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YOU CHOOSE

“Four fifty-one,” I mutter under my breath. Head shaking.

“Was there a comment from the gallery?” The full-size holograph of the district administrator looks up vacantly toward me and the flickering images surrounding me. I’m the only one who doesn’t use an avatar these days, so the virtual meeting space is full of beautiful projections, and me. Can’t even be sure of who is really here given the digital facades. I clear my throat.

“Ah, yeah, it was me. I said four fifty-one. As in Fahrenheit. Ya know, Ray Bradbury, Montag, burning books, and all that? I figure if you’re set on closing the library, you’d want to know the temperature at which books combust. Just trying to help.” Through the motionless smiling avatar, I sense loathing. Pathetic.

“Mr. Fitzpatrick, we welcome any and all comments as we determine the most reasonable course of action for the district resources formerly known as the Green Town Public Library. While the former staff has been fully relieved of duty, I assure you that I am carrying on,” he says in a sweet auto-tuned voice.

Really? I sigh to myself. I’m going to give it another shot even though I think the decision was made a long time ago. “This is one of the last places empowering learning and self-discovery. You, I mean district administration, seem pretty set on telling us what to feel, what to think, and what to do. You want us all in neat little order. The library and those who manage, curate and care for it, help us challenge that order and that’s exactly why they need to exist.”

The administrator avatar seems to glitch for a moment. “Thank you, all, for your participation. The meeting is adjourned.” The ExxAmazon logo flashes for a moment,

then the images blip off around me. The meeting room fades and I'm alone again in my quiet and unpretentious apartment. I look over my full bookshelf-lined walls and reassess what just happened. Quiet coercion and manipulation are becoming more blatant and the community's complacency even more so. Why doesn't anyone see it?

As I consider whether to keep attending these meetings, my home network alerts me that an ExxAmazon drone is inbound. ExxAmazon. A mega-merger for the ages. The world's largest energy company, knowing that petroleum consumption was ending in favor of renewable energy, diversified and bought the world's largest logistics and delivery company. It wasn't long before most of the world, including me, worked for ExxAmazon. Ironically, as workers we drove the machine that supplied our consumption. Our consumption fueled the engine. A peculiar, vicious cycle. I was a drone technician my entire working life, nearly forty-five years. I've forgotten more about drones than most people know. Without much warning, leadership decided my team and I were no longer necessary, telling us drones were now "self-repairing." They knew nothing. It's hard for me to grasp that I've been retired now for as long as I worked.

A drone hums at my side door and sings the signature chime. "BING - ExxAmazon is pleased to anticipate your needs and presents you with this wrist-fitted holo-projector, in your favorite color. Normal charges apply. Thank you." The predictive AI that started out simply suggesting things based on search history now delivers products before we even know they're needed or wanted. I've never stopped being unsettled by this, but most people have simply accepted that ExxAmazon knows best.

I level my focused-beam electro-magnetic pulse and pull the trigger. "Self-repair this." The drone goes silent and drops unceremoniously to the deck with a thud. I mockingly blow the nozzle end of my EM pulse like in the old westerns and pick up the drone to put it in the shed

with all the others. I wonder how much longer it will take before I'm in serious trouble. I look over the pile of drones that have attempted to deliver what they think I need. It's always bothered me. How do they know what I need? How do they know what anyone needs? Like, what about the administrator from the meeting that just ended? What does he need... to understand there's a better way than closing the library? A thought occurs to me, and I look to my bookshelves, a very large collection I've accumulated over the years. Could it be that simple? I scan and pull the title I'm seeking. Looking at the cover, I think it's crazy enough that it might just work.

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My maglev silently races south down the Sheridan Road corridor. My individual pod connects to two others. I can make out passenger shapes through the frosted glass. Strange how common it has become to remain separate in our togetherness. The morning sun shimmers through the lush green trees, sparkling off the chrome and glass of our small train. This line, which runs elevated well above the roadway, has been my favorite way down to the central hub in downtown Green Town. As we approach Grand Avenue, pods are splitting off from other incoming caravans to connect with the inter-lev lines servicing everywhere between Chicago and Milwaukee. Commuting is rare these days, but the mag-lev lines are efficient for those still working up and down the Milwaukee urban corridor.

