

# **The Street Sweeper**

**By Pavlo I. Viktorovych**

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## DEDICATION

*To all the people we ignore every day. You are the strong arm that keeps society standing. I, here, recognise your existence and praise your efforts through a fiction novel!*

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Pavlo I. Viktorovych

## **The Fishmonger**

It was here, the most violent country on the planet, where an unusual man was born. He was an utter mistake between the local Izalco Butcher and the street vendor. They fucked once, thinking they could escape faith and fool luck, but after the bad news, the Butcher disappeared, and the street vendor tried to abort him.

Her work was taxing, and her lack of money pushed her to bear the unwanted baby for nine months. She gave birth to him in a narrow dark alley near her stall, where she dumped him still in thick greyish-white discharge, vaginal fluids and blood. He was screaming nonstop between the placenta, the trash and the black running water in that dirty street facing a fishmonger's rear exit.

He stopped crying and listened to the morning chirping on the rooftops. He could hear the roaring sound of a motorbike passing by cars. He could see the strip of the sky opening from the balconies of the two buildings. His senses came to life as they were triggered for the first time.

Despite other kids' first time, he didn't spend his first minutes in a hospital or someone's arms. Let alone imagine if he will ever see a crib or a family. He belonged to the street of El Salvador, AKA 'the land of volcanoes, famous for its frequent earthquakes and volcanic activities. It is the only

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country in South America that doesn't have a coastline on the Caribbean Sea. El Salvador is one of the most violent countries in the world after Venezuela and Mexico.

He didn't get scared when a giant brown rat approached him and fed himself with his mom's placenta beside him. He smiled at the rat and stretched his short arms to him as if he wanted a hug. He would have accepted any hug, but the rat didn't appreciate the food offered, so he left him alone in the dirt.

It was a summertime morning in Izalco; the sun hit almost 39° Celsius, and no clouds covered the city. However, two buildings projected an immense shadow sheltering the baby while a gentle breeze carried the heavy fermented smell of trash and a stingy stench of rotten fish.

He sneezed a few times, probably thinking something was pinching his nose from the inside. With time he got used to that smell and almost appreciated it: he thought that was how the world was supposed to smell. The alley had a thin stream of dirty liquid on the sides of the sidewalks, as there were no manholes, and a populated family of cockroaches would wander around.

The black water and sewage systems weren't at the top of their game in El Salvador. Still, things worked enough to keep the city of Izalco safe from significant diseases. In that quiet city, people were way more dangerous than diseases: they

were the leading cause of death. His mom has been kind enough to leave him in such a quiet alley as many people on the main road would step on him or sell him in the black market.

There wasn't much work in El Salvador, and most people would open their shop business or work for one. You would have street vendors and nomad vendors travelling around the country selling all sorts of stuff. During the night, the dark alley would swarm with junkies and pushers. Many crimes would be committed there, and some murders as well. Robbery and kidnapping were a reality but not so popular in Izalco.

Tourists would be the most targeted as they were easy to spot and rob. They would shit themselves on the sight of a knife and give you even their underwear if they didn't shit them yet. But now, El Salvador was getting a bad reputation, and you couldn't see many tourists anymore. Robbing locals wasn't the same, many would be armed, and others would be ready to react to any aggression. The criminal could become a victim in the blink of an eye: victims would kill many robbers. Police didn't bother to investigate such 'petty' crimes.

The robbery industry was in deep crisis, and criminals went on greener pastures. Sex trafficking and drug dealing were the country's most common criminal alternatives; many gangs would compete for monopoly and turf control. Many

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deals were made between bosses, and many more were broken with steel and blood. Dealing with such a level of scum was unimaginable and unrealistic for the authorities on the cartel's payroll or under a few layers of soil.

The baby had little time to live unless he found food or anyone willing to care for him. He could starve to death, or vouches could eat him. He didn't seem to notice all the dangers around him and the hard life he would have to endure to make it on his own. He innocently smiled and screamed with happiness: he was too amazed about the little things of his first minutes in that cruel city.

He heard some noise from the left building while someone opened the front door from the primary street. He could hear the rattling sound of keys, tools and electric gear turning on. It was the sound of the refrigerated fish shop counter. A sudden noise of ice falling on metal and voices upset the baby, who cried out loud after an unexpectedly long silence.

A van parked on the main street, and three men talked with the owner. They were the fishmonger's loyal suppliers. They loaded a variety of fresh fish and brought it inside the shop. The fishmonger paid the fishermen and waved them goodbye. He loaded the fish on the icy counter behind the protective glass. He emptied more than 24 big fish boxes in less than an hour.



He opened the store to customers and walked to the back door to move the boxes in the narrow alley near his side of the sidewalk. He crashed the boxes and stacked them on top of each other. He half-closed the backdoor behind him and stopped all of a sudden. He set his attention to his ear like a dog ready to run.

*Those fucking kids! I am going to kill them today!*

“What is this mess? I swear if you come here again, I will chop you into little pieces like calamari rings!” the man roared after storming outside the rear alley wearing a white, now bloody, butcher apron. He was wearing blue latex gloves and holding a bloody meat cleaver, still dripping blood. “This fucking stray kids! Always busting the balls of a respectable working man! Show yourself! Where are you?” the man kept shouting while walking back and forth in the alley like a bulldog who saw a cat enter his territory.

He paused a bit and listened carefully for any feedback. Nothing. He left his monstrous cleaver on a trash bin lid and removed his blue gloves. He tucked them in his pants back pocket and reached for his pack of cigarettes in the top left shirt pocket. He had to untie his apron to release his belly and facilitate the reach for the pack of cigarettes. He took it and checked inside.

“Fuuuuuck!” he roared while taking the last Marlboro.

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He crushed the red pack and threw it over his right shoulder without looking. He reached for his lighter from his left pocket while putting the cigarette between his lips. He turned the light on and approached the flame to his mouth.

