

THIS ABOVE ALL;
TO THINE OWN
SELF BE
ZOO.

Vol. I

No. 11

November 2023

In this issue,
animal lovers visit a space station's sewer system,
and a mind reader helps someone with a secret.

To the fullest extent permissible, all stories and poems herein are released into the public domain.

To Thine Own Self Be Zoo
Vol. I No. 11
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UNDERGROUND NEWZLETTER

AWOOOOOOOOOOOOO! SALUTATIONS, ANIMAL LOVERZ!
For all those who know the comfort of snuggling a dog under a blanket on lonely nightz: For all those who arent shy to look at a dogs boy parts or girl parts like another dog would, and would like the pleasure of sniffing around in there too: For those whose first thoughts about a horse arent their rideability (at least, not that kind)...: For those who LOVE ANIMALS, its time for your community newz as we continue our faster-than-light yet slower-than-an-unswelling-dane-bulbus-glandis voyage into the deep sector!! Therez p-l-e-n-t-y of animalz-themed fun going on if you know where to look: and if your looking here your looking in the right place! Come join in the debauchery! The more the marier! The party never ever ever ever ends, as long as neither of our competing captains on this shit show vessel tank the thing before we get to the next habitable space rock.

!!!Eventz!!!

Nickys Meet!

On Mission Day 438 at Unadjusted Station Time 1800, animal loving folkz will be gathering in Nickys Bar outside of the aft colluseum for drinks, then at around 2015 everyonez drunk assez will be walking around the corner to Crankys Theater to catch their showing of Balto for history and culture night.

Lutzful Meet!

MD 439 @ UST 2130: Wanna hump someone? Wanna get humped by someone? Okay with taking a chance on whether that someone is 2 legged or 4?? Evin will be leading an officially sanctioned tour of one of the stations sanitary sewers, the door in iz next 2 the door to Engine 4, by Insanity Pizzaria. This tour will definitely just be to obtain knowledge and foster a sense of community and it totaly iz irrelevant that Evin is bringing shitloads of condoms and lube and dog food.

Craftz Meet!

MD 440 ALL DAY!!! Somewhere in the arboritum, animal loving craftz folkz will have merch on display! Lindi has made tonz more knitted glovez with knit clawz on the finger endz after the last round sold out so fast, get some from the new batch while they last! Mergrit is continuing her surprise stickerz series, no spoilerz here but your not going to want to miss this weekz graffic, seriously. Get out there and check out whatz on offer!

!!!Newz!!!

Giroz VR!

Our god given master of 1s and 0s, GIRO, has released ANOTHER NEW VR EXPERIENCE. Mail him \$2 at the usual address and let him know you want giraffe, and he will mail back the disk that you can slip to the chair operator at your next VR sesh. U heard right, GIRAFFE! The scene can be scaled to make u big enough, the giraffe small enough, u can be a giraffe 2 or any other avatar u want to bring in. It feels out of this world. Giro sez the next one that hez workin on iz another in hiz line of fictional typez, and iz not commenting farther at thiz time.

Sticker Sitingz!

Ho. Li. Shit. To whatever ninja assassin ultra sneaker put a Get Lickjobs sticker on captain Berrmz podium right smack in the middle of his logo, in time for hiz LIVE BROADCAST TO THE WHOLE STATION, you deserve a place in history. Hiz press guy noticing it near the end and trying to walk by in front of the

podium and remove it casually and totally failing to get it off and only making it more obvious to EVERYONE it was there when he gave up and walked away again made my entire year. Bless you, unknown hero of stickerz.

!!!Artz!!!

(Line art of a man sniffing the stink lines coming off of a donkey's butt. A woman is watching him with her arms raised in the air in despair. Below in quotations is the text, "And he won't eat his spinach at dinner. MEN.")

(Line art of a deer from the neck up. In place of each of the deer's eyes is a plume of fire. Some of the deer's antler points are cut off and are pouring blood.)

(Black and white photograph showing the exterior of a bakery. The bakery's wall has spray painted art on it. The spray paint art depicts a Labrador dog with an arrow pointing to her rear, and text before the arrow which reads, "COOKIE LOOKING 4 MILK.")

(Line art of a dog's erect penis with the bulbus glandis swelled.)

!!!Personalz!!!

Jeff – Have hemeroids, my husbands dick needs somewhere to go in the meantime. Look for the bald guy and the husky walking around the oaklog forward dwellings, can host.

Stallion Stufft – Need recording professional to record our new album! Acoustic, so we have an excuse for not knowing how to do it ourselves! Please get in touch!

Aymee – The chick I hooked up with at the masquerade on MD 422 who had the dog tattoos: Still thinking of you. Hoping to meet again. I am at Iceberg Tunnel Coffee most mornings around UST 0645. Lets talk about dogs. Kisses, mwa mwa.

Alwaysz so much going on!!! Catch the latest newz again soon, animal loverz!!!!!!!!!!

IGRA PRC

My name is Lyn. I like to go on walks. I'm working on learning how to do art, but, to say my doodles are uh, childish, would still be pretty generous, they're still bad, I'm still learning. I chew on sticks. And, I am literally undead, although I don't mention it to most people.

I originally lived from 1952 to 1961, and died getting hit by a car in my old age. I was a Great Dane. My life partner (my human) was named Fiona, we grew up together, started as young ones and grew into ourselves, through all of the fun and all of the hopeless-feeling work that that entails. I remember long hours sniffing around our back yard while she did laundry; I remember lying pressed up against her side in the sunlight as she did the washing in the bucket, and I remember playing around bothering her to throw a rock for me to go get while she was pegging up the clothes to dry; I remember how at first she really wanted to throw a stick, but I liked the rock more, lifting it up and the taste of it as I carried it, it was important to me it was a rock, and eventually she went along with it. I think fondly of the smells that filled the house when she cooked. Roasts, bacon, I drool just at the memory sometimes. I remember some days were crying days, she would be in a foul mood, and it would never go away until at least the next day, but she would calm down a little if I was there, she would cling to my hair, she would pet me, she would tell me things that I don't think were about me, but I tried my hardest to be listening, and I learned who some of the people were who made her sad. I remember her

scolding me regularly for going up onto the table to eat food when she wasn't around, but the food she made always smelled so good, nothing she could say would stop me the next time I was left alone, it was always worth it. I remember a time when my ears were sore and itchy, and she would be mad when I scratched at them, I didn't understand; eventually they stopped being itchy, anyways. I remember sharing her bed, I would never fall asleep better than to the smell of her breath, and the warm comfort of her there with me, my packmate. I remember I always licked her, on the hands and arms and legs, and then one day while we were on the couch, she looked around to see if we were alone, and then we kissed mouth to mouth, and that became a thing that we did a lot. I remember one time our bedroom door was closed with her inside and me outside, and I bonked my paw into it to push it open, and to my surprise the door wasn't fully closed and did come open, and I saw her on the bed naked, doing something with her nakedness; she looked around like she had looked around before the kissing, and then she invited me into the bed; she showed me what she was doing, sliding some toy in and out of her vagina; I licked at it carefully, and she liked that a lot, and it became another new game we played; I even got her to use the toy on me, showing her my puss, showing every interest in getting played with too; when she finally did, it was so immediately fulfilling, pleasurable, enjoyable, like I had found out about a new sense entirely, similar to the disobedient gluttonous joy of filling my belly by eating good food off of the table; I remember the first time she did it, we looked into each other's eyes like hey, we just found something new to share together, didn't we; it was a fun personal moment. We went on for years, playing around on the bed, waiting around in the house, romping around in the sunshine in the back yard as the wind blew by and carried all of the neighborhood's smells right past my nose, for my inspection and appreciation. And then, yeah. Car. Smack. I barely lived long enough to even know that was what happened. It's not like it was all that traumatic, at the end of the day, from my perspective anyways. It was pretty quick and then it was over.

I don't even want to get into why I was brought back, because that isn't really my story. It's like if I was raped by a stranger.

Why *he* decided to do what *he* did doesn't define *me* or what *my* story ever was before that. But, since it did become a defining moment anyways, sure, I'll give the brief version.

The car that ran me over ran over a human later too, same driver in fact, and this time the driver actually did do time for murder. But, more to the point here, after being in evidence and then in an auction, the murder car mostly spent the next few decades forgotten about in some dude's barn under a sheet.

And then in 2018, my reviver—I won't say his name, fuck him—came along looking for a murdered soul, knowing about the story of the car. Well. He knew about the human who was killed by it. She was the one he was looking for. He didn't know I was on there too. Inadvertently, he got the more inert pieces of her, and the actual soul of me. He had designs of creating a zombie to assassinate President Trump. I didn't know what a president was prior to being brought back, because, yeah, dog. Not my ballgame. I did get some factual knowledge off of the human's soul, so, when it came time that I was resurrected for this purpose, I at least knew the job description of a president, even if the exact politics of this specific president were a few decades ahead of the other soul's time too.

My reviver died, anyways. As he was trying to imbue me with the desire to assassinate and the skills to actually make the attempt, something went wrong with the ritual. A demon appeared he hadn't even been attempting to commune with—I think she overheard, bless her. A giant she-wolf made of fire and smoke. She bit his entire head off, freed me from the chains he had kept me in, and then... the world was mine again. Just like when I was a dog, before, I was alive again, I was a creature in the world that could do... whatever it behooved me to do.

I tried to find Fiona. That took a very long time. It was difficult enough finding the town that we had lived in, but I did, in the end I walked there through huge fields of corn that cut up my bare and sensitive human feet. I walked to our house. Someone else lived there who I didn't know, and he threatened me as he told me to leave. I learned more about what year it was, and, what that meant. I found out it was 2019, and she had died in 1968, seven years after I had. Everything was over.

I tried to die. I went out into the woods and tried to starve. I tried to shoot myself. All I felt (after the initial pain and confusion) was a breeze. I reached into the wound and started scooping my brain out, handful after handful, until I could run my hand smoothly around the entire inside surface of my cranial cavity. It didn't matter. I regenerated. I never even passed out. My soul (my perspective of existence in the universe) is not predicated on having a physical body, like it is for most people.

So I decided, if I am unable to die, then I will give myself over wholeheartedly to living. I eat well and I eat healthy—I'm actually vegan, mostly, which is not very dog-like, but with these human taste buds I cannot get enough of onions and peppers, seriously. I have a job. I have a girlfriend who I uh, have not told the undead thing to. And I have a truck that I am driving in right now, on my way home from picking up some groceries from the organic store that's down the highway. I didn't really need to go there, but, I'm mixing it up today. It's a free spirit sort of day right now.

My exit isn't for another couple miles, but on a whim I take this other exit I'm coming up on anyways. I have a drink of my bottled lemonade on the way up, tilting it up beside by face, my eyes never leaving the road. At the top of the off ramp, I take a right turn onto whatever the hell street this is, and start cruising.