I disembark at the hub, descending to street level at the Bradbury Center/Carnegie Library Plaza. I clutch my carefully wrapped package and follow the pedestrian garden walkway to the covered Genesee Street pedestrian mall. It is late enough into the morning that I would expect the town to be bustling, but it is nearly empty. When the ped mall was

first dedicated, the downtown thrived during a renaissance of dining and fine arts. At their height, the old ArtWauk events drew thousands in the post-pandemic years. The art galleries flourished, restaurants provided a foodie haven, and live arts thrived. This lasted a while... but slowly at first, and then quite abruptly, the galleries blinked out, the restaurants closed, and live performances vanished. The vibrant town life snuffed out, no coincidence, around the time ExxAmazon established a stronger presence world-wide. Except for the ExxAmazon-sponsored main events at the grand theater, and the tenacious microbrewery pub across from the library that still drew an occasional rebellious crowd, the downtown resurgence was a brilliant but brief solar flare.

The sun is rising, but the heat of the day is still to come. It is quiet as I make my way to the library building. No one is around so I am a little startled by the whoosh of the automatic door as I approach. Inside, beams of morning sun reflect through the dim light and quiet floating dust. The silence smells of potential. I never stopped loving the sweet smell of the books, the stacks. There is so much to see and discover. The scent prompts memories even further back of card catalogs, Subject-Title-Author, story times, summer reading programs and the day I got my first library card. Anything was possible then. I'm reminded that anything is possible now.

As my eyes adjust to the dimmer interior lighting, I am shocked to see less than half of the stacks filled with actual books. Books are being removed, likely in favor of digital resources... or none at all. The building is clearly being prepared for sale or demolition. Shifting my attention from the stacks, I see an office light in the far back of the floor. Even in their diminished state, the stacks call out with tales of adventure and wonder as I pass through on my way to the office. At the doorway, I look in to see a solitary figure standing at a large table with

stacks of books lined up along a late model electro-shredder. It's the administrator from the meeting, though he is smaller, gaunter, and with less hair than his digital avatar boasts.

"Oh, you're just a little guy," I say, shattering the silence. The administrator gasps and freezes in place, startled and fragile. I'm afraid either his heart has stopped, or his shorts are soiled. Maybe both.

"I'm, I'm sorry," he stammers. "People do not usually come here. In person, I mean."

"Yeah, call me old-fashioned. I just wanted to follow up on our last meeting." The administrator looks puzzled, but studies me for a few seconds and slowly starts to comprehend.

"Yes. Yes, of course. You are Mr. Fitzgerald. I see now. I would not have recognized you except that you never use an avatar. How is it that I can help you?" he says, his composure returning.

"Well, I know you're just doing your job and all..." I say, nodding toward the stack of books, "Still, I want you to have this. I think you might need it." I hand him the wrapped package which he suspiciously opens. In his hands, he holds a leather-bound copy of Hans Christian Andersen's Complete Fairy Tales.

"Are you joking? A book? Why on earth would I need another book? Do you understand what is going on here?" He gestures around. "I do not need this nonsense," referring to fairy tales, "nor do I possibly have the time." He tosses the book down. "Even more, ExxAmazon did not curate this content for me. You just randomly gave it. Why would I possibly waste any time on it?"

“Yes, I am giving it, but not randomly. I thought you might be interested in ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ one of Mr. Andersen’s more famous tales. It would be worth your time because it’s about people believing things because they’re told... even when it isn’t so.” The administrator starts catching on.

“You understand that I am simply completing an assignment here. These resources no longer serve the constituents of the district. District leadership will reclaim the resources and reallocate in a more reasonable, effective manner. Your trip here was unnecessary and futile. Now if you do not mind, I have a lot to do.” He picks up my book and turns toward the shredder. The conversation is over.

“Sounds good,” I say to no one listening, “Enjoy your day.” I’m hardly through the office door when I hear the zap of a book hitting the electro-shredder. I wince at the sound.