*"Aaaaaah! Aaaaaah! Aaaaaah!"* a baby cried five metres from him. He lost his shit and dropped his last cigarette on a filthy black pond where the streams of all the liquids from his fish shop meet.

*"Pendejo! De puta Madre! If I catch you! Where are you hiding?!"* he swore, picking up his cleaver and running towards the direction of that noise, stepping on his now soaking-wet Marlboro.

*"Aaaaaah! Aaaaaah! Aaaaaah!"* the crying intensified. The fishmonger passed by the baby with fury in his feet. He stopped, walked five steps backwards and turned his head to the left. In the middle of the trash bags (he brought outside 10 minutes ago) was laying a baby wrapped in dirty clothes.

*"What the fuck is that?! Is that a- baby? Who comes dumping babies in 'MY' alley? If you can't feed them, don't make them!"* he scoffed indifferently and relaxed his shoulder. He moved back to his shop backdoor through that same dark alley. He reached his door and put a hand on the handle. He opened the door and saw that he had some clients waiting from the other side of the shop counter.

“Aaaaaah! Aaaaaah! Aaaaaah!” the kid cried relentlessly. He looked his next client in the eyes and raised an annoyed eyebrow while closing the door and shutting the noise behind him.

*Not my fucking problem! I have work to do! Food doesn't magically appear on my dinner table!*

“I am coming.” he roared to his next customer while putting his gloves back on. “What can I get you today, Sir?” he tried to be as friendly as possible and deliver a forced smile: he was inherently bad at it.

“One kilo of calamari, six Oysters, 200 grams of tuna fillet and an octopus, please.” the customer said impatiently.

“Right on, sir!” the Fishmonger served the customer's request and weighed the fish on a scale.

*What a shitface this guy has. I wonder if his wife fucks him with pleasure. Maybe she can't even get wet looking at that face! I bet she turns off the lights and cries in the dark! Perhaps he doesn't even have one. What a loser! Why does he even need so many calamari? Does he have ten kids? Poor man? I hope he doesn't fry them! I won't allow him to violate my fish! I bet he doesn't understand the difference between fresh and old Calamari. I should have given him the Calamari from yesterday! This asshole wouldn't notice fresh from rotten! I wouldn't deprive the stray dogs of the leftover food for this asshole, anyway!*

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“Here you go, it’s 23.65 dollars,” he said to the customer, extended his hand over the counter and collected his money while handing over the fish. He touched the customer's hand with his bloody glove and gave him a fake smile.

*Here you have your rest! Do you like this shit? You'll smell like crap for another hour now! Fuck I love my job! I can imagine his wife's face. 'Dear, why do you stink of fish?'*

Those little things were his only pleasures in an otherwise tedious job. He liked to mask his sadistic actions with an innocent face. He didn't have many loyal customers, probably due to how he treated them: he loved seeing new faces anyway. He would try to examine his clients from how they dressed, held themselves, walked, talked and looked at him. As you may have already guessed, he didn't have many friends. In fact, he had none. His best friend was his mind; it would never contradict him, would always agree with him and would not speak unless spoken to. He was a 'different' man, but he knew everyone was like that deep down inside.

*I wonder what this asshole is thinking now! Why did he look at my fish that way? Don't you like it? Fuck off! The fish may not get it personally, but I do! That is my fish! You have a problem with my fish; you have a problem with me!*

No one had the balls to say what they thought, and, despite he would, he had to refrain from it during work. Word would spread quickly, and he would remain penniless; he

would speak with his mind more than with his customers, and he would dream that one day he could say all those things to their faces. However, he should have respected this annoying thing called 'etiquette' to live in a functioning society. Outside his shop, he would be his true self: sadistic, cynical, rude, selfish, ungrateful and alone.

Nobody knew his real story, why he opened his shop in Izalco and why he didn't have a family. He was a quiet and resentful man who would cut like a knife when talking, which made him not the best friend material. However, I think everyone needs someone like him sometimes in their life. People like the Fishmonger, who speak their minds and tell things for how they see them (for how despicable it may sound), are a fundamental part of a healthy society.

He could take this too literally and share more than his unfiltered thoughts sometimes, which made it unpleasant to have a conversation with him. You could not have a critical discussion, as he would shout at you if you dared to imply he was wrong. People would go to his shop only because he owned the biggest fish shop in that little city. His fish was fresh, and he had a great variety of quality catches of the day. He was an impeccable businessman and reliable with his suppliers.

Some Izalco citizens would gossip that he was a drug cartel member and became a fishmonger after 'Sombre Negra'

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(the military police in charge of fighting gangs) killed his boss. All the members ran away with new identities, and his was that of a fishmonger. He was reserved and cautious but didn't bother being the most hated man in Izalco.

"Next! I said next! Are you deaf or what?!" he shouted to his next customer while cleaning the counter from the fish scales.

"Hi there, this is my first time in this shop. Do you have a delicacy to suggest to me? I mean, I used to go to Vincent--"

"Get out!" he scoffed with anger.

"Sorry? What do you mean 'get out'?" the client asked, shocked while surrendering and raising his hands.

"I do not serve Vincent's clients! They have eaten so much shit fish that they wouldn't distinguish fish from shit! So fuck off and go to Vincent's and his shit fish! I won't waste my product with someone who doesn't even know what to buy!" he whispered, covering his mouth and opening his eyes like an owl. That wasn't the first time he said that to a customer.

"Is this the way to treat your customers?" he asked, looking for an explanation and raising his voice.

"You'll never be my customer. Now fuck off! I have a long queue to serve here!" he replied, losing his calm and pointing to the exit squirting some fish blood from his glove on the face of the man.