I don't really have anywhere to be. Not in a hurry. The groceries in the back are mostly produce, nothing that's going to go bad even if I take all afternoon getting home. And I'm on a two week staycation, because incidentally I have not used any of my vacation time this year, and that time resets on the anniversary of when you were hired. So, being that I was hired nearing three years ago, here I am with time off that I either use or throw away.

So I am taking the scenic route home.

Shortly after the off ramp and the stop light are some gas stations, fast food places, nothing surprising. I think one of these bigger buildings is a hotel, and the next one down is probably an apartment complex, and then I'm into a bunch of

housing, my truck ambling along by people's yards, taking it casual in the slow lane.

I see a sign for a yard sale. Yeah, why not. I throw on my turn signal, ease down the break, and make the turn.

A little ways farther down a bendy residential road, and I see the garage sale ahead. A few fold-out tables set up in the driveway, a few people poking around. I park the truck on the side of the road, hop out, and go to see what's good.

The other humans shuffle around between the tables, looking things over. Seems to be middle aged people, one of them has a kid with them who is goofing around in the front yard—I smile at her. She's making a better use of this day than any of the rest of them here, definitely, doing somersaults and running around.

I do turn my attention back to the tables. It's mostly clothes, from all kinds of ages, baby to adult. I wish it wasn't considered weird to smell things. Like, screw all these other people, I'm interested, you know? I'd love to spend a long, long time here, going item by item, holding the clothes right up close, cupping them around my nose whether they're a shirt or socks or pants or underwear, and just sniff them, inch by inch. Who knows. Maybe they'd all just smell like cigarette smoke anyways. But, maybe some body odor, maybe fragrant detergent, maybe dirt, maybe mildew. Guess it'll be a mystery. Guess I'll be left not really caring about these clothes, since, that was going to be what was interesting about them. Oh well.

On one table, there are some tools on one end, wrenches and uh, stuff. And on the other end of that table is some computer stuff too. A couple of screens, a couple of keyboards and mice. I certainly don't have an interest, and I think my girlfriend, June, is already good on screens and keyboards and mice. What catches my eye though is something that she might have an interest in: there's a cardboard box with game cartridges stacked inside.

I take some out and look them over. They're definitely used, a lot of the labels are scuffed or discolored. I sniff one, it doesn't really smell of much at all, which is good of electronics I have come to understand—I catch myself and do not sniff any more. Most of the cartridges are light grey, and have labels with different cartoon characters on the front, and names I am sure

I've heard before, Mario, Banjo, Zelda. Down at the bottom of the box are ten black cartridges that don't have any graphics on the labels, just a narrow white laminated strip with plain black text on it. I don't know what those are. They all say IGRA PRC and then a number, like, the lowest I see in here is IGRA PRC 2, and the highest is IGRA PRC 30, so there would appear to be numbers missing, I don't know if that matters.

But, details aside, June *loves* computer games. Each of the cartridges is labeled with a little sticker that has \$10 written on it in pen. I turn to the woman who's seated in a fold-out chair in the mouth of the garage.

I say to her, "Nice day out." It's the way humans say hi to each other, I guess. Start by talking about nothing. It is nice out, anyways: it is autumn, and it smells like it and it feels like it.

She says back, "It could stay like this all year long, you wouldn't hear me complaining."

Just estimating, buying all of these would be three hundred bucks. And I mean, I have it, and I'd do that, why not. But I do think June will appreciate this more the less I say I spent. She is smart like that.

I make an offer. "One forty for the box?"

"Deal," she says, no hesitation. As I'm getting out my wallet, she goes on, "I was on the phone with my grandson, he said I should charge more for those, found them going for more online. I said, well do you want to come get them? They're free to you, if they're staying in the family that's worth as much to me as selling them. And he said no, and I said well there you go, I'm not charging more if you won't drive an hour to get them."

I hand her one forty in twenties.

She counts it out briefly, and then says, "Thank you very much, miss."

"Good luck with the rest of the garage sale!" I say.

She grabs a sturdy plastic cane and starts to stand up, probably to go put the money inside. I have such a desire to help her stand up, offer her a hand, but I have learned that personal space with humans is... Touching a stranger is not something you do, even if you're being nice.

I leave her to stand up on her own, happily pick up the cardboard box that is so totally mine now, and carry my new

thing to my truck. I set it in the passenger side on the floor, rather than in the back, to keep the open box safe from unexpected showers or any dust on the road. I kind of hate computer stuff. Always have to be so careful with it. No fun. But, I'm happy to have gotten the box all the same, I think it's a good present. We'll see.

I continue driving in the direction of home. Driver's side window rolled down, arm hanging out, wind on my face.

Getting closer to home, now on streets that I do usually go down, I make a stop that I usually make. I pull into a small graveyard by the road, park the truck, and get out.

Reaching into the bed of my truck, I take a can out of a six pack back there, and open it as I walk to one of the graves.

Fiona Warren. My life partner.

I sit down in front of the grave cross-legged, and start sipping. There is a lot of space between my thoughts, as I speak them to her.

"Not much new to say since yesterday, Fi. Picked up a box of old games. I don't even know what system they're for. They look like Nintendo 64? I don't even know if all of them are games, some of them are labeled like they might be someone's tax files or something, so, maybe they aren't even for a game system necessarily. June will know. I basically got them for her. I think she'll either be stoked or she'll call me a dork and be a little bit annoyed at how much money I wasted on this. It wasn't much honestly, but, I guess it would be a dumb amount to spend on something she can't do anything with, if she can't. We'll see. I'll let you know if anything in the box was any good."

I set the can down and lean back for a moment, hands pressed down onto the grass, head tilted back to look up at the clear blue sky. I breathe it in, and sigh. I pick up the can again, which is half empty now, and I keep talking.

"I don't know what else to tell you. So much of the human experience seems to be about... thinking about things that you aren't sensing right now. And that's not to say I never thought about things that weren't in front of my face as your dog. Believe me, when you were at work, I looked forward to you coming home, even beyond the fact it would mean you would let me out into the back yard to play around. I just looked forward to

seeing you. So it's not new, thinking about things that aren't true yet. But it's... more. So much of the human experience seems to be thinking about things you aren't sensing right now, even when the things that you are sensing right now are good enough. I don't know. That's just how I feel about it in this moment. But I'll let you know how the games go over with June."

I take the last drink from the can, crush it in my hand, and huck it into the bed of my truck as I'm walking back to it. I get in, and drive the next couple of blocks back to home.

I live with June, my girlfriend. It's her house. It's *really* her house. A human's house. I would never think to put so many of the touches on it that she has, but she has really made it her own space, on top of all the things that the previous owners left here. She's done an unnecessarily cool job of decorating the walls: in the living room the walls are mostly painted black with a bunch of neon colored triangles here and there; in her office the walls are papered with desert imagery, sand and cactuses and skulls, that kind of thing. There are book shelves in so many rooms, many do actually have books, others have ceramic vases and figures, pieces of taxidermy, sewing projects, puzzle toys, tiny masks carved from wood and painted in detail. If this were my house I probably would have smashed all the windows to let the air in and dragged all of the blankets into the kitchen to make a food and shelter den. So, she has thought of more than a couple decorating ideas that I would not have.

Her car is in the driveway, I didn't really expect she would be going anywhere while I went out to get groceries. I bring everything inside, two bags of groceries in one trip (I bury my nose down into the bags as I walk in and sniff the onions and greeny earthy veggie smells), and the box of games in the second trip (I bury my nose into the box and sniff that too, and basically just smell the cardboard box itself).

I set everything on the kitchen table for now, and start going around to find where my girlfriend is. She isn't down here on the first floor, in the living room or kitchen or in her office or in the bathroom. I climb up the stairs—unashamedly I go up the stairs using my feet and my hands. At the top of the stairs I walk lightly over the carpet down the hall, and poke my head in to our bedroom. There on the bed is June, all cozy with blankets

strewn all over her. Sunlight falls on her in little golden beads and lines, through the gaps in the binds. I feel a phantom tail wagging behind myself—the fact that I don’t actually have one isn’t even super a bother right now, it would be smacking so hard against the wall behind me. I tiptoe forward, take off my shirt and pants, and slink onto the bed with her, snaking my way under the blankets, into the warmth that she has packed in there.

June, half asleep, grabs me in her arms. Under the blankets, we hug front to front, finding a way to settling in that is comfy: she ends up using my arm as a pillow, I have a scrunched up blanket for my pillow. We nuzzle in, my face and hers touching, skin tingling skin, my nose mashed into her forehead, her cheek mashed into my lips, and we are so cozy this way. I love her. It’s perfect.

I take a deep breath. A slow breath, letting go, wholeheartedly, of any sense of needing to be anywhere else. I do not need to do anything at all right now. I can just relax. I can snuggle.

I love coming home to this. I love June. She is warm. She is here. And she wouldn’t make it anything more complicated than that. She gets me.

And the smells. The sheets smell like us. Sweat, cooch, ass, detergent, breath. This is our den. This is our special together place. This is ours.

Before too long at all, I fall asleep with her there, face on face.

I wake up to the feeling of her planting a big kiss on my lips. I wag, or at least, I feel the fact that my tail is not thumping against the bedsheets when it should be. I kiss her back. Then I stretch, grab all of the blankets, and fling them all onto the floor in one throw, leaving me and her bare on the bed.

“How do you *do* that?” she asks, amused, but also really asking.

“I wanted them off the bed and now they are. Duh.”

I pet her tummy. She stretches, and lays back relaxed and lets it happen.

She says, “It’s like that trick where you pull the table cloth off and still leave everything on the table, but with the blankets and leaving us on the bed.”

I have no idea what she's talking about, but I just keep petting her tummy.

"I got you video games," I tell her.

"Did you?" she asks—she sounds like she might be happy about this but is sooo skeptical of what I mean by that, which, to be fair, is totally fair.

"Whole box of old ones, down on the kitchen table."

She floppily rolls away from my petting and off of the bed, onto the floor, and starts pulling her clothes on down there on the floor without getting up. I do get up, get back into my pants and shirt too, and follow her out of the bedroom door, towards the stairs.

"I need to see these immediately," she says on the way. "What kind did you get?"

"It's a surprise because I have no idea."

"Oh my god."

We get to the bottom of the stairs, and she runs to the box on the kitchen table, and immediately starts grabbing the cartridges out and looking them over and setting them out.

"Yeah, these are Nintendo 64 carts," she says. "Holy shit. Okay..." She is setting all of them out in some kind of organized way, it seems. "Where did you get these?" she asks.

"Garage sale," I answer. "I know the labels all say ten dollars, I just bought the whole box for a hundred and forty."

She continues digging and sorting while I'm talking. When she gets to the ones at the bottom, the black cartridges with the text labels, she says, "I don't know what *these* are," and she leaves them in the box. "But the ones I do know... yeah, honestly you did not get ripped off whatsoever, some of these are pretty worthless but some of these are good gets."

That is good to hear and all, but I wasn't in it for the resale value: I'm just pleased that her tone of voice at seeing this is all excited, happy, interested. I am very pleased that I seem to have not fucked up here. Some could even say that I have been a good girl.