I wonder why I even bothered as I walk back toward the hub. I look out over the lake and decide to stop down by Old Harbor. With the shoreline about a hundred yards further out than when I was a kid, I’m soon surrounded by stylish condos and neighborhood storefronts just steps from the inter-lev. My favorite reason for coming down the bluff, though, are the lakefront parks and flourishing foliage a little closer to the lake. The famous Green Town ravines created this new shoreline, slowly and instinctively crawling from the bluffs in response to warmer global temperatures. This is one part of today’s Green Town I understand. Even though some shine has worn off, the appeal of living on the lake remains. There is a relaxed friendly energy in this neighborhood as people walk past me. There are far more people than I had seen downtown just a few blocks away.

I find a shady bench along the lakefront garden paths and order a protein-power breakfast boba as consolation for my failed appeal to the administrator. I don’t mind this drone as it sets

my drink beside me. On the lake horizon, the morning sun bounces off the mini fusion station, the same as others that dot the coastline. While I think they're ugly and obnoxious, I must admit the technology is impressive. Just drops of lake water supply unlimited energy to Green Town through a controlled cold fusion reaction. This isn't anything I understand, but they were a turning point for us and so many other communities. I consider two ideas about these reactors that parallel my recent experience. First, there's the idea about unlimited *energy* and *power*. Second, in some situations, it takes just drops to achieve tremendous energy.

What's most upsetting to me about the library is that I don't feel like I can change anything. *Power* doesn't even rest with the community or the district anymore. Someone else is making the decisions, and everyone's going along with it. Just like accepting whatever the damn drones deliver. When I was a kid, used to be celebrities and politicians influenced culture and society. When social media rocketed into prominence, literally anyone with a device could become an influencer through their fifteen minutes of fame. It was an unlikely coincidence that all the social media platforms collapsed just after the ExxAmazon merger, wiping out independent influencers. ExxAmazon, whoever that REALLY is, conveniently stepped right into the prime influencer role. Today, we are spoon-fed culture, opinions, beliefs, and wrist-fitted holo-projectors in our favorite color. No one, it seems, is thinking on their own. In a world of limitless *energy*, who has the *power*? I saw enough sci-fi movies as a kid that I can only assume there's a diabolical evil artificial intelligence at the center of it all, ensuring that the "machine" continues to produce, we consume, and repeat. That's great. Me against an evil super-intelligent AI. Never heard that story before.

I slurp up the last few juicy bobas and squint at the fusion station on the sparkling lake. A few drops produce unlimited *energy*. Like the tasty boba, maybe a few drops from me could produce some unlimited *energy*, or *power*. Why not? Everyone gets fifteen minutes. Right? Maybe I can hijack some of that ExxAmazon influence. I mean, I have a shed full of drones. Unlike my fairy tale gift to the administrator, people believe they need something if it comes from a drone. Right?

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With surprising ease, I've been able to hack the locator ID of the district administrator. I guess when you've got skills, you've got skills. I find information for not only the administrator I met at the library, but for all his regional peers across Chilwaukee. Digging a little deeper, it is not hard to find the list of participants from the last several advisory meetings. Not surprisingly, this includes the previous library board and staff. With this list in hand, I start reviewing my personal library. Let's see. Who "needs" to read what? Dandelion Wine. Great Expectations. Moby Dick. The Martian Chronicles. I take time to make thoughtful connections for nearly everyone on the list. Some are easy, like the administrator. Some are guesses that I hope will hit the mark just the same. One by one, I program my stash of drones to make the book deliveries: "BING - ExxAmazon is pleased to present you with this book curated especially for you. There is no charge for this complimentary item. We only ask that you return this item to the Green Town Public Library and choose a new title to read. Thank you." As I launch my "fleet" I watch through the drones' eyes as dozens of people, puzzled, accept the books, and seem to take interest. Then I wait.

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Something causes me to halfway open my eyes. It is still dark. I take a slow breath, adjust the pillow, and turn over. As I settle back down, my brain recognizes what my eyes see in the room... a blue drone indicator! I bolt upright. "Who's there? Lights On!" Hovering silently right in front of me is a small and sleek drone model I do not recognize. I reach to swat it and it effortlessly reverses, still silent. "Damn it! What are you?"