Vincent's customer left appalled and in total disbelief at what had happened. He has never been treated like that in his entire life. I don't think he will return, but the Fishmonger was delighted.

*Why is Vincent not serving his dumb clients? What is wrong with him if his clients instead go to my shop? Is he dead?! he thought with a stupid smile on his face.*

Vincent was one of his first clients; he founded a small fish shop after a lit fight with the Fishmonger for his rude attitude towards Asian people. Vincent opened his new business and marketed himself as a fish shop selling to everyone 'not like the other one': he would write on his commercial posters. The two would fight since then as they have been the only two fish shops in Izalco: good and evil. Vincent was kind but didn't have much variety, while the Fishmonger had a terrible temper but had more variety of fresh fish. Customers would close an eye for this, while others wouldn't trade a good day for better fish.

The two fishmongers were the centre of the discussion and gossip in the city; some magazines would write about them to broaden their target audience. When some rebellious kids set the man's fish shop on fire, everyone thought Vincent paid them to do that: the man believed that too. Revenge was settled with a bomb in Vincent's premises that injured three customers. Their relationship was precarious; turning the men

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into violence wouldn't take much. No bilateral peace meetings would ever happen since that terrifying event.

That was his business, his baby and his life. He had fought hard to be where he was, and no one would dare to push him over the edge. The business has always been doing great, allowing him to be more selective with his customers. He would serve only locals and refuse the following: black people, Asians, Caucasian, Americans and Vincent's customers.

"Next in line! Come on; I don't have all day! Fish will spoil waiting for you!" he said annoyedly while washing his gloves in a filthy sink.

"Can I--"

"No, José, I told you many times I am not going to serve you! You made a decision years ago! Go to Vincent's. You are not my customer, and you never will," he said, a bit surprised at the man's insistence. "This is the third time in a week you have come here. I don't have Alzheimer's; I remember your face! Why is it that you are insisting on coming here? Do you like to check on me? Or are you a Vincent spy? I didn't know you loved me so much!" he laughed while weighing fish for another customer.

"Trust me; I would go elsewhere with pleasure if I could!" José said, distorting his face and folding his arms on his spot. "Vincent has closed the shop for a week now without notice or



explanation,” he said, scratching his head in discomfort, almost begging the man to sell him fish.

*That fucking loser failed! I need to celebrate later! Champagne or Spumante? I may finally open the good old bottle of Mezcal! This all explains why lately I have had so many Vincent's customers. Should I sell fish to them? Fuck no! Traitors! I rather lose money than be weak! What if people thought I have a generous soul? Every punk would start opening fish shops all around Izalco! I have the monopoly now, and I make the rules!*

“What is with you? Why are you still there? I have better customers to serve! Go to Sonzacate if you want some fish!” he shouted, looking like a dictator, banging his fist on the counter. Some fish scales flew on the customer's face.

*I wonder what happened to Vincent. I hope my plan of spying on him and sending the health control officers for a 'health hazard' complaint worked! I am a genius!*

“Next! Come on; we are not selling furniture here! You look like a bunch of old women! I said next-”

“Are you the owner?” asked a man in a black suit while showing his Badge: an FBI agent.

*Fuuuck, what are the pigs doing here in my shop? I knew that bitch talked! What a filthy whore, and she wanted me to marry her!*

“Do you see anyone else here, officer? Sure, I am the owner! I wouldn't entrust my business to anyone but me and

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only me alone!" he said proudly while wrapping an octopus in a newspaper.

"Maybe if you did, more people would enter than leave your shop." remarked a second officer after he made his way through the thick and disorganised queue.

*Perfect, two pufferfish with a badge in my shop! What the fuck is he implying, that I should be 'kind'?! I give them 2 minutes, then kick their asses!*

"I get no business lectures from two officers who should be in a butcher shop." he scoffed with a chuckle while folding his arms as a sign of protection.

*Fucking pigs!*

"What? Why do you say a butcher—"

"Do you know this man? He was found dead a week ago near Caluco." the first officer interrupted his partner, understanding the Fishmonger's rude figure of speech. He showed him a picture of the victim.

*Vincent? Did Salmonella kill you? Fuck, I know why these pigs are here; they think I killed one of my worst business competitors! Plausible, I had a motive and am deemed capable of nasty things.*

"I know him, and he's an asshole! What killed him? Salmonella?" he said with a smile and no sadness in his voice. He went back to serving the next customer.

“You mean ‘who killed him’? A rather interesting remark was the one you made about the butcher shop--”

“They found him with no limbs. A butcher, we thought at first. Such clean, straight cuts like a professional. But then, we wondered that you, too, might be exceptional with the knife, right?” the first officer Interrupted his irruptive partner again and looked at the Fishmonger’s cleaver. He approached the counter and looked closer at that blade.

“Look! I have no time to waste! I have customers who are waiting, and the fish is still fresh! I haven’t killed that asshole, even if I wish it were me! You are in the wrong place here!” he lost his patience and signalled the next customer behind the officers to approach. He picked the cleaver up and almost cut the officer’s nose. “Be careful, officer! You may cut yourself if you put the nose in the wrong place!” he burped while the fast movement of the cleaver splashed some blood on his face.

“We found the killer. It was the local butcher of this city. He seemed he couldn't get around an Asian man fucking his girlfriend. So he killed him, left the city and his pregnant woman,” concluded the first officer while observing the Fishmonger’s reaction to that news. He didn’t flinch. He was hardly listening.

*The world is fucked; we all know it, dumb pigs! You are the only one giving a crap about it! I am happy that asshole died! I would*

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*have killed him myself if he only looked at my girl! I mean, if I had one.*

“We are going to keep an eye on you. I don’t like—”

“Can I have 100 grams of prawns?! What took so long?” a customer roared, pushing the second officer apart while stepping before him.

