said.

“When the chancellor of the University of North Carolina has a knitting needle jammed into his skull in the middle of campus, everyone from the President of the United States on down is a suspect,” Pauley said.

He continued with the questions.

“Tell me about Mallette’s morning routine.”

“I’m sure Rose told you – or would have told you. I’m not sure how much she was able to speak to you today. Mallette was up very early every morning and went running on campus. Or used to go running, when I first met him. The last few years, his jogging had turned into walking. He would be out for walks at 5 a.m. or so. Sometimes he’d invite students out for the walks. I’ve been with him a few times. Lots of people have,” I said.

“Did he walk the same route every day?” Pauley asked.

“Not precisely. But it’s a small town. There are only so many routes to walk,” I said. “No matter where you’re headed, most folks end up going past Silent Sam at some point.”

“Have you spoken to Dr. Pike today?”

“Only a brief text message,” I said. “She asked if it was true, that Mallette was murdered. I said yes. It’s all coming apart so fast, I can’t imagine what’s happening in South Building.”

“Coming apart?” Pauley asked. “What do you mean?”

“Mallette’s inauguration as chancellor was scheduled for today. He’d been on the job just a few weeks. Donors and big-shots, like Dr. Pike, are in town for University Day. Now the chancellor is dead, and helicopters are flying over campus. It’s the worst kind of crisis, because the guy who would be able to lead us through something like this is gone,” I said.

Pauley sat still. Didn’t bring another question right away. We could hear the crowd singing a block away.

“Another cliché,” Pauley said, sliding his business card down the bar to me. “Don’t leave town.”

He put a wilted dollar bill on the bar for the coffee. Got up from the stool and headed for the door. Grabbed his coat from a pile stashed on top of the bar.

“One more thing,” Pauley said, turning back to me. “I hear you’re writing a song about a woman who is a Baptist and a Communist?”

I had nothing for him on this one, and I said nothing. Just held the mug of tea and gave Pauley one of Siler’s dumb looks.

“That’s a twofer – blaspheme and treason all in one song,” Pauley said. “Send me the link.”

20

*Guess things happen this way
Doesn't dry my tears
Guitar town, and Dublin blues*

It's a hard life all these years

*The grievous angel haunts my sleep
Shows me the devil and the deep blue sea
I fell in love with Emmylou
I don't know what to do*

Fats walked into Pig Farm as Pauley was wrapping up. I saw the two of them huddle. Conversation was brief. He hugged her. He left. She walked toward me.

Fats was wearing a Navy blue suit that looked like tiny electric lights were sewn into the fabric. Something she might wear to ring the opening bell on Wall Street – and she probably has done a dozen times. Her black hair was TV perfect. Her cranberry lips oozed against the white skin.

Siler met her at the opening in the bar. They hugged.

Off my bar stool, I hugged her as she approached.

“This is as bad as it gets,” she said in my ear. “I’ve dreamed of hugging you again, but never imagined it would hurt so much.”

She squeezed me.

“So what do you know?” I asked. “I see Pauley gave you a hug, not the third-degree, so I’m assuming you are on the inside of this one.”

‘Let’s see,’ she said. We both took bar stools.

“The chairman of the University board of trustees is announcing an interim chancellor in just a few minutes. It’s the law school dean, Porter.”

“He’ll be fine,” I said.

Jones Porter was born a Vermonter but moved as a teen to the North Carolina Outer Banks. He carried an off mix of affects, part New Englander, part Southern professor and part Hatteras Island. Whatever he was as an attorney, and I had no idea, I knew that he was beloved personally on campus.

“I was with Mallette last night, as you know, so I called the FBI this morning and offered the assistance of my GRL security team. Pauley has a couple of my guys helping to secure Mallette’s office.

“The national media have flipped out,” she continued. “This is like the O.J. car chase and the Boston bombing rolled into one. East Franklin Street is closed to traffic and occupied by satellite TV trucks. And it’s going to get worse.”

“What happens next?” I asked. I couldn’t process how we could overcome the emotional grief to operate the University, though clearly the machinery must run.