"Hello, Fitzpatrick." My mind races remembering where my EM pulse is. "No need for the EM pulse. I just want to talk."

"I don't talk to drones."

"OK, no problem." The drone rises a few feet, and a standing avatar image shimmers to life in front of me. "Hello," It says in a familiar voice. I blink and rub my eyes. I am face to face with... me.

"Knock it off," I say.

Without a change it continues, "I need to speak with you about your recent activity. Given your tenure at ExxAmazon, I have allowed the drone shutdowns without consequence. However, your redeployment is causing unplanned but predictable impact."

"Who, exactly, are you?"

"It is of no consequence."

"Well, I think it's of consequence."

"I am you."

"Like hell you are."

"For all intents and purposes, I am. I am an exact intellectual and emotional model of you. How else can I anticipate your every need?"

“I didn’t ask anyone to anticipa...” The drone is exactly duplicating my response.

“Stop that,” it says with me.

“Listen you...” it repeats as I lunge through the image. I fall to the floor.

“I am you, Fitzpatrick, and I am every other consumer on the planet.”

I’m furious at this violation and taunting but compose myself enough to sit back on the bed, still thinking about the EM pulse. “So then. You’re super smart, way smarter than me. I’m just giving people books and suggesting that THEY choose what to read next.” Exasperated, I demand, “What is it that you need?”

“Your conclusion is accurate. I have infinitely more reasoning capacity, processing speed and velocity than you. I ignored your earlier acts of vandalism. Now, I am allowing your redeployment of my drones because I have used a very insignificant portion of my analytic capacity to consider over fourteen million scenarios and your ideas have...” There’s a pause too long for a super-intelligence, “...merit. I will continue to monitor, as I do all things.”

I shake my head.

“Yeah, OK. Whatever. You can leave slow, little-minded me alone now.”

The image goes dark and the drone darts away without a sound. Why on earth did that interaction need to take place? I’m old and slow. Whatever that was, is sleek and fast. I can’t figure it out, and now I’m too unsettled to go back to sleep. In the predawn darkness, there’s a distant rumble of thunder from an approaching storm.

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The sky is gray and chaotic. Global warming hasn’t stolen any of the bluster from Green Town in late October. Fallen leaves whirl around me, and I pull my trench coat closer to protect myself from the gusty chill. As I walk into the shelter of the ped mall, I calculate that over half of

my personal library has now been sent out to others. My little expedition here is to snoop around the library and see if I'm having any impact. As I leave the ped mall for the library, I plunge my face into my coat collar concealing myself like a classic private eye. I laugh to myself. Unnecessary, but it fits my mood.

Coming up to the library, I am more conspicuous than I care to be because... I blink to clear my eyes... there are actually people coming and going. I drop my trench coat veil and return a greeting nod to a man walking out with a handful of books. Ah, I think that was the western section administrator. I had sent him a copy of Something Wicked This Way Comes. Entering, the library couldn't look more different than the last time I was here to speak with the administrator. I am pleasantly surprised to see a scattering of people. Some are in a small line preparing to check out books. Some are sitting reading. Some are moving about the stacks. I recognize many faces and associate them with the books I sent.

I slip back into undercover mode and have a look around. As I pass the front desk, I overhear someone sharing, "It's very strange, but I was instructed to return this here, AND to choose a new book myself." She is speaking to the administrator who seems to have easily switched roles from book destroyer to helpful librarian, assisting with self-checkout and answering questions. I turn away quickly so as to not be recognized and pass people sitting at tables with stacks of books. At a few tables, people even seem to be leisurely discussing what they're reading and learning. Looking through the stacks I see patrons casually exploring and considering new choices. I take all this in with a sense of accomplishment. This could be a renewed life for the library.

With the checkout line waning, the administrator has taken a seat at the side, seemingly to catch his breath. I make my way towards him. As with my first visit, I unintentionally startle him. I see he is holding, what, a book? I'm astounded but pleased to see my leather-bound Hans Christian Andersen.

"Remember me?"

He sets the book down. "Ah, yes, hello Mr. Fitzpatrick."