June asks me, "Wanna play these?"

Holy shit. "You have the console??" I ask.

"Yeah, it should be up in the attic."

Holy shit! "You have an attic?????" I ask.

June lets out a shrill little laugh, as I continue to stare, wide-eyed, awaiting her elaboration as to this “she has an attic” news.

“We have an attic,” she tells me, resting a hand on my arm.

That is firstly very exciting, and I must know right freaking now where this entire freaking attic is hidden at. And, to the point of her emphasis on ‘we,’ it is nice that she thinks of this house in that way. Because, according to my understanding of how human ownership works, this house is all hers and she could kick me out for no reason if she ever felt like it. So it’s nice to hear that she doesn’t feel like it. The house had previously belonged to her parents, and then there was a sickness that killed a lot of people including them, and now it belongs to her.

She promises that yes, she will show me where the attic is. When I see she’s going for the stairs I run around her and climb up the stairs ahead of her on all fours, and wait for her at the top.

“There,” she says, pointing to some kind of square recess in the ceiling of the upstairs hallway.

“*That’s an attic?*” I ask.

“It’s the stairs leading to an attic. Come on.”

We go to stand under the square. I see there is indeed a little handle, painted the same white as the ceiling, I never noticed it at all before.

June carries out a stool from our bedroom, and uses it to step up, and pull a fold-down door stairs thing magically out of the ceiling.

“Woahhhh,” I say.

“It’s very cool,” she says, teasing me, but she loves me. “You going up first?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Really? You always seem to insist. Like, literally just now when we went up the stairs.”

“Yeah I already know what’s up the stairs, I dunno what’s in that fuckin place.”

“Alright, I’ll go make sure there’s no ghosts or anything,” she says, and starts up the stairs slash ladder thing, up into the attic.

I hold my tongue as far as commenting on how the ghost is kinda down here, sort of. Me. Her girlfriend. Whomp whomp.

I follow her up, once she's made it to the top. Looking around, I see that there is indeed an entire attic in this house.

I ask her, "Why aren't we doing anything with this! This could be like an awesome scary hangout that we turn into a cozy hangout!"

"Um," she says, and then looks around, and shrugs. "I guess I'm not against that, actually. I have to go through all these boxes at some point."

"Do you know where the video game thing is?"

"Yeah! My old gaming stuff is in a plastic crate, I should be able to spot it." She takes out her phone, turns on the flashlight, and barely shines it around for two seconds before the light lands on a blue plastic box that stands out from all the cardboard ones.

She moves towards it, doing a sort of crawling walk to not bang her head on the low ceiling here. I crawl after her, and take her phone to hold the light while she opens the box.

"This one!" she says, and takes out a game system. I can see right on the top of it, it has a slot the right size for the game cartridges I got. "One sec, let me find the right cords."

The box has all kinds of old electronics and game cases in it. Neatly packed in among them are power cords that are all bundled together and kept from being all loosey-goosey by the same kinds of twist ties that come on bread. She takes out two cords, and a pair of controllers, and then closes the box and takes her phone back, and turns off the light.

We split up the load, making easy work of carrying it all down to the living room. As she gets it all hooked up to the TV, I go and put away the groceries. I put the paper grocery bags beside the collection of paper grocery bags June keeps below the sink—sometimes I see them re-emerge as overflow recycling bags. I don't know if she uses them for anything more other than that, but, I put the bags under the sink, anyways.

When I come back to the living room, June is on her stomach, reaching under the TV stand into all of the wires back there. I sit down on the couch, and hold a pillow as I watch her work.

Eventually she is triumphant in setting up the system, and raises her hands over her head and does a little dance. I clap along to her rhythm—dancing still *looks* very strange to me, but,

some human instinct for keeping time has rubbed off on me, and so going along with things like music is... still weird-feeling, but it kind of tingles too. It's sort of like the first time June gave me a foot massage, when the feeling of music is strong. When the feeling is weaker, it's more like seeing an optical illusion.

June continues her little dance all the way over to the table, and there she stops. I turn around and flump over the back of the couch, facing her.

"Were there any of these in particular you wanted to play?" she asks, looking over all the games she's laid out.

"Nah," I tell her.

"Would youuuu like to try a racing one or a fighting one?"

"None," I say.

"What!"

"I just want to watch," I tell her.

"That sounds a little boring."

"It sounds a little *not* boring," I counter, and I wag at her—well, I would wag at her, etc etc. "I get seasick playing."

"Yeah, I know."

"But I wanna snuggle and see you play and you tell me what you're doing and I ask dumb questions and you tell me more."

"I love you so much, Lyn."

I blow her a kiss. She makes an air kiss back at me too.

She grabs one of the games, and says, "Let's try Ocarina, make sure my N64 still works. After that though, I'm really curious about these other ones with the weird labels."

"What do you think they are?" I ask.

She peers down into the box, moves a couple of the black cartridges around. "The labels say I G R A, P R C. That doesn't mean anything to me, off the top of my head. But I mean, it could be a few things? My guess is that these are just bootlegs, and they'll just turn out to be some other normal games, maybe in a different region or something. It could also be that these are loaded with in-development game snapshots? Doesn't seem likely, but, it's weird anyways, so who knows."

"Do they still make games for this?"

June laughs a little, as she comes over to put her chosen game into the system. "No," she answers. "This is like, later 90s, up into 2000, baaarely anything O1 or O2. Well, but that's the thing:

just because commercial development stopped, doesn't mean that any random person who wanted to couldn't develop on their own in the twenty years since too. Modding is definitely a thing."

I have no idea what she's saying, but I wag at the sound of her voice going on. It's very relaxing. As she's been talking she has put a cartridge into the slot at the top, and slid the power switch on.

Onto the screen comes a logo, and then the title screen, with a horse going across a dark field in the background.

"It works!" June says.

"Yay!" I yay.

June sits down on the couch next to me, presses stuff on the controller, and then we are looking at a menu. I don't know this game at all, but I get the gist of it, that these are two different save files. The second file is empty. The first one has some stuff on it.

June flips the selection back and forth between the two files, and says, "Huh. The guy named his Link Pick."

"Is that important?"

"No, not at all, but I guess that's what we can call him? I am assuming all of these games came from a guy, I have no reason whatsoever but it's what I'm going with."

"Sure, they can all be from a guy," I say, and then I melt over against her side, nuzzling her, getting comfy. "We can call the guy Pick. Can we look at where he got to in the game?"

"Yeah," June says, and just as soon selects the first save file.

The screen cuts to a view as though we are looking down into a room from the ceiling, and I am very glad I have opted out of playing: just looking at the screen I can deal with, but if I was the one who had to drive the character around right now I might hurl. June makes the guy, Pick, leave the room, hop off of a balcony, and then start wandering around in a village with a bunch of trees and hills.

June mentions, "From the file select, I know he's still on the first dungeon."

"Show me around," I request.

June takes me on a walk all around the town, doing all of the fun little things to do, running around in tall grass, throwing

rocks, talking to all of the people—she does the voices on all of them, as I snuggle in and wag and listen. I do enjoy it, seeing this whole place. It'd be neat to be there.

As June is about to go into some other part of the game, I interrupt, saying, "Let's try the weird games."

"Fuck yes, let's," she agrees.

We both scramble off of each other, and she goes to get the box while I stand and stretch—my side that was all mushed into her is all sore, but, no regrets.

She brings the box over and sets it beside the system, and kneels there as she switches out the game we just played for one of the black cartridges. "IGRA PRC Two," she says, and then slides the power switch on, and doesn't even get up as she looks at the TV, waiting to see if it works.

The game does come on, I think. It looks like a pale blue sky in the distance, a completely flat dark green field, and a yellow rectangle standing on the field. And that's it.

"Hm," June says.

"Any idea what this is?" I ask her.

"Nnnnnot a finished game, is all I can tell you," June answers. She hits the reset button, and same image quickly appears on the screen.

Sensing that this whole process might involve a lot of fiddling around with switching out games and doing stuff on the console itself, I start taking cushions off of the couch and blankets and pillows and stuff, and begin forming a cushion nest around June that I will join her in when I am finished.

June tries something with the controller, and right away says, "Oh wowwww, this is terrible. Look at this."

I look, as I am draping a blanket over her shoulders. She is moving the rectangle around, but the point of view on the screen isn't changing, so the rectangle easily goes away off to the sides or becomes really small in the distance.

She makes a noise like she's going to throw up (I think she's like half pretending) as the rectangle starts drifting slowly into the distance.

"What?" I ask.

"I pressed the... oh Jesus, the D pad starts the camera moving but then doesn't stop it, I can still control the block with the joystick, this is... wow."

"Bad?"

"Yeah, very bad."

"You like it?"

"This game is talking dirty to me in the *best* way."

I lick the side of her face, and then continue working on the pillow fort.

She tries the second controller. It doesn't seem to do anything at first, none of the buttons effect anything, but then all of a sudden she says, "That's a crash." She laughs to herself, kind of rolls over onto her side (onto many of the comfy cushions I have placed) and then rolls back up, sighing after the laughter. "Wowwwwww this is shoddy. Initializing controller two crashed the game."

She turns it off and on, and the game is back to normal. I sit down beside her, and get in on the blanket I put over her, stealing half of it so it's now draped over both of our shoulders.

June tells me, "If the rest of these are as exciting as this one, we are in for a treat."

I lick the side of her face again, she kisses me back this time, and then she turns off the game.

She reaches into the box, and says, "Up next, IGRA PRC Five."

Swapping out the games, she turns it on with the new one in, and we get a totally different screen. We actually have a person to move around instead of a rectangle: he has a cape and green skin and a bald head. And there's actually stuff here, too. A bridge is right ahead of us, leading towards an expansive obstacle course that climbs high above our heads in a field in the woods.

"Damn," June says. She moves the guy around, and he actually walks. "Well this is a huge step up."

She starts walking for the bridge, and our view actually follows the guy now, instead of staying behind.

As she goes, she tries out all of the things her guy can do. He has a bunch of different kinds of jumps, some of them are flips and others are really far jumps or tall jumps. She manages to do

double jumps too, finding weird ways to dance the character around.

“This handles insanely well,” June lets me know.

“Is it a copy of a game, like you were talking about?”

“No. This isn’t anything that was ever released on the N64. It’s taking some design cues from SM64, but this really is wholecloth its own thing.”

“Maybe it’s one you haven’t heard of?”

“I am a freaking historian with this stuff,” June says. “I promise, I am familiar with the entire N64 library, this isn’t anything in it.”

“Name every game.”

“Super Mario 64, Pilot Wings 64, Saikyō Habu Shōgi—”

“FUCK STOP, I believe you.”

June giggles to herself. She is doing a lap around the forest clearing area, staying on the ground rather than going up onto anything.

“Getting a lay of the land?”

“Yeah. This area alone is extensive. Can I...”

She tries a few things on her controller, making her guy do random stuff. Then, with an “ah ha!” she makes the view look upwards.

“Damn,” she says.