“Lots of things,” she said. “I’m just coming from a meeting with Porter. He had a private talk with all of us who’d come in for University Day honors. Unbelievably painful. The University is canceling classes today, and a wave of cops and state and federal agents will be on campus. The absolute No. 1 concern is security – there is a killer free, and no one is sure if the place is safe. Was Mallette targeted? Was this random? Is it the start of some killing spree? Is it terrorism? Every scenario is on the table.”

“You know,” I said. “Mallette would be mad as hell at this disorder. He despised mobs and thugs that disrupted civil discourse and the democratic enterprise.”

“I remember,” she said. “His reputation on that point lives on. There is a fierce debate going on now about canceling classes. Obviously, the University is closed today. The security issues alone require it. But are classes canceled tomorrow? If so, for how long? Porter is working with the FBI and the governor’s office on that. And the White House, truth be told. The potential for liability, if this is not an isolated incident more people are hurt, is driving the decision making for now.”

I remembered Bootstrap.

“Hey, do you know why Mallette would have Bootstrap beside my name in his calendar?” I asked. “Did you take up the GRL business with him?”

She let out a laugh.

“Why do you think I hired you?” she asked. “I ran the problem by Mallette a couple of weeks ago. Tried to hire him. He said to hire you. In fact, his exact words were: ‘James Battle is better at finding needles in haystacks than anybody in the country.’”

“Mallette had asked to meet today and said it was about University faculty business. Did he mention a connection between the prospect of GRL fraud and faculty here?” I asked.

“No, never,” Fats said. “Lots of University faculty have published through GRL outlets, but that’s the same with every Tier 1 research university in the world. I’m guessing that our conversation about GRL fraud prompted him to want to re-visit whatever system the University has to discourage research fraud. After the athletics and academic fraud crisis here, the last thing he needed was questions about the integrity of the research done on campus. And he would have had his eye out for it.”

My adrenaline was gone. I was out of tears and out of luck. I needed a shower and a bed and a prayer that somehow peace of mind would come again. I couldn't imagine that it ever would.

"A couple more things," Fats said, putting her hand on the back of my neck to pull me back into the conversation.

"Porter wants to keep your defense on for Monday," she said.

"What the fuck?" I interrupted. "Has he lost his mind?"

"Hold on," she said. "Think about it. Your dissertation defense already was a public deal. Having a sitting chancellor chair your committee was a big deal – at least among the insular group of academics who care about cranking out Ph.D.s. Now, it's a national event. Everybody cares, the Today Show included. Keeping the defense date will be a public demonstration that the University is back open for business. It will be a tribute to Mallette. A real honor for him, to have the last student he advised complete his course of work. That's you."

Fats explained that Porter suggested that we place a chair at the table for Mallette but leave it empty. We would proceed with the dissertation defense with four of the five committee members. And the defense might be moved to Memorial Hall to accommodate the crowd.

"So here's the plan. Saturday morning is a private, graveside service for family only. The old cemetery on campus. Monday is your defense, which begins to put the University back in business. Then sometime shortly after, there will be the public memorial service for Mallette. That will be in the Smith Center and will be televised. The White House is re-working the president's schedule so he can speak."

Fats paused. Checked her watch, then her phone. Then her watch again. She was about to be on the move.

I pulled out my phone. Found the number for the black car. Requested a pick up at Pig Farm.

"Last thing," she said. "I'm flying out to New York. Now in just a few minutes. I'll be back on Saturday to pick you up. You'll be coming with me to Atlanta for the weekend."

I gave her Siler's dumb look.

"It will do you good to get out of this town. The circus is in full swing out there on Franklin Street. You can prepare for your defense from a suite in the Four Seasons. And I'll buy you biscuits from West Egg Café."

Siler walked toward the door. She was talking to a cop. I waved goodbye as we finished up.

Fats was two steps ahead of me through the bar and down the steps. Her high-end Tesla was in front of my black car. Hers still as dirt. Mine idling.

I opened the car door for her.

She hugged me again.

“It’s going to get better,” she said. “Because you’re strong enough to make it better. A whole lot of people will be looking to you for the leadership that they used to get from Mallette. I know you’ll step up.”

I didn’t want to be a leader. I didn’t want to be anything.