“Yes, ma’am! Right away, and sorry for the wait! These people have no respect for the hard-working men!” he shouted, making sure the officers that were leaving heard him well. They disappeared in the crowd. That day, he served another couple of dozen hungry customers until it was finally time to close the shop.

“Thanks. Have a lovely day, mister. Hope you enjoy your weekend!” said the last customer of the day, collecting the fish over the counter.

*How can people be so irritably kind? I hate them; I don’t believe they think that; I wonder what they think. Why can people be like me: speak their minds? The world would be a better place. Ruder, but more honest.*

“A great day to you,” the Fishmonger paused, “fat woman!” he concluded with a chuckle after she exited the shop.

*I am so fucking exhausted! Today I had a record of customers despite rejecting many of Vincent’s traitors. I foresee many more to*

*come tomorrow and the day after! It is going to be stressful to deal with the demand.*

The man approached the entrance door and locked it after checking for a second outside. No Movement. He lowered the curtains in both the front windows and turned off the refrigerated counter. He collected the leftover fish – which wasn't much that day – into a bucket and went through the backdoor out in the ally, now almost entirely dark. As usual, the dogs were waiting with impatience outside for their share. The man threw the fish in the middle of the alley and stood there while observing the dogs.

“Good dogs! Eat all and don't leave anything. I don't want any seagull to shit my alley again!” he roared, encouraging the dogs.

*I almost like giving my fish for free to stray dogs more than my undeserving crap customers full of human shit!*

The dogs were eating like wild, ravenous beasts, biting each other and fighting for the last fish. After they cleaned the alley with their tongues at perfection, they sat and looked at him with greed. They barked, and suddenly, more dogs came demanding more.

“You greedy bastards! That's all! See you tomorrow! Get away, come on, Shuush!” shouted the man scaring them with a foot. The dogs ran away with full bellies and their tails between their legs.

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*I was wrong; dogs are as greedy as people! But I still like them more: at least they obey and don't talk nonsense!*

The man removed his apron and gloves and left them on the lid of the blue trash bin full of trash from a day of work. He reached for his new pack of cigarettes and took a Marlboro he lit with his lighter and smoked with pleasure. That was his blessed time with himself. He enjoyed taking breaks, but that day he was swamped, and that cigarette represented all the missing breaks of the day. It was an essential and much-needed smoke, especially after encountering those agents. The sun was setting slowly, but he could not appreciate the view from the narrow alley. He didn't mind; he wasn't a romantic nor a nature lover. He had almost finished his cigarette when he heard it again.

"Aaaaaaah! Aaaaaah! Aaaaaaah!" the baby was still there, crying his lungs out.

*Fuck, not again! I thought the dogs would eat it before the end of the day!*

The man approached the baby, knowing his location; he stopped before him and put his fists on his hips in a thinking pose. He stepped forward and bent on his knees.

"You are a fucking nightmare but a strong baby, after all! You can't stay here for the night, or you will surely die! Why did you cry? Now I feel responsible for saving you smooth ass

from the streets!” the man whispered to the baby, who stopped crying and looked at him in awe.

*What are you talking about? Leave him to the dogs! You have too many things to think about. Do you want to save this orphan, he will be your free employee. I always needed help but never trusted anyone!*

“Okay, okay! You win; I will keep you for only one day! Then you will have to deal with the orphanage.” he scoffed impatient at the smiling baby. The man picked up the filthy baby wrapped in dirty clothes, now dried and hard like a plaster cast and removed him from the trash. He kept him away from his chest like the dirtiest thing on earth, left the alley and returned to his shop. The Fishmonger was used to sickening smells and almost immune to the fish stink, but that baby emanated an uncharted fragrance.

“You gonna sleep here and no crying, ok?!” the man ordered, laying the kid on the shop table.

*I am not going to change his clothes! I am not keeping him; why should I care? I am tired, and I need sleep! Tomorrow is going to be a busy day!*

The man left him alone and went upstairs, where he had his apartment. He used to live right above his shop like many business owners in that city did. It is more convenient and easier to save money on transport and, in his case, food. To economise, he would cook his fish for dinner, eat the leftovers

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for lunch the next day, and skip breakfast. His intermittent fasting routine allowed him to keep fit and thin all year round.

His apartment was extremely spartan and small, a great compromise since he always lived alone and was not planning to have a family. "Families are a waste of money and energy! Moreover, once kids grow up, they are ungrateful and cause too much trouble." he would always mumble to himself. His routine would be finishing work at 7 pm, having dinner, sleeping at 9:30 pm and waking up at 5 am when he would open his shop again. He would reluctantly shower and smell like fish again the next day, "what a waste of water!" he would complain once a month.

He wouldn't wash his head because he was bald and never spent money on shampoos, body gels or creams. He used to live more in the shop than in his apartment upstairs; in fact, he would have more appliances and valuable things in the shop than in his apartment. His apartment resembled a storage room; his bedroom was the only 'livable' space. He didn't have a proper shower, but he would fill a bucket of water and shower outside in the alley behind the shop. He rarely brushed his teeth and never flossed in his life.

He thought people were stupid for wasting money on healthcare or keeping clean a body doomed to get dirty, old and, at last, decay. Instead, he invested his cash in booze, fucking whores and gambling on cock fights. That was his life



and the reality for many people in that tiny city and El Salvador. He has never travelled and never loved anyone more than himself; he was antisocial, hated talking and could not get along with anyone. He had no family he could recall, and his parents left him when he was 12. He has sold fish ever since.

He worked several jobs and could not retain them because of his temper. He would always tell what he thought and never compromise or come to terms with anyone. When he was 17, he almost killed a sailor with a fishing net. He threw it on the sailor, who nearly drowned in the water. The sailor was trapped in the net, and if it weren't for a man nearby who helped him, he would have died. The Fishmonger stood still and did nothing. He didn't feel anything. At 21, he had profound and long conversations with his mind, and since that moment, it has become his best friend. He realised he didn't need anyone else in his life. He founded that business, and he loved being alone.