It goes up very, very, very far. Kind of far enough that the highest stuff up is basically too small to see, so it might go even farther.

Once she’s done a whole lap around, she stands in the middle of the clearing, and points the view around to a few different places. She explains, “So, we can start climbing up there... there... or there. I think all of them are a viable path up, but I wanna try this one, I see tight ropes and I’d like to see how those work.”

“Sounds good to me.”

June heads for that way, which starts with a series of platforms spiraling up the trunk of a very tall tree.

The way that June plays is mesmerizing to watch. I don’t just mean that of this game, either, I have sat and watched her play games before. It’s like performance art. She glides around the platforms up this tree like a ninja. She gets to the tight ropes,

and with laughing and experimenting, she has figured out how they work so fast, and starts jumping across them like she is hot on the trail of someone ahead.

This area of the game really is freaking huge. We spend way longer just climbing up all of these things than we spent in the village in Ocarina, and it just keeps going up and up and up.

At some point I grab us snacks. Snacks from June's food, not mine, so, chips and sodas.

By the time we can see the top of the area, it's gotten dark outside in real life. There is one last thing to get over, a bunch of platforms that are all spinning around a weird giant glowing green orb. June just goes for it, no hesitation at all, we both scream and reel at the idea of falling down at this point, but she powers forward, makes it across the platforms, and leaps into the orb.

Instantly, her character is teleported to a completely different level: a blue-tinted town, instead of a green-tinted forest. June scream laughs at the jarring change in scenery, and rolls over onto her side, into my lap. I pet her as she is laugh crying and trying to breathe.

She says to me, "We are going to be up all night, aren't we?"

"That sounds fun to me," I say. I. love. doing weird random shit with her.

"I need to know how much more of this game there is," she says.

"I'd like to know too," I tell her. And then I admit openly, "I mean, I don't actually care, but, I want you to be able to find out, and I like spending time with you."

June kisses me. She tastes like terrible cheesy corn chips. I love her. She then sits up again, takes the controller once more, and goes forward into the new area.

As we go around the town, she says a lot of things like "interesting" and "huh" and "ohhh." I usually have absolutely no idea what is so interesting or huh or ohhh-worthy, but she explains to me that basically this area is a huge puzzle, riddle, secrets kind of thing, unlike the last area which was purely jumping around.

She walks around to the same areas many times, sometimes spends a bit of time standing in place, staring at an area,

thinking, before she says “ah ha!” and then goes and jumps on something or moves something somewhere else, and then seems pleased about it, and explains how this thing she did here will have effected some other thing somewhere else. Mmmmost of this is lost on me, but mostly I don’t care. At a certain point I’m not even looking at the screen, I just have my head in my girlfriend’s lap, facing her, taking in deep sniffs of her shirt, and feeling her gut moving forward and back against my face as she breathes. She smells so human. Bad cheesy snacks, body odor. We are both incredibly sweaty for two people who are just sitting here. It’s probably a mix of all of the excitement from jumping around in the game and also just the fact that we are very toasty, both of our body heat pooled together and contained within blankets.

It really is seeming like we’re going to be up all night. She is still sitting there, I am lying beside her on my back, looking at the TV screen upside down, and she and I are just talking about stuff as she works on the puzzle thing in the town.

June says to me, “This reminds me of growing up. Being tired, and eating garbage, and hanging out with friends, and playing a game without knowing at all what I should expect next. An actual sense of mystery in a game.”

I treasure her sharing that. I haven’t told her much about my life from before I knew her, because, there’s not a lot to share if I don’t want to get into the whole ‘undead dog’ thing. And, in a sort of mirrored way, I don’t know much about her life from before I knew her either. In some ways I don’t need to? I never know if this is just a normal human thing or if I should try harder to ask. There is isolated trivia. She knows I dated someone named Fi who died. I know she had a girlfriend growing up too, but I don’t know what her name was, or what happened, and that’s fine that I don’t know. I feel like it is my dog side that is utterly nonjudgemental as to how she got to be here, and is only invested in the fact that yes, now she is here. But, this right here, this night, is the best of both worlds: her sharing some insight that stuff like this is how she grew up, I love to know that, and I love to get to be here doing it again with her.

She asks me, “Did you do a lot of stuff like this growing up?”

What a question. I tell her bluntly, “No. Doing stuff like this with you is a lot of firsts.”

“I had like, two best friends when I was a little kid,” she says. “One was a neighbor, and the other was a friend from school...”

She goes on, telling me stories from when she was little. Playing around in the woods pretending to be wolves—hehe, oh that is so great, I love that. I wag a ton at those stories, and ask to hear a lot more about their pack, their territory, their hunts. She tells me things about going to school. I hear so freaking much about school, from TV shows and from people talking. It sounds traumatic, so much of the time. Fiona cried about school a lot. It sounds like June had mixed experiences. Some of it was bad, and hurtful, and unfair. But she and her friends also got up to fun, writing things on the whiteboards that would disrupt class, passing notes and trying not to laugh but failing, and also sometimes just leaving school early with her friends to go hang out and, well, do stuff like what we’re doing, this night. I snuggle against her listening to all of it, wagging. It’s incredible I get through the entire conversation without it coming up that I never went to school.

It’s late enough into the night that June and I are both nodding off a little bit. We have busted out June’s energy drinks, and have been sipping those. June has been circling around and around a graveyard in the game. There has been a little lull in the conversation, and I find myself snapping my head upright, catching myself from almost falling asleep. I turn and lick the side of June’s face.

“You’re weird,” she says.

“Licking is a sign of closeness in wolves,” I tell her.

She is weirdly quiet at that. I expected her to explain we are humans. But instead, there is a real heavy silence, as she makes the character on the screen walk around the graveyard more.

And then she says really quietly, “Hey Lyn?”

I get the sense that we’re not in teasing joking mode anymore, and I try to affect a certain amount of... approachable gravity. “I’m here,” I answer her.

“I told you once that I could relate to you and Fi, but I didn’t want to get into it.”

I nod, and don't interrupt her. I can feel her voice on the verge of cracking, and I might cry just hearing how worked up she is, but I remain right at her side. I rest my temple on her shoulder, listening completely.

"Well. My partner growing up, my girlfriend who I had my first kiss with, and my first sexy times, and who I really wanted to marry and run away with... was my family's dog, Shiloh."

Tears flood into my eyes, because of how much I know now, how much I understand about her pain. The dog "was" Shiloh, not "is" Shiloh. I might be the first person she has ever told about this hidden pearl of love. I tell her, "Oh sweetie," and I grab her in a strong hug. She grabs me back, and we cry together.

"I understand," I tell her, as I pet her, and we hug each other. "You're okay. You're beautiful. You're perfect."

She lets it all out. I stay here with her, here to have it all let out onto. I'm good at that. I wouldn't have it any other way. I want all of her pain she will give me. I squeeze her again. She squeezes me back. We are real. We are two breathing crying things that are here together right now, breathing and crying on each other.

As some time passes, we are eventually just two beings breathing together, not crying. I lick the side of her face. She licks me back. I wag. She smiles.

"Do you wanna tell me more?" I ask.

"Not right now," she says.

"Will you later?" I ask.

"Sure," she says.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I really do get it, and I hope you and her had all of the best years that you could."

She nods, and says, "We did. I wish it could have... no offense to you, but I wish it could have lasted forever."

"You don't have to explain that one to me, I understand."

"Right. Sorry."

"We have so many notes to compare, some other time," I tell her. I hope I used the turn of phrase right. 'Compare notes.' Seems like a school thing.

She seems to know what I mean, anyways. She nods, and comes in and hugs me again. We make it a quick one this time.

June looks over at the TV screen, and says, "I give up on this graveyard, unless you have any ideas."

"I have had no ideas the entire time you have been in this area, I promise."

She snickers, and says, "If these are all 'in progress' versions of the same game, maybe this is as far as this version goes. Should we try the next one?"

"Let's snuggle a little first," I offer.

"Sure," she says, and then in one motion she leans forward and switches off the power on the N64 and falls onto me to snuggle. I catch her, and gently lay both of us down in this nest of cushions and blankets. Both of us there, both of us having the taste of chips and soda on our mouths, both of us up way past our bedtimes and so tired, both of us so cozy, I nuzzle her. I kiss her forehead once, and then we just lay there, and I hold her, and I pet her.

Pretty soon, she is snoring as I am petting her.

I relax, good to fall asleep too. I fall asleep thinking about how beautiful my girlfriend is, this human completely asleep on me who knows what the love is like between a human and a dog. I fall asleep thinking about how much we really, really have in common. I fall asleep in love with someone who kisses dogs, more times than she knows she has, but I think, when I tell her, that it will all be good news to her, as much as something like that can be. I fall asleep truly, fully pleased with my new human, as she has fallen asleep with her new dog.

GIFT

Read the following short story, and then answer the questions about the short story that follow. The short story is approximately 8,000 words, and is called “Gift.”

—

Gift

A clatter of pool balls. Smooth jazz playing on the speakers, whenever someone isn't using the juke box. I sit in the booth in the back corner, my usual outpost here, hunched over my big notebook, carefully making a straight vertical line in pencil, drawing in a strut connecting floor and ceiling on the first floor of my latest creation. I can see it all in my head already, all five floors, every room, every piece of furniture, every painting, every trinket on every shelf, and it's good to get it down. It's good to be working on the sketches. I like this stuff. Architecture. Pure fantasy. Scratching pencil lead, or, graphite, it probably is, onto paper. It gives me a chance to just be... no one. I don't hear any voices when I'm working on this. I can't even say I hear my own, most of the time. It's a weirdly effective numbing agent for the mind. Part by part, line by line, I am filling the page in.

A drop of sweat falls off of my brow and lands on the page, about where the third floor's guest suite bathroom will be.

Distracting.

I lean back, feeling my back decompress with little aches and tingles. I maybe hadn't realized just how long I was bent over that notebook, finishing off the previous building that I had started on yesterday. With a sigh, I grab a couple of napkins out of the dispenser on the table, and wipe the sweat off of my forehead, and off of the rest of my head while I'm at it, ears, back of the neck. My shirt probably isn't visibly soaked, only by virtue of the fact that it's black. The weather had been hot all week, but it's been the worst today—now tonight—, and the AC here in Ivory's hasn't been switched on all summer.

I reach over to the other side of the table, and grab my fruity drink, which is sweating as much as I am. The fruit punch-y, pineapple-y, rum-y taste is nice for sure, but tonight the fact there's ice in the drink makes it. I'd just as gladly be sipping on water with ice cubes, almost.

Drink in hand, its condensation making it feel like I just grabbed it out of a cooler, I turn in my booth, and look over to the bar. Presently there are two men there, each one to himself.