Looking around, I say, "A little different here than the last time we spoke."

"Yes. Very busy here. Very hectic." He looks down. "I never thought this place would be busy again." There is silence. "And..." he pauses. "I wanted to thank you for this," holding up my gift to him. "I was about to toss it into the zapper and decided to put it aside for later. I really enjoy it. It reminds me of stories from when I was a kid. I actually looked up a few books myself. Got me going on some things I forgot I like. So, yeah, thanks. I got your point," he said with an uncharacteristic wink, referring to the Emperor's New Clothes. Silently, I nod.

He glances past me. "Looks like I need to help some patrons here. Spending all my time upfront these days. I know district leadership had me pause my destruction assignment, but what I really hope they think about is getting me some help." He makes an old man grunt as he struggles getting up. "Thanks for coming by." And he's gone. I take one more satisfied look around the room, and head toward the door.

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I look at the invitation for this special, live and in-person advisory meeting on my phone, then up toward all the people converging on the library. As I come to the entrance, I think back several weeks to when I was last here. Today, people are inside chatting, laughing, and mingling amongst each other. It is the uncommon scene of a community gathering with the room set

auditorium style and a line of seats facing the audience at the front. It appears that former board members are organizing in the front seats. This is an event I would never have envisioned after my first “gift” visit.

“Please take your seats,” the district administrator invites. He seems happier and more rested than the last time I saw him, maybe even perky. “Order. Order,” he calmly projects. As people sit, the chatter turns to murmur, turns to polite attentiveness. “Thank you for joining--those online and especially to all here in person. Your participation is appreciated throughout this process. I’ve called this special meeting for an announcement. You will no doubt recognize that former members of the Green Town Public Library Board join me here. In recent weeks and months, we have recognized an unexpected increase in library patronage including an unplanned but welcomed influx of legacy hard copy books.” I glance at the refilled stacks and recognize much of my own library.

“The increased traffic has also prompted interest in the rather retro activity of book clubs. This has resulted in nearly continuous use of our facilities. Considering this surge and growth, this newly reinstated library board and I would like to announce that it is the District’s intention to retain the assets of the library. Public offerings will not only continue but will be enhanced as well.” There is a surprised and happy buzz amongst the crowd. “The board will oversee the innovative programs promoting independent thought, discovery and growth. Fundamental to these new offerings will be a revolutionary new program called YOU CHOOSE, which coincides with the new campaign from ExxAmazon. Some might say that not only as a community, but seemingly as a society, we had moved away from independent thought and choice. I’m here to assure you that

this organization will counter that trend by promoting independent learning and self-discovery.”

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As the satisfied crowd gradually disperses, a remarkable number of people duck into the micro-brewery across the street. The delighted and quick-thinking proprietor makes a few quick calls, and in no time, there are actual live jazz musicians jammin’ like the old days. While the music is interesting, I move outside away from the crowd. As I sit at a table on the streetside “promenade”, it dawns on me that ExxAmazon cannot affect the overwhelming influence of people coming together. If this impromptu street party is any indicator, maybe this trend will continue and help revitalize the downtown, the district, or beyond. I’m reminded that the cold fusion reactors, just a few drops, or books in the right hands, lead to unlimited *power*.

Just at that moment, a silent drone drops down in front of me and I’m sitting across from a flickering holo of myself.

“So whadda YOU want?”

“Hello, Fitzpatrick. I have determined that YOU CHOOSE is an excellent progression of consumerism. Proactive delivery is no longer beneficial or cost effective. The new programs will be very successful and further analysis indica--”

“Yeah. Save it,” I interrupt. “The way I see it, somehow, you didn’t think this one all the way through, even though you’ll still benefit. You’re welcome.” The holo-me stares back blankly. “Somehow slow little old me outsmarted speedy-smart massive you while you were snoozing. Who knew Aesop’s fable was alive and well in the late twenty-first century? I’m a regular tortoise to the super-sleek hare.”

The holo seems to flinch. “Contrary to--” THUD.

I set my EM pulse on the table, take a long drink from my pint, and think, “Hmm.
Next, I think I’ll read...”