No one knew his name, and he rejected it in disdain (as a symbolic decision) for his parent's abandonment. He called himself the 'Fishmonger', and everyone went with it without asking questions. He didn't have documents after they prohibited him from changing his name to 'Fishmonger'. The government officials said they needed a proper name, and a profession wasn't adequate. He sent them to 'fuck a pig' and

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burnt his documents once and for all. That day he knew who he was. He was free from his past, becoming a great businessman and a no-one.

As he got old, his beard revealed the first grey hair, and the only thought of losing his business would depress him. Who would inherit it? In his opinion, no one was worth it, and no one will ever be. Seeing his business dying with him was rather romantic and a brave choice: in his opinion. The only thought of giving it to someone selling his fish to non-locals or Vincent's customers made him shiver with goosebumps of disgust.

## Call Me Dad

He went downstairs the following day and opened the heavy separatory door at the bottom of the staircase. He entered the shop and was hit by a familiar stinging smell: it was shit. The baby was crying on the table and coughing heavy bronchitis in the air. He had been wrapped in wet clothes for an entire day, and now he was scorching hot with his face purple. His cough sounded 'medical attention' bad, but the man didn't seem to care much.

"I leave you one night alone, and you shit my shop? Is this the way to repay me for saving you from sure death? I already had enough of this!" the man yelled to the baby, who smiled at him and laughed joyfully before resuming coughing.

*Why is he smiling? Do I have anything on my face? Do I look funny? This doesn't make any sense!*

The man moved him on the chair while he cleaned up the mess he made while spraying some perfume without daring to change the baby's clothes, now soaked in shit, sweat and dirt. His suppliers arrived, but he still didn't open the front door. He left what he was doing and catapulted to open the door and welcome that day catch. He sighed with relief when he realised he had got herrings that may cover the baby's smell. He went on his usual routine and opened the shop, and his first weekend, customers entered the fish shop one by one.

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“Can I have 13 herrings?” a customer asked.

*Why 13? Some people don't know what the fuck they are talking about!*

“Sure! Here you go,” he said, handing over the fish and collecting the cash over the counter. “Next, please! Hey you, are you deaf or what?!” he shouted to a teenager next in line.

“Is that baby yours?” the teen asked, surprised knowing the man.

“Do you wanna buy fish, or are you his dad? If it's neither, you can go and fuck yourself! I had enough troubles with kids and babies yesterday!” he scoffed, cutting him short with a piercing look.

“My mom asked for—” he paused and picked a list from his pocket.

*Here we go again, a time waster! I hate them! I give him 5 seconds, then kick his ass out of here!*

“My mom wants: ten shrimps, four prawns, one octopus and two calamari!” he finished reading the shopping list with a stupid smile.

*If I ever had such a dumb kid, I would kill him with my hand and try to make a new one. You can't get things right the first time. Practice makes perfect!*

The man gave him the fish and collected the money over the counter. That action was so repetitive that he would sprinkle fish water on some customers to find joy in that

tedious movement. Sometimes he would touch the customer's hand and spread blood on them. Once, he faked to slipper and threw a bucket of dirty water on the queue before him. He apologised but did it on purpose: and the customers knew. He would instil fear to earn respect, but we would get a cold clientele in return.

“What a beautiful baby you have, mister! Is it a boy? You are so lucky. My husband and I wanted one, and we tried many times to have it, but we can’t-”

*Maybe because you are a fat pig and, maybe, he can't find your pussy? Have you ever tried eating less? You are not infertile; you are just a watermelon! And a verbose one!*

“Do you want it? It’s yours if you want it! I just found him out in the streets! He’s not my baby! I would never be so stupid to make a baby!” he scoffed angrily at the woman, speeding up his movements while cleaning and gutting the fish.

“I didn’t know you had a sense of humour, mister. Maybe they were wrong about you after all. Everyone can change! Congratulations on the baby again, and thanks for the-”

*This is not my fucking baby! Why won't you people stick it in your brains? Humour? Me? You have humour by saying that! You don't know me, fat woman! Is everyone going to talk about this baby all day?*

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The man moved from behind the counter to the chair where he laid the baby. He picked him up and put it on a stool behind him out of customers' sight. The baby cried, but he ignored him.

"May I have--"

"Who is crying?" the next customer asked.

*Don't push me, man! Don't push me! I warn you! Don't fucking push me!*

"I don't hear anything! What do you need?!" he asked, cutting him short.

"I am quite sure a baby is crying somewhere here! Can you guys hear it?" the customer asked the queue behind him, who agreed with a silent nod.

*I said not to push me. Why you had to do that? Get your fucking fish and get back to where you came from! It's easy. Don't come nosing in my business!*

"Get out, all of you! You had me pissed! I said, get out, all of you!!" the Fishmonger screamed while waving his hands, holding two razor-sharp cleavers. He left the counter and pushed the crowd out of his shop with his bloody gloves. He smashed the door, closed the curtains and flipped the sign to *Cerrado*. He pushed his back on the door and enjoyed the silence for a bit before the baby broke it with his cough, now resembling a boiling kettle. He approached the baby, picked him up, took his car keys, locked the shop's front door, and

drove to the nearest hospital. His face revealed pure anger and rage, which you could notice from how he was driving.

“Would you shut up, for god’s sake? You are a pain in the ass! I am trying to help you here, ok? Should I dump you in the first alley I find again?!” he asked, looking back and forth from the street to the baby and vice versa.

*Dump him! He has been a problem since you took him! Your business is losing money, and you should spend your time wisely! He is not your responsibility! You are not obligated to keep it!*

The man was speeding in his car, invading opposite lanes and passing vehicles in narrow streets. He almost ran over six people on a sidewalk and a couple on the zebra crossing. He went through several red lights, and he caused an accident behind him.