I look first to the one in the green tank top: he's drinking a jack and coke, and his body screams of athleticism, sore muscles that are contented to be sore, they've been given their workout; he plays on the college football team, he's having a good season but he's not doing well in his classes, one teacher in particular isn't cutting him slack like she's supposed to for a good player on the college football team, she might really screw things up for him; on his phone, which sits out on the bar in front of him beside his drink, he's looking through an ebook, open to his physics reading assignment for today, he's really not getting it, he knows he's going to have to backtrack through the book a long ways to catch up; shaking it up and going out to read at a bar has been a nice change of scenery but it hasn't helped him understand the material better. I wish I could help him, but, I've never been a science whiz myself, unfortunately. Not one of the gifts I have been graced with.

I look to the other guy at the bar, the one in the white collar shirt: he's drinking a beer; on his phone, he's looking through a spreadsheet; he supervises an assembly line that is currently producing little assorted nut snack things; it's going well enough for them, but he's going over all of the data he can about it,

making sure that there's not something he's missing that would give lie to it actually not going well; but, so far it's all checking out, it all does seem to be shaping up to be a really positive production cycle for them. He doesn't know it, since his back is to me, but I lift my glass up towards him and silently toast to his success. I then have another sip, and set the glass back down on the far side of the table from me.

As it so happens, I don't know either of these men—Terry and Jason, are their names. I'm a regular here at Ivory's, here most nights out of the week, back here in my booth. They're both first timers. I have never met them, here or anywhere else, nor have I heard of them secondhand. But I'm also not guessing when I say all this, about Terry's struggles in his physics class and Jason's studious interest in his team's figures. Nor am I guessing about the fact that Terry just took a sip of his jack and coke that hit him all wrong and has made him queasy.

I was twenty three, working in a movie theater and going nowhere fast in life, when it switched on like a light bulb. The ability to look at someone and read their mind. I think the first time it happened, I had been sweeping up popcorn in the lobby when I glanced up to my manager who was clear on the other side of the lobby behind the counter, and I heard her clear as day that she wanted me to hurry up and come take her spot because she was already working way over and her feet were killing her. I shouted over that I'd be over soon, because, I was kind of zoned out, and I'd thought, without thinking about it, that she'd said all of that to me out loud. And she never talked about it after, but, I realized that that didn't add up, that would be a lot of oddly detailed information for her to convey at a raised voice, and I didn't remember her voice being raised. I think that was the first time it happened. But, in any case, once it was on, it was on, and it got real overwhelming real fast.

Believe me, I thought I was a lunatic. I was pretty sure I had gone schizophrenic. But I did get a handle on it. And it took no stroke of genius to monetize this new gift either. I'm trespassed from every casino in Las Vegas, from the strip all the way out to the micro casinos tucked away all throughout the suburbs surrounding. But I made my millions there before leaving.

I reach across the table and grab my fruity drink again, have another sip of the cool cocktail, and then set it down again. I turn my head back down to my notebook as I hear another new person entering. I take up my pencil, and am back to scratching in the details of this same little room as I overhear the new man ordering a glass of whiskey.

I'm not even done with the next strut in this room before I hear him order a second glass, and I hear Liam, tonight's bartender, cut him off.

That gets my attention pretty quickly. I glance up at the man. He's standing there at the bar, dressed in black cargo pants and a black long-sleeve shirt, and a black scarf that I assume is for its value in fashion, and not as a way to keep warm in this stuffy bar that is already a furnace in this hottest summer weather.

This man just drank the entire glass of whiskey as though he was gulping down water after a jog. I can feel his stomach and throat burning, but indeed, he was completely genuine in his intent on having a second glass. He is trying to get d-r-u-n-k, and he knows what his limits are, and he would like to get to them. He usually drinks at home, and would be glad to tonight, but but for the fact that he just woke up less than half an hour ago, saw it was late enough that all of the liquor stores would be closed on a Wednesday, and so he got dressed, and headed out for the part of downtown where the bars are. He realized upon stepping outside that he was overdressed, but he was on a mission.

I search for why he's trying to get drunk.

So, the way it works, basically, is that I have access to his mind in all of the same ways that he does. At a glance, I get all of his surface-level thoughts that he's thinking, right as he's thinking them. Hell, I don't even have to glance, really: if I'm in the same room as someone I can kind of hear it whether I'm looking or not. If I'm right next to someone I can definitely hear it. It's why I prefer the likes of Ivory's, instead of a place that gets busier. Crowded rooms get... very... very... loud. I was glad enough to get out of Las Vegas, I'll tell you that in a heartbeat. But, besides his surface-level thoughts, I can also attempt to recall things, basically as well as he himself would be able to recall things—actually a little better, because, while he may be a

layman in the art of thinking, I am for better or for worse a bit of an expert. So, no, I would not be able to pull the memory of his birth from out of his mind, because that memory does not exist anymore, the data is not there, no one has it, himself or me—at least, the birth as experienced from his perspective. Were his mother here, I assuredly could pull that one out. But, that's not the question at hand, anyways, I'm not trying to pull out anything nearly so far back. Trying to think for him about why he wants to get drunk, that is quite easy. And he won't know that I'm doing it, doing this information gathering. Right now, as I am digging deeper and learning that he's trying to get drunk because he is a pervert and feels deeply ashamed about it, he is completely unaware that I'm getting those thoughts from him, his mind is only on trying to weigh how many more bars are open down the street, and whether it will be worth it to try to bribe one more drink out of this bearded and unimpressed bartender in front of him.

He decides that he'll chalk this one up to a lost cause, and play the next bars a little bit slower. He glances down at the change he got for his first drink, which is sitting out on the counter. He takes the bills, and leaves the coins, and then turns and heads for the door.

I flip the covers of my notebook closed, drink the last of my fruity sweaty drink, and then stand up and head out after him.

As I'm going, I can sense my exit from a lot of perspectives. Through my own eyes and other senses, of course—my feet touching the ground with each step, my own sense of balance. I can also see myself leaving through Liam's eyes: he wonders how in the hell I do it. Every instinct in his thought processes tells him I'm a predator, but his conscious mind can't help but also remember his surprise that every time someone I've walked after has returned to the bar, they've been nothing but happy to see me again. I can also feel my exit in the peripheral awareness of the two at the bar, they sort of hear my footsteps and have vaguely noticed Liam's attention looking my way, but neither of them makes anything of it, they were more interested in the other guy who is already out the door, they're just paying enough attention to make sure there isn't trouble—good

instincts on both of them, some people are very dim and would not even be clocking that kind of thing subconsciously.

Stepping outside, it actually feels a little cooler than in the bar—I'm sure the weather hasn't actually improved any, but at least the slight breeze is, well, something. Chris's black scarf—his name is Chris—blows out to the side in a suddenly stronger breeze as he walks: I feel the breeze as him, and then a second later the breeze has arrived at me, and I feel it as myself too.

I start following after him, keeping my footsteps quiet—I am successful in that effort, I don't register in his awareness whatsoever. He's aware of the cars on the street beside us, but only because the headlights annoy him a little bit, having to walk with them coming the other way right next to him, blinding him. One of the cars honks, and he's annoyed that he can't see the situation through all the glare of the headlights, because if they're honking about him how would he know it anyways, and why would they honk at him anyways, he didn't do anything, dammit. These might not sound like flattering thoughts when I lay them bare like this, but, actually, they are exceedingly normal. Anyone else walking down this street would have better than even odds of thinking the same or worse. I stare at him as we go down the sidewalk towards the next bar, and I make sure I've fully understood the dimensions of his thoughts that I had started to unpack while we were inside.

He is in a dark place right now. He feels a huge amount of self loathing. He carries a secret that he hasn't told anyone else. He thinks it's a bad secret. He watches porn on the internet of animals. And he's seen a lot of it. He's seen videos of male dogs sticking it to men and women, he's seen videos of men sticking it to male and female dogs. Stuff with horses, stuff with goats, stuff with sheep. It seems like a fairly limited amount of this material has ever made it to the internet. I say that for two reasons. One is that I can see Chris has rewatched a lot of these videos, often when he's searching for them the same ones come up. The other reason is that I've seen these same videos before in other people's memories. I can't say I've ever gone to the web for that kind of stuff myself, but I recognize some of these scenes, a man on a bed sticking it in a great dane's pussy, a woman sucking a weird red dog cock as someone off screen holds it there for her.

By the time we're nearing the entrance to the next bar, I have gathered a lot. Firstly, that he has seen so many of these videos, and that's his secret, this is the only thing he gets off on and he's ashamed of it. His shame stems from the fact that so much of this material is rape, if not overt sexual murder, of the animal. He has seen videos where the animal is tied in restraints, and is trying to get away, but is forced. He has seen videos of men sticking it in a chicken, and while I can't find any memory of a video showing the chicken dying, I would agree with his thoughts on those videos, which are that the chicken in question seemed greatly pained and probably didn't have her health held in high regard by someone who would do that to her. Chris has also seen videos that he does not consider to have been abusive, where the animal seemed like he or she was having a lot of fun getting to fuck a pervy human. And I would agree with his thoughts on those videos too: in those videos, it does seem like the animal had a great time. I would go even farther than he has, and say that it's fucked up for his sake, and for the sake of people like him, that all of these videos, the abusive and the okay, seem to all be shuffled together on the websites he goes to as though they are the same kinds of videos, when they are really, really not. In any case, he still feels shame around those positive videos too, for the fact he can never talk to anyone about it.

Well, he thinks he can't talk to anyone about it. I'm going to get it out of him though. Helping people through their sexual damage by leading a good example is kind of my thing.

Oh, the other thing I have gathered, about Chris, is that his damage isn't anything worse. He's never raped an animal himself, he's never had sex with anyone at all, two legged or four. And as far as porn goes, animals are his sole interest, which, have no doubt, I've been in the thoughts of people who have seen worse, and I'll leave it at that. We are all flawed. Chris is flawed too, but he is not as far gone as he believes himself to be. And I would see him set on a better path. I follow him into E's, the next bar down the street from my usual post at Ivory's.

As he goes up to the bar, I loiter around inside by the door, grab a newspaper off a wire rack that's just inside, and make

some idle to-do about fanning myself with it. No one notices me much, I can say with confidence.

Look. I know how this comes across. Am I here to get my own rocks off? Yes. But if getting my rocks off on helping others is a crime, then I would submit that there are much worse criminals out there than me, your honor. It's true, I have used my gift as a means of getting around, and often times early on, it was a selfish interest, I will cop that every day of the week. But listen. Putting it in someone who's agreeable but distracted and not all that enthusiastic herself? It's sort of a bore, when half of the experience like it or not is in her mind too. I learned that if the other isn't over the moon, I'd have usually been better off staying home and pleasuring myself alone. On the other hand, tickling someone's most sensitive interests, letting them run free with their kink that they've never gotten to indulge in before, and reading them the whole time like I'm them, now that's something, and it's fun just about every time. Feet, spanking, role play, whatever their schtick is. Am I a foot guy? Not on my own. If I let a foot guy perv on my feet, do I feel his tinglies? You betcha.

Chris sits down at the bar. When the bartender gets to him, he orders a glass of whiskey, and sets some bills out on the counter. The bartender takes a couple of the bills and leaves the others, and gets Chris his drink. Chris does take his time with this one—at least, he does a better job of taking his time than at the last bar, where he more or less chugged his 90 proof glass. This time, he is taking measured pauses between his gulps.