“What is this smell?! Don’t tell me–”

“You shit yourself again!!!” he shouted, pulling the hand break, parking half car on the sidewalk after a long squeaking drift that left a long tire mark on the asphalt.

The baby shit himself again on the car's bright brown backseat due to the extreme driving and the loud noise. His stomach could not resist anymore. He cried. The man got out of the car and picked up the baby. He didn’t bother closing the car doors before he ran to an alley where he left him. He returned to the car, closed the back seat door, and entered the

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driver seat. He stopped for a few seconds and took a deep breath.

*What am I doing? Am I abandoning a baby? Again? I am no different than my parents! I am not different from the baby's parents! Don't be stupid! You can't believe what you are thinking. You belonged to your parents, and they didn't want you anymore! This is not your baby. It doesn't belong to you but to the streets or an orphanage! Your choice!!*

The man calmed down a bit and got out of the car again. He approached the baby, who was smiling and happy to see his face again. He probably thought he was playing 'hide and seek' with him. "Look, I will not dump you out here out of pure respect. We are going to the hospital, then I will bring you to the nuns. There, our paths will split!" the man whispered, exhausted while holding his breath.

*Let's get over this nightmare. The sooner I get rid of him, the faster I can return to work!*

He picked the baby up, put him on the passenger seat, and fastened his seatbelt. Off they went to the hospital, now five minutes away. It was more a small clinic than a hospital, where he entered with utter ungrace and disrespect; he skipped the long line of sick patients and pretended to start his triage at the top of the queue.



“Mister! There is a queue!” the nurse impatiently said in the triage booth, raising her eyesight with her glasses on the nose tip.

“I saw it! This is an emergency! This kid is probably dying. I found him—”

“Sorry! I waited more than two hours for my turn! Everyone here needs help, or we wouldn’t be here!” interrupted a woman he had just passed.

“Ah, yes? What do you have of so dramatic? Did a broomstick get stuck inside your asshole? Why are you so stiff? I have a ‘real’ problem here, hippo!!” the man scoffed, raising the stinky baby in the air like a chemical weapon. Everyone ran away at the sight of shit and the gust of dense, sticky smell.

“Sir, you have to wait for your turn! Some patients need more urgent medical attention. Your baby has severe bronchitis! We will assist you as soon as we can. Please-queue!!” she ordered, bringing a hand before her nose, sounding like a funny dwarf losing her cool with a nasal voice.

“I don’t have all this time! I need to return to work, and this is not my baby! How long do I have to wait? Hey? Can anyone answer me?!” he asked, lowering the baby and taking a seat in surrender.

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*This is fucking absurd! I don't hear anyone coughing or shouting in pain! I have an emergency here and don't have time for it! I should leave him here and go! Should I?*

After the man stayed in queue for a couple of hours, the nurse led him into a room where they measured the baby's temperature and pressure and checked his lungs. He was extremely sick and had a 39° Celsius body temperature. They gave him antibiotics for the infection and told him to rest for a week.

"Sir, this baby needs diapers and a shower! If you are not able to take care of him, I will proceed and call the social services who will provide--"

*Not able to do what, bitch? You don't have a pale idea of what I am capable of! I have survived on my own for my entire life! Built a successful business! Do not dare to doubt me!*

"I will take care of him!" he replied, blinded by pride but with visible disbelief in his eyes. He spoke his mind.

"Perfect! Remember to finish the cycle of antibiotics and measure the temperature regularly. Keep him dry and get him new clothes--"

"I know how to care for a baby!" he interrupted the nurse, and his insolence drove her crazy. She tried not to lose her professional composure.

"Do you?" she asked worriedly, raising an eyebrow and twisting her lips.

*Do I?*

“Thanks for your help, but we will be going now!” the man concluded while picking up the sick baby and leaving the clinic. They came back to the shop after a day of chaos. They stopped to get some diapers, new clothes and blankets. The baby was sleeping, and his cough drastically decreased. After drying him well, the man put on some gloves and changed his diapers and clothes. He wrapped him in blankets and tucked him in a box in his apartment: his provisory crib. The man carried his bones to his bedroom, didn’t remove his clothes and fainted like a baby. They both slept deeply despite the outside weekend noise caused by parties and bars.

The doorbell woke the baby up, whose crying woke the man. He checked the clock on his bedside table. “Fuck the suppliers!” he shouted, jumping on his feet and running down the stairs. He tripped on the dirty baby clothes and fell on his left side. The bell kept ringing, echoing his painful screams, and now an engine started. He arrived downstairs and opened the front door. He ran in the street, waving like a crazy man. Still, the suppliers flew away in their refrigerated vans to their next buyer.

“That is not good! Nothing has been going well since this baby appeared in my life!” he shouted, kicking a trash bin in the middle of the street. He smelled a familiar scent. It was the fish from the morning before, the one he didn’t manage to sell.

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It was rotten and smelled extremely bad. That was a month of work lost right there. When he locked the door angrily, he mistakenly shut the power, and the refrigerator went off. “De puta Madre! You stupid idiot! What have you done?” he said desperately while approaching the spoiled fish with a big bucket. He filled 15 buckets of fish and threw them in the narrow alley!

That day he probably fed all the hungry dogs in the city and nearby. However, the cats didn’t appreciate the fish at all. That morning the alley was the largest animal venue in town. Who thought that Saturdays could be exciting for animals too? The Fishmonger had the day off; for once, he was forced to enjoy his first Saturday. He cleaned the mess the melted ice created and reordered the tiny apartment upstairs. He went shopping and bought: a wooden crib, a year's supply of diapers, baby food, milk, a baby bottle, some cereals, juices, baby toys and anything else he thought worth getting.

*Who does need all this shit? Now I understand why people don't have kids, or if they have them, they dump them in a dark alley!*

After a couple of months, he got used to the baby being a pain in his ass. They got along well, and he didn’t feel he was sacrificing much of his ‘precious’ time from his work. The baby would usually stay upstairs, but he would cry, so he had to bring him downstairs to the shop, where customers would get to know him better. The baby was changing the man who

now wouldn't shout so much for fear of waking him up or making him cry. He would look threatening to customers who dared to touch or approach him too abruptly. People thought the management at the fish shop had changed. Still, instead, they realised that it was the manager who did. Everyone saw that kid as a blessing, the only thing that softened a lost man.

Customers liked the Fishmonger; for the first time, people respected him because they liked him and not fear him. He still swore and insulted some fat lady now and then, but he was getting incredibly better in the social domain. He would still not serve other races or Vincent's ex-customers (even after his tragic death). People still didn't like that about him, but no one was perfect. However, he wouldn't work to change that; it would be that way.

He was excited to see the Baby growing into a kid and being present in his formation. He used to teach him only practical things despite the Kid being unable to understand high-level carpentry or how to fillet a fish to perfection. We can say that he fell for the Kid, and now for the first time, he was scared to lose someone. He never loved anyone and never cared about anyone as much as he did with his rescued kid. Somehow, he reminded him of himself and wanted him to become a better person.

The first word he spoke was 'dog', which happened one day when they gave the leftover to the stray dogs in the dark

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alley where he was abandoned. He was 18 months now, and he could already talk and walk on his own. The fishmonger would make him perform basic tasks like: collecting money in a small colourful cardboard box (hanging on his neck) from customers and handing it over to him. That would save the man countless repetitive work hours and avoid the tedious over-the-counter touches. Moreover, it would suppress his perverted need to impregnate customers' hands with blood.

The kid attracted more customers, and it was the shop mascot. The man even made him a fish hat to wear around the shop so that customers could take a picture and post it tagging his fish shop on Social Media. That would work exceptionally well. The business was booming, and he was now recognised as 'the fishmonger with the cute kid' and not 'the fishmonger with the rude manners'. After a while, he served tourists and non-locals and gave up on rejecting Vincent's ex-customers. He was the only fishmonger in town, and he would have been silly not to make the most out of it before competition grew back again.

Many people have thought of opening another fish shop, but they got discouraged from seeing his success, so they went for a plan B. The man realised that being kinder or more considerate was, after all, a win-win strategy. He had now the money to branch out or open a franchise, but he didn't care much. He wanted to make that shop an iconic place where

locals and non-locals (now) could feel at home. He invested some of his returns in restructuring his apartment and his shop.

He got better refrigerators that are energy efficient. With the latest technology, they would have a secondary alimentation in case of a blackout. He expanded the building nearby by extending the wall and incorporating more space where he made a playground and a social space for customers with kids. He now has rented that spare space to some local street vendors who would come and put up their stalls and sell food cooked directly from the fish shop. People would gather around for lunch, dinner and a street food snack before getting some fish on the way home.

It was a terrific upselling investment, bringing more traffic to that street. The local authority noticed the Fishmonger's contribution and awarded him the MVC (Most Valuable Citizen). He would proudly hang it on his wall with a picture of the governor. The government decided to renovate the street nearby and build a square near the fish shop. They even put a fountain in the square with a big fish in the middle. Seeing so many people appreciating his work was a great honour for the man.

The Fishmonger wasn't talking to his mind for a while but made friends and had healthy conversations with customers. However, due to his fame in the city, he was still reluctant to

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trust that people liked him because of his character and not for his wealth. His best friend would be his kid, who grew healthy and tall at 6. He could speak Spanish and English perfectly and learnt a third language: French. The man had big plans for him, and the Kid seemed to agree. At 10, you could notice his eyes were a bit longer than white people with a marked almond shape. The man seemed not to notice or care since his 'no other races' rule was no longer in his shop. The Kid showed incredible intellectual skills and manual capabilities; he could serve the customers independently and make tools from the carpentry workshop without help. He would speak Spanish with international customers and sometimes use his French on rare occasions.

At 15, he opened the shop and turned on and off the refrigerators. He would bring the trash outside and feed the dogs with the leftovers. This allowed the man to sleep longer and relax when he entrusted him with the business. The man would explain how a business is run and how to manage the suppliers and the stock. They would discuss ways to improve revenues with intelligent investments. The Teen would travel around the city alone to find any possible business partners. He suggested the new butcher move closer to their fish shop as he noticed redundant customers' behaviour. People used to go to both on the same day and putting them close together



would motivate them to choose them over the competition for convenience.

The competition grew, and three other fish shops were opened in the city. However, the Fishmonger didn't suffer from this. He thought we could have suffered it if he didn't change into the person he is now, and he thanked the Teen for that. All the city knew them and adored them for the people they had become and for the incredible life-changing story of the Fishmonger. A university nearby used his story as a case study in humanistic and psychology courses. Even universities acknowledged his bravery in changing himself so radically. He didn't change on his own; his love for the Teen was the reason for such a miracle.

The man never told him about how he found him in the dark alley nor the uncertainty and reluctance he faced in raising him. No one was allowed to discuss this; he would cut them immediately if someone tried. He wanted to wait for the right moment to tell him when he was mature enough to understand it independently. The reality was that the man was scared of his reaction to the news. The Fishmonger never gave him a name as he has yet to be registered with the nativity registrar at the government. He explained his decision not to have a name and how he tried to change his to 'Fishmonger' and burnt his ID. The Teen liked not having a name: it was non-conventional.