I come forward, and have a seat next to him—not directly next to him, the bar isn't crowded tonight, so I leave one stool between us. I keep it light, order a beer. The bartender has it to me in no time, easy.

As I'm having my second sip, Chris is ordering his second glass.

The bartender looks at him. She's teetering on getting it to him or not. He almost has it, but then he ruins it for her by trying to grab his wallet out of his pocket, and stumbling off of his stool clumsily onto his feet. He still tries to hold out the money, but she tells him to take it easy for a little bit, and turns away.

I slide off of my stool and onto the one I'd left between us, and lean over to him all conspiratorially, and say, "They're strict around here."

He's pleasantly surprised to have someone on his side, but he leaps on it, and answers, "Yeah. I came here to drink, now they're not serving drinks?"

I suggest to him, "Probably too many lawsuits, from people who can't hold their liquor."

"Mannn I can hold my fuckin liquor, they shouldn't ruin it for the rest of us."

"You said it," I agree. I'm not even blowing smoke, too much. I do agree, different people have different limits. Some people could sniff what Chris drank tonight and not be responsible to be left unattended. Chris here, if he has his way, is barely warmed up. I ask him, and I actually haven't read his mind on this so I actually am asking him, "Do you like amaretto?"

He has no idea what that is, and takes a swing at answering, "I don't smoke."

I wear an amused little smile to myself, and tell him, "It's booze. It's 20% and it tastes like tootsie rolls. I have way too goddamn much of it in my fridge at home, if you wanna blow this place and hang out at mine, drink until we're silly, laugh our tits off watching dumb internet videos, that'd be a good night in my books."

I drink from my bottle as he decides. The bait is very strong, and don't I know it. I've just suggested one thing he knew he needed, booze, and another thing that I knew he needed but he didn't realize it until I brought it up, which would be friendship, comradery, a pal, someone to have fun with, hang out. He thinks about what the odds are that I might murder him, and he figures the odds are about ninety percent that I do, but he also makes up his mind that he doesn't care. I suppress a sigh at that. There are a lot—a lot—of depressed males walking this earth who would walk into something that might kill them just to prove a point, even if that point is something as petty as, "I knew it would, and I don't care." I am glad to see he has no intention whatsoever of killing me, though it is also a little sad to see he doesn't even think he would if I tried to kill him, he would probably just take it. But, it's good inasfar as I don't have

worries for my own safety, or for taking him to where I live. I have had to slip away from hookups in the past when I realized that that wasn't the case with some people who at first had seemed nice.

"Is your place far from here?" he asks.

"Up the hill, about three blocks."

"Really?" he asks, mind flashing to images of passing by the houses in that area, and recognizing that they are mostly mansions, not to mention the location, right on downtown.

I lie, and tell him I hit it huge on the lotto and am mostly just pretty bored these days. I do tell him the truth that my place isn't one of the huge houses you'd see from the main street, it's a more normal modern house tucked away down one of the residential blocks.

A short time later, we are walking across my front yard, up to the door. I fetch a key out of my pocket, unlock the place, and step inside first.

He steps in after me. In his head he is solemnly resigning himself to whatever may happen to him tonight, but that is quickly replaced with other more giddy thoughts when he sees my living room: there's the couch and TV, where I predict we'll be spending some time, but past that, I have a bunch of instruments set up, which immediately catches his interest.

"You play?" he asks, walking towards the equipment.

"Not uh," I start, and then I lose my train of thought. Normally one on one I'm better than this, but, let's say it is a learned and practiced skill to not get sidetracked when you're thinking for two or more. And Chris just got really excited at seeing all of what I have—keyboard, upright piano, guitar, bass, drum kit. He plays all of it. Some of his go-to's on each are rushing through his mind, he's eager to touch but wants to make sure I won't be bothered. I start over, "Yeah, I play."

It's actually more of a science experiment to me, or something akin to that. I have been in the thoughts of a great many people who can play musical instruments. Seeing someone's thoughts about something doesn't necessarily make me an expert in it. I took all of the normal math classes in high school, and just being exposed to the teacher talking about the subject did not make me automatically understand all of it

inside and out, I barely scraped by with passing grades—at the time I thought it was on pure luck, in hindsight I do realize that if high schools actually failed all of the students who didn't grasp the subject matter they were supposed to, graduation rates would be bleak. So, anyways, with this rock band setup, I'm not so much trying to pen the next pop hit or express my soul through music. I'm more-so seeing how much actually has rubbed off on me with this subject. How much I can access if I really put my mind on it. So far, the answer is that more of it has rubbed off than I would have guessed. For something I never had a knack for pre-mind reading, I've made a lot more headway on this than I have on calculus.

"Are you in like, a band?" Chris asks.

"I'm not against it, but no, I just play by myself. Notebook over there on that desk has some of what I've been composing if it interests you at all. I'm gonna grab drinks, feel free to play whatever you like if you want."

He is very pleased about the permission to touch the instruments and the knowledge that I am going to get drinks, and he actually is very passingly interested in my music as well, which is more than I would have guessed. He asks, "Sheet music?"

"Yeah."

"I'll check it out," he says, "but, I won't be able to play it without having heard it first. I only know how to, kind of read that stuff as a refresher."

He's not weird for that. That actually makes him pretty average among musicians. I give him a little play salute as I walk off down the hall, deeper into the house towards the kitchen.

Behind me, I hear the fuzz of the amp kicking on, shortly followed by some metal licks.

In the kitchen, I have a normal fridge, and then I also have one with a glass front that is more akin to what you'd see in a supermarket. In the glass-fronted one, there is, indeed, an absurd collection of booze, a large percentage of it being amaretto. It's a personal favorite. A bit like drinking candy that also makes you tipsy. I could drink the stuff all night every night, and, for some periods of time, I more or less have done that.

I grab two bottles, and a couple of glasses from the cupboard. Holding the glasses pressed between my arm and chest and holding a bottle in each hand, I return into the living room and all of the metal guitar sounds. Also returning into Chris's thoughts, he is pretty self-pleased that his guitar work is sounding good, he's aware it ought to be impressive.

Hey, as a budding musician who can't do what he's doing but can, directly, appreciate the talent that he's got behind it, sure, I'm impressed. I tilt back my head, and give him a loud, "AWOOOOO!"

He caps off his jam with a few fast strums, and then flips something on the guitar that turns it off—I hadn't been aware of that switch, and I make a mental note, that seems handy to know about.

I sort of make a show of slightly lifting the glasses and bottles in my arms.

Chris sets the guitar back on its stand, and comes over.

"Take either, should be the same," I tell him.

He grabs a bottle and a glass, freeing me to hold my own in each hand too. With two *pop!*s, our bottles are open and we're each pouring our first glass.

He's wondering if he should say anything.

I help him out, and make a toast: "To a fun night."

His mind blanks for half a second, but he smoothly enough retrieves the appropriate response: "Cheers."

We clink our glasses, and then each have a big, long drink.

Hits. The. Spot.

I start walking past him towards the upright piano, and I mention as I go, "More where that bottle came from whenever you want. Your pace."

"That is, a dangerous offer," he says honestly.

"I trust you," I say, less honestly. I do trust that he has a good sense of his own limits, I got that off him pretty much right away, but I also got that he has a habit of pushing them. So, I don't trust him, but I do trust that if I have to cut him off, he'll inadvertently tell on himself.

I take a seat on the piano bench, and set my glass and bottle on the ground beside myself.

I say over my shoulder, “I know I promised something to the effect of watching silly internet videos, we can get to that of course. Humor me with a song first?”

He’s stoked, but gives a subdued, “Yeah. What did you have in mind?”

As soon as I turn forward to face the keys, I feel him secretly —“secretly”—down the rest of his glass.

I pick up my own glass for another sip to keep up, and answer, “Improvised, play what comes to you. Original, something you heard, whatever you’re feeling.”

“Sure.”

I lay the bed of a comfortable, approachable piano melody, to see where we go from there.

Competently, he finds the key we’re in, and lets a few chords drone out at opportune moments. Then, after the melody has come around a few times, he stops with the droning and starts up a chugging on the guitar, dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn, and I sense that he wants me to give him more to work off of. I throw in the flourishes he wants—exactly the flourishes he wants, little stings on the high keys here and there and switching up the rhythm to something more... he thinks of it as ‘jazzy,’ I don’t know if that’s right, but certainly something more shaken up than what I’d started on. We play back and forth, it’s a dialogue, and he’s into it. He’s having memories of himself in high school and another boy with curly brown hair, Caleb, the two of them a few times found themselves alone in the band room—some kind of detention? I can’t break this flow to unpack it completely right now—but he and the other boy played instruments back and forth and really, really, almost magically, seemed to be able to communicate their intentions back and forth, and play more or less exactly what the other had hoped would be played. This is reminding him of that. As we’re going and the notes are flying, Chris launches into one of the movements of Freebird, and I cackle with amused joy, not letting myself slip up, seizing this victory of musicality by the horns.

When his solo is over, I start letting us glide to a gentle landing with this, letting things ring out.

He is very emotionally open right now. Let loose from standing tight and upright in public, he is getting to make loud music, show off, flourish, he could do a lot of things he normally wouldn't be in a habit of right now.

I get up from the piano bench. As the last of his chords is still ringing in the air, I stand up, walk to him, and over the humming guitar, I lean in for a kiss. He reciprocates, although he's never kissed anyone before, he doesn't fully know what to do being this close with another person's face, doesn't know what to do against another human's weird rubbery muscly mouth and lips, against my stubble. He's curious to try it though, for a little bit.

I don't dwell on it though. As he's getting towards really over thinking it, I back off.

He's still very open. If I started unzipping his pants, he wouldn't say no—I can say that very confidently, because he is imagining me doing just that, and he would very much like that, less for the pleasure of it even, and more for the sake of not being a virgin anymore. He wants to be rid of that label, to not have to call himself that. He would like, when other people talk about sex, to not have to think about it as some kind of hypothetical.

And I could give that to him. And I might. But, later. If I can behave myself, that will be something for if we meet up again on another day. Tonight, I want to help him with the other thing. The porn thing.

I slink an arm firmly around him, a sort of hug, my hand going up across his back and resting on his opposite shoulder. But I say to him, "We eh, might have skipped the part where we talk about this first."

He gives a little laugh at that.

I ask, "Am I getting ahead of myself?"

He does think that I am very much getting ahead of myself, but that he's glad I am. Even still, he becomes embarrassed at the idea of being the one to suggest it goes any further. Sheepishly, he suggests, "We could... do more..."

I slink off of him. He switches off the guitar again, and as he's putting it back on the stand, he awaits me setting the bar for where we're going to go, what we might do, what's on the table.

Oh hell, I'm a sponge, what's on the table for me is quite a lot more than what there would have been before this gift, before I was more or less forced to be at least halfway into what any person I'm around is into. But, again, I make sure not to forget myself, my intentions.

"How about this," I start. "Are you gay?"

He immediately flushes at the prospect of having to answer that. Many, many, many, many images flash across his mind of seeing male humans and male animals doing each other in the butthole or sucking each other off. It's also not lost on him what he was just about to be down for, with me. But somehow, the idea of getting off to human males with animal males, or the idea of himself being swept up in the moment with another man, somehow all of that jars with the idea of "being gay." The label isn't one he feels is quite appropriate to himself. There is another one he has settled on, a while back, that is a bit more vague, a bit more apt for him.

He tells it to me: "I'm kind of more pan than gay, so I mean, kind of gay."

I go and retrieve my glass and bottle, and he does the same. As we're each topping off our glasses again, I say, "How about this: I don't want to seem like I'm taking advantage of you. Got you drunk, and all that."

He is quick to chime in at that, "Oh I don't feel like you were —"

"I know, I know," I tell him. I am though: I am getting him drunk.

I sigh. If I were to stab someone on the street with a knife, that would be assault with a deadly weapon. If I were a surgeon and cut someone open with a scalpel to perform life saving surgery on a patient, that would be me doing my job. I like to think of what I do as somewhere admittedly in the middle of those two things, but a lot closer to the life saving than the assaulting. I *am* doing this with the intention of saving him—suicide has crossed his mind a lot more than it does most people's. And I may not have a degree, but by whatever unknown forces, I have been given the role of world's biggest authority on what other people are thinking.

So yeah, what I do is sleazy. What surgeons do is gruesome. Sometimes some people are allowed to do things that other people shouldn't. Hopefully the end result is for the better.

I have a sip from my refreshed glass, and tell him, "I'd like to know you better anyways."

That sets him on edge, social nervousness prickles his skin.

"What you're into," I add.

That is a relief in his book, for a second, and then he actually thinks about what he is into, and now it's making him nervous again. He takes a gulp from his drink.

As he drinks, I suggest, "If you wanna get off, we could each have a seat on that couch, and you can pick something to put on that you're into, and we can watch it together, drink our drinks, make a night of it. How's that?"

No longer wanting to be on the defensive, he forces a little smile, and asserts, "I don't know what you're into. People have a large variety of limits, and stuff. I don't want you to be bored, or like, freaked out."

He says it thinking he is the biggest freak in the world, so anything I might suggest I'm into, he can match it.

"I like to explore new things all the time," I tell him, and then I sip my drink. "You won't freak me out."

He is hyper aware that I did not answer his implied question about what I'm into, and he does indeed call me on it: "Name your favorite thing."

I tell him, "I don't want you to feel like you have to conform your interests to my interests. I look at a lot of different stuff. No shame. None. Lately I've been looking at a lot of furies. You know them?"

He is unbelievably stoked that we are even in the same ballpark. Worst case, he figures, we watch some furry stuff, and he'll have an okay enough time getting off to that, he won't have to be faking it too much, not nearly as much as if we watched something human-on-human.

He is not able to stop himself from a huge smile, and tries to half cover it with his glass as he says, "Yeah I know what furies are," and then he has a drink. In his mind, he is picturing a couple of videos he's seen of someone in a fursuit getting mounted and fucked by a dog.

He notices his hardon is pressing against his pants. I can feel it too.

“Care to get more comfortable?” I ask, glancing down at his crotch and back up to his eyes.

He wanders over to the couch, and sets down his drinks. “I’ve never JO’d with another guy before,” he tells me. “I don’t know what’s, like, polite, I guess.”

He briefly considers if he’s really doing this, and then he decides it sounds fun and he definitely is, and he peels down his pants and underwear and kicks them off, and is ass naked on one side of my couch, still wearing his shirt and scarf, his prick completely stiff. I join him, sliding off everything from the waist down too, and taking a seat on the other side of the couch.

I grab the TV remote and press the power button, though this TV takes a little bit to load up.

He asks, “So you wanna watch furry stuff?”

“Nah hotshot, I wanna watch what you wanna watch.”

“I uh, don’t think you do.”

“If I don’t I’ll tell you you were right. No harm in suggesting it.”

That first part, laying it up to him as a challenge, really lands with him. I’ve given him his permission, his excuse, to tell me something really wild and out there.

He comes out with it: “Animals. Actual animals. Bestiality videos.”

What a weight that is, taken off his shoulders. It’s like it has been a mission, for years and years, to keep that information a secret at the cost of anything else, and now the mission is done, and if I but let him know it’s alright, then he will be able to truly relax for the first time he ever has. I have been in the minds of people who at one point in their lives sat accused in a court of law, in a trial that really could have gone either way, and so I know what the feeling is, when the jury has come back with a verdict, but the verdict has not yet been read. He more or less feels the same way, after revealing that about himself, and now awaiting how I am going to take it.

With an amused smile, I say, “Oh, alright,” and I take a sip of my drink.

Chris goes straight for his bottle, and takes what in his mind is a victory drink. I'm glad for him. He's earned that.

I press him, "Is that your thing?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, that sounds pretty hot, alright," I say, and begin toying with myself. "What kinda animals are you into?"

"Um. Dogs, mainly."

Nodding, I say as though learning all of this for the first time and being very intrigued, "Okay, okay. Got a website for that or anything?"

"Are you sure you want me to look it up?"

"Yeah, that's fine," I tell him. I go to the web thing on my TV, and hand the remote over to him. It occurs to me then, we are missing something. I say to him about the bestiality website, "Look that up, I'll be right back with lube and more drinks."

With a smile, looking back and forth between the remote and the TV screen, he says, "You got it."

I step away from the living room very pleased with the way this is going, glad for Chris, and looking forward to the rest of the night. We'll watch some videos, we'll bust, and when it's all said and done, I think my companion for the evening will have been all the better for it.

I skedaddle up to my bedroom and grab the basket of assorted lubes that I keep on the dresser. I think back on all of the memories I have been privy to of Chris jacking it. From his muscle memory of how the container on his lube works, and the knowledge of what it feels like when he rubs it onto his shaft and how it holds up in practice, I actually know exactly which kind he uses, it's one of the very common store brands. But—professional poker player here—coming back downstairs with just that kind for him and just my kind for me would be a tell. Maybe not much of one, it could be a coincidence, but by this point, I don't want to give him any kind of prompt to question how I know things. I return down the stairs with the entire basket, stop back into the kitchen for a couple more bottles of amaretto as well, and then with my arms full return once more into the living room.

Chris is sitting there leaning back into one corner of the couch, stiff as ever, giving me a smug grin. I turn to look at the

television, and there indeed is one of his bestiality websites that he's called up. I nearly lose my balance, coming back into his presence, like stepping from solid land onto a rocking boat: he has downed the rest of his bottle, and is definitively drunk.

I set everything down on the ground in front of the couch. We have a giggle at all of the different kinds of lube I have—some stuff is good for some activities some stuff is good for other activities, what can I say. He does grab the one he usually uses and tells me as much, but then he asks if I recommend something different. The one he usually uses is fine.

Lubing my own tool, I start to stroke it as I face the screen. Chris, absolutely thrilled to be doing this, starts doing the same, with the remote in his other hand. He starts navigating through the site.

I say to him, "Wow, so many videos. I didn't know so many people were into this. Which of these do you like?"

He highlights a few for my interest, telling me this one looks to be a man taking it from a male dog, that one looks to be a man giving it to a mare, et cetera.

We make a night of it. Everything goes according to plan. We watch through some videos and he is utterly euphoric, firstly just from watching the porn itself, secondly from the booze, and, thirdly, as a new twist for him, the acceptance he feels within himself, what was once a shameful knowledge in him is now a smug knowledge, he is my teacher, or so it is good for him to believe. We both bust. He eats his without thinking about it, and then is briefly mortified at the idea that he might have just done something that would ruin my opinion of him, but I stick my tongue out at him and then eat mine too. I order us pizza, we each take turns washing up in the bathroom. Chris learns my name when the pizza guy says it: Dean? Yup, Dean here, thank you. Over pizza, Chris and I chat some more about the videos, what's out there. I lay the seeds for a better path for him. Are there others like you, I ask him. Are there communities. Basically, hey, I see there's a lot of porn, obviously some people are making this and even more people are hounding after it, so to speak, so what's the deal, why don't I ever seem to see people talking about this, do you not have any friends who are into this. He intends to look into all of that. He doesn't tell me so, he just

goes along, says yeah I don't know, it's weird, it's fucked up that things are like this, I don't know what to tell you. But he is looking forward to seeking those things out.

After our food, we go for a second round of watching through some videos. Chris helps me—"helps me"—steer clear of the videos that seem abusive. We chat openly about that, ah, no I hate that, I just want to see everyone having a good time, we agree.

After we've each finished a second time, Chris is very sleepy—he thinks it's because he didn't get enough sleep earlier, in my expert opinion it would be because of the orgasms and the large amount of food earlier and the booze, but what do I know. I get him a couple of blankets, and he falls asleep on the couch.

In the morning, he is gone.

I hope to see him again down the road.

—

1. Is Dean a reliable narrator or an unreliable narrator? Why do you think so?
2. Dean justifies his actions by comparing himself to a professional surgeon, rather than somebody cutting people open at random. Are Dean's actions in this story actually ethical?
3. What comparisons can be made between Chris's sexual interest in animals as a human, and Dean's sexual interest in humans as a mind reader?
4. Dean appears to possess a very large amount of amaretto, which he describes as being 20% and tasting like tootsie rolls. Does this say anything about him? Why or why not?

SUPER SOLDIER MEGA SPIES

Setting

It's the year 300,000,000, and humans have long since lost all affinity for harmony, nature, or animals: their singular goal as a species is to colonize the universe and its varied landscapes and lifeforms at all costs. This is where YOU come in! A conglomeration of elite intelligences at the center of the universe has agreed that it's time to send you and some other super soldier mega spies in to sabotage human endeavors on various planets. You and your teammates may look like such innocent beings as cute red pandas, little bipedal robots, or squishy green aliens, but beneath the cute veneer you and your colleagues are lethal assassins and adept saboteurs.

Materials

Minimum: One deck of cards and one 6-sided die, which the table can all share.

Optional: One deck of cards for each player, two 6-sided dice for each player, and a pencil and paper for each player.

Rules

In Super Soldier Mega Spies, one Game Master leads a Player or Players through a quest to reclaim a territory from human supremacy, setting scenes and presenting obstacles.

A Player Character starts with 5 HP and a number of GFY points equal to their level. Each Player may choose to represent these values by tokens, such as a stack of nickels for HP and a stack of bottle caps for GFY points, or by marking these values on a sheet of paper or on a digital document. Each Player Character should have a name (examples: Linda, Sir Hopsalot, The Mysterious Vanishing Ewe, Keith,) an appearance (examples: a Golden Retriever with a large sunhat, a frog who is blue with black bumps, a white sheep who is usually semi-transparent and stands on her hind legs, a koala double fisting vodka,) a weapon (examples: a sword, karate, wicked fire magic, insults,) and some things they are good at (as many as you want to say.)

Out of combat, the GM's job is to describe the current surroundings and to guide Players towards the way forward, perhaps encouraging them to make use of the things their characters are good at along the way.

In combat, the GM's job is to talk hella shit as the Enemies.

When combat begins, all of the Player Characters go in whatever order they decide, then all of the Enemies go in whatever order the GM decides, then back to the Player Characters and so on until combat is resolved.

When a Player Character attacks an Enemy, the Player rolls one 6-sided die, and the attack deals one point of damage if the die shows 4 or higher. If 3 or less, the Player may describe their character's fumble and how they're going to save it, and then roll a second die: if the total of both dice is 6 or higher, the attack deals one point of damage. The GM may, however, decide that Enemies are invincible unless a certain attack is described that circumvents that Enemy's reason for invincibility. Most Enemies should have 1 HP.

When an Enemy attacks a Player Character, the Player draws a card from a deck of cards. If the drawn card is a face card, the attack fails. If the drawn card is an ace, the attack fails and the Player may describe how their character manipulates the attack to effect the environment to the character's advantage. If the drawn card is a joker, the Enemy deals one point of damage towards itself. If the drawn card is a number card, the Player Character takes one point of damage, unless the Player

announces “Simon says I dodge!” with Simon being something that the table determines at the start of the session (examples: Simon is the name of any celebrity who the table then imagines as a dog, Simon is any furry media content tag, Simon is the description of any NPC in any video game.) Each Simon may only be used once per session. The deck of cards is reset and shuffled whenever a Player decides. Players may each use their own deck of cards or use a communal deck.

A Player Character may instantly defeat an Enemy using GFY points. The number of GFY points required to defeat an Enemy is determined by the GM, and should generally be 0, 1, or 2. The Player may inquire freely as to the number of GFY points the GM will require to defeat a particular Enemy. Player Characters gain 1 to their max GFY when they gain a level, with all points refreshing to max upon a level gain and at any time the GM decides.

Player Characters gain a level upon completing milestones in their quest, such as clearing a dungeon.

A Player Character’s HP returns to 5 upon gaining a level and at any other time the GM decides. If a Player Character drops to 0 HP at any time, that character is defeated, and the Player may introduce a new character to join the party at the next appropriate opportunity.

Happy human hunting, super soldier mega spies!

POEMS

Ducks

Ducks in pairs on logs and shores
Ducks in tandem flight
Ducks in V's of ten or more
Ducks in love with life

Fort Boysnuggle

Fort Boysnuggle
A fort for boys to snuggle in
The boys can be humans or dogs
They can have a vagina or a penis
But they must say they identify as a boy
While in Fort Boysnuggle
Fort Girlsnuggle will be on Wednesdays and Fridays
Fort Enbysnuggle on Thursday and Sunday
Fort Bring Your Own Gender Identity on Monday

Dog Pee

I think it's pretty cool that my dog can pee where he wants to.
On people's yards, next to the sidewalk, wherever.
I think public urination should be a right, not a crime.
It's not like a big deal, but like, I do think that.

Passing by a T intersection in a gravel road by a pasture

This morning was very cool
but it has since begun to heat up
and I am now overdressed
in three layers of clothing:

long sleeve shirt,
sweater,
winter jacket.

I can see vapor
rising off of a big puddle in the road
like this land's breath.

New Recording 5

Feel the cool spring-scented breeze
tingle across your drunken face
as you and a dog stumble your way
through the woods.

Grocery List

Go outside and bite the plants: Go outside and pick off little parts of the plants that you see and bite down on them in order to learn their taste and give their power to yourself. With deliberateness bite down on the plants that you find while outside, slowly crush the planty fibers between your upper set of teeth and your lower set of teeth and meditate on the flavors that come about because you have done this. If you need recommendations, here are some starting points you may consider depending on local availability: a pine needle; a big fistful of grass; a leaf from a tree; two other leaves from two other different looking trees or bushes; a small berry, just one of whatever the first type that you find is, no more than the one; a fresh, green twig; an entire flower at once; a lump of dirt; a lump of dirt from somewhere else. When you bite these things, keep them in your mouth for at least a minute or two; The point is not to eat, but to learn more than there may have seemed there to learn from initial visual impressions. If there are poisonous or dangerous plants where you live, maybe don't or at least bring a friend. But if you live in like Wisconsin go for it: Go outside and familiarize yourself gustatorily with the world that you have a place on.

Queer Dogs

Some dogs like humans
(Most dogs who like anyone like humans)

Squirrel

squirrel squirrel squirrel
climb climb climb
yay
good job

Apparent Loneliness

Hanging out with friends,
one makes a joke at my expense
about how I am single,
I have no sex life,
I am alone.
I am happy to swallow it
and know, myself,
how wrong they are.
My love with my dog—
my sexy, beautiful, affectionate, caring dog—
demands no public displays.
It does not need validation or certificate.
It can be for him and me alone
and be good:
everything that either of us needs.

Partners In Really Emotionally Healthy And Cool Crimes

I would really recommend becoming jerk off buddies with a dog if you happen to know one who would be down with that and there's any overlapping availability in both of your schedules.

He or she might even give it a few licks,
kiss you for a little bit,
or let you throw your arm around him or her for a sec
and let you give him or her a few affectionate strokes
on the back
while you're all squirmy and snuggly.
Even barring these things,
if he or she is chill about you taking care of yourself while they
hang out,
but he or she would rather not get too paws-on about your
masturbation themselves
then even just having someone else there in the room who
you're friends with is fun.

Feeling It

Drunk and really feeling this mattress
you did a big leap onto the bed
and laid down with me.
Smushing my balls around with one hand
I nuzzled into your side.
Realizing how much I appreciate this,
I grabbed my notebook and felt-tip pen
and on the bed beside you I wrote down this poem.

Sniffs

I think most dog people would get something out of with your
dog
while he or she is lying down
respectfully lifting their tail
and lying down with them
rest your face in front of their butthole
and just lie there with them
flaring your nostrils
and taking in the smells over time
seconds, minutes,
as you get to know the rear end
of their digestive tract
a whole lot more intimately
smelling their odor and occasional gas
each fart smelling a little bit different to the others,
hitting a little bit different to the others.
There is no need to lick or kiss,
to pleasure or to entertain—
just stay there,
lying down with your face in his or her butthole,
sniffing,
sensing,
taking in,
and all in all generally observing what it is like back there.
Zoo or non zoo,
I think you will feel closer with your dog afterwards.
The dogs already know each other like this, by their smells,
but they have better noses,
so as a human you gotta get real close and personal up in there.

Memo

100% optional “this dick” proposal—
it’s there if you want it.

Aw, thank you.

Good dog.

Air Conditioning

The air conditioning unit is an extremely un-subtle droning
as my boyfriend and I lie together in bed,
each of us naked head to toes.

Neither of us is really trying to fall asleep yet.
We snuggle and we make out,
human tongue and doggy tongue dancing
in this cool, naked bedroom.

Someday tonight we will go to sleep for real
and wake up well rested.

Dogs

Dogs

Still Dogs tbh

still Dogs tbh
kissin em
walkin em
pettin em
givin em personal space if they want it and being happy to know
that they're happy
givin em good food every day that's healthy for them and that
they like
listinin to what they got to tell you about
tossin em dog treats or handing them to them depending on
their preference at that moment
tossin or handin em a second or maybe even a third dog treat
because you like them so much
takin naps together
hangin out
dogs are great

Maternal

Snuggled up into your tummy
I think about the fact that you probably drank from your
mother.
I wonder whether you remember that.
I wonder whether you hold in you some maternal instinct
that makes you accepting when I want to nuzzle into your
stomach.
Whatever you are,
maternal or stud,
you are perfect.

Untitled Maturation

Wet dog smell
Getting hair in your mouth
Things that once seemed bad
Now nice

Moment

Hanging out on the bed
Dude and dog
You're worried about the dishwasher
I'm here for you
All the security and space you need

Memento

Cuddling
nostrils flared
to sniff your fur as deeply as possible
I am stricken with sadness
as I remember that you will die.
There will be a point in my life
after which you will never be there.

Untitled Vague Green Bug

Out walking the dog
Vague little green bug jumps over onto my eyelashes.
You can hang out there for a while if you need to little
individual.
There's no worries.

Metal Bit

When we walk
I often wonder whether the clasp on your leash
will hold forever.
As I commit this thought to writing,
I also wonder whether it ought to.
I do mostly use it to stop you from getting hit by cars.

Communication

There are depths to interspecies communication that I know
seem
hyperbolic to those who are deaf to the words of their dogs.
The other day a dog I was playing around with said something
to me that I swear if I were translating from canine body
language
into English was “Get over here Nerd” before then smugly
taking
my hand and using it to make himself cum. He was very pleased
with
himself, and how should he not be, after pulling off such a
move?

I Get It

I assume some people are jealous
of how often I get to pet a dog;
of how often he rolls over
for me to rub his belly;
of how often in the morning,
first thing,
before either of us has fully woken up,
the first thing my dog and I will do is snuggle;
of how often we kiss, and how thoroughly,
lip pressing to lip, his enormous tongue
licking my eyelids,
my tongue,
or the back of my throat;
of how much he trusts me;
of how nonchalantly we touch each other's dicks;
of how awesome his knot is,
big and red and veiny, throbbing,
a sign of such satisfaction;
of how much he likes to go out and walk with me;
of how happy he is when I come back home
from grocery shopping or from getting us fast food to share;
in short—I get it—
some people are jealous of how much my dog and I love each
other.

An Interest

Dogs evolved from wolves
and so many breeds of dogs exist today
because we took such a pointed interest
in their sex lives.

Is it any wonder that they
should have a sexual interest
in us

Superlative

I cannot overemphasize
how good dogs smell,
how beautiful they look—
their structure, their coats, their facial expressions—
how fathomless their capacity for kindness,
how contagious their expressions of joy,
and how soft their fur is
to hold against yourself
or to pet.

ZETA

Zoophiles for the
Ethical
Tongue kissing of
Animals

hehe

(Shh Secrets For Zoosexuals Time)

(Most people don't actually care you guys.)

(It's really only a smaller-than-it-would-sound number of noisy
bully types who make such an alarmingly big panic out of it.)

(Treat it like playing minesweeper.)

(Proceed with caution
but don't think that it is impossible to proceed.)

Police Dogs

Make dog love not dog war.

Suddenly Cognizant Seconds Apropos Of A Life That While In That Moment Cliche Is Being Well Lived

Seeing a sunset

Feeling immersed in a good book

Getting a message from a friend

Touching warm laundry

Relaxing in a hot tub

Walking through a dapple forest trail

Making out with a dog's butthole

Taking an accomplished huff of a breath after a hard day's work

Creating little arts like paper airplanes or doodles

Drinking a much desired glass of water

Hearing a new song that you really like

Hearing an old song that really takes you back

Making out with a dog's butthole a second time

Finishing dusting and vacuuming a room

Biting carefree into an apple or a plum

Snuggling with someone you're in love with