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The man would explain that we should not be associated with one name as we are what we do: our actions. We should be named after the thing we do and what we contribute to in this world. He would never call anyone by name or share his own. He would say, "The butcher came here yesterday." or "The apple street vendor," or "The carpenter;". Yes, they were an unconventional bunch, and they stood up in that city but didn't care about opinions. They lived their lives, and everyone respected their belief the way they respected others'. Sometimes they had issues with the local authorities, who threatened to jail them because they didn't have a name or documents. However, their fame made them untouchable.

## Who Am I?

Time passed quickly when you had fun and didn't have money problems. The business was going great, and the Fishmonger had seen his healthier year than ever. The Teen had now become an irreplaceable resource to the man's business. He was naturally gifted and had a brilliant mind. He didn't have many friends, nor he talked a lot. His dad was the only person he had honest conversations with, and talking with someone else was taboo. The Fishmonger still didn't tell the Teen the truth about his past, and he was forbidden to speak with anyone outside the fish shop. He became suspicious.

He was almost 17, and he was demanding freedom. However, he felt trapped in his tiny bedroom in the fish shop, where he worked his fingers to the bone daily. He became the shop manager and was in charge of the business. He would: research the best suppliers, manage the supply chain, liaise with key stakeholders and find some investors to expand the operation in the US and the EU. The Fishmonger has noticed his recent discomfort but refrained from 'the speech'. He promised to tell him after they successfully opened the franchises. He remained selfish; after all, he was a fierce businessman.

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The Manager rebelled against the man that year and would not come to work. He would sleep all day despite the beatings the man would give him. He was on strike and demanded clarity; he had no social life and realised he had been deprived of a normal life. Other teens would think about girls, school, friends and travelling while his worries were business. He felt like the chicken of the golden eggs. He knew his work was making the company grow as he could read a financial statement and understand cash flow. He realised the man would desist and spill his guts if he went on a few week's strike.

However, he knew he was a stubborn donkey as much as he was. *It is going to be a great challenge*, thought the Manager. He would go outside in the morning to 'expand the business' and 'look for new opportunities', but he just had fun. He would gather with other teens and smoke weed; he would meet some girls and have his first sex; he would drink and come back home drunk.

"Are you becoming my dad? Your grandpa was a drunk; he beat me every night when he returned home, and he smelled like you do now! Is this how you repay me?" the Fishmonger scoffed while banging a box on the table.

"Repay you for what? For exploiting me for your business? For keeping me caged from normal life? For hiding the truth? Don't you think I have done enough? What is enough for

you?" fought back the Manager while folding his arm and facing the man with a challenging look.

"You think doing drugs, having sex, and drinking is living? You, my son, are taking the loser path! Gratifying yourself in short-time pleasures wouldn't change anything!" the man said with a patronising voice. "It is a drug like anything else! You know about business, you manage one very well. You speak three languages, for god's sake! You are more than street scum!" he continued with a trembling voice on the last remark.

"Do you know how I feel when my peers ask me for my name, and I don't know how to reply? I tell them to call me 'the Manager'; it is fucked up! Why don't you have a name?! Why are we so weird?! Why can't we be normal?" he opened his arms in despair and raised his voice.

"What is so exciting about being normal? Ordinary people want to be us, and you want to be them? You are the most renowned manager in the nation. What would they tell about you if they knew you went to whores, did drugs and drowned your sorrows in booze? What would they say about me? How would the business be impacted?" he continued calmly, reaching for his shoulder.

"I envy normal people; they don't have to worry about disappointing anyone; they don't have unrealistic expectations; they don't have to worry about paparazzi or

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what the newspaper or people think about them! They have a normal family who loves them!" he raised his voice and stamped a foot on the floor while dodging the man's comforting hand.

"Son, I know it is difficult to understand now, but all I have ever done was for you and your future. I want you to get out of here and have a better life; I don't want you to become a Fishmonger; I don't want you to be a normal person! Nothing is exciting about being average. You are gifted; you have a big heart and a fire in you. You are a fighter and a great Manager!" he said, stepping back regarding his son's personal space.

"How can I know if I am supposed to be a manager if this is all I have ever known? I haven't lived a day out of this building or travelled. What if I am doing this only because you want me to?! I need to understand who I am and what I want! Please do not interfere in this, Dad! I want to find my path, OK?" he asked, lowering his voice and turning his back to the man.

"Got it, son! I just want you to know one last—"

"No, Dad, you said enough today!" the Manager interrupted while storming upstairs into his bedroom.

*I am getting things out of control! Why have I waited so long? Am I scared to lose him? But now I am losing him anyway! I*

*wanted to tell you the truth, stupid! Why did you interrupt me? I will say to him first thing first tomorrow morning!*

The following day the man knocked on his son's bedroom door. No answer. He opened it and noticed no one was inside. The bed was untouched, and the room was tidied up.

*Did he- did he leave? Where is he?*

The Manager was walking alone in the city centre when he entered the primary market 'El Mercado Civico', where he browsed the street food stalls. He had many choices: Pupusas, Tamales, Yuca Frita, Pastelitos, Tortas, Panes Mata Niños, Elotes Loco, Quesadillas, Nuegados, and Empanadas. He approached the Empanadas stall with a grumbling stomach, pointing at a delicious couple of Chorizo Empanadas while drooling.

"May I have those two, please?" he asked impatiently. He paid the woman and stretched his arms over the counter to collect his food.

"What's your name?" the woman asked, holding on to the two Chorizo Empanadas.

"I have none. You can call me 'Manager'. Can I have my Empanadas, please? I am ravenous!" the Manager got impatient while his stomach rumbled.

"Yes, sure! I am Maria, nice to meet you 'Manager'. Come back when--"

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“Have a nice day!” the Manager said while going on his way and biting his first Empanada.

*Why can't I go anywhere without having people notice me? I wish I were normal; I wish I weren't the manager of the most famous fish shop in the nation! This is a fucking nightmare!*

He has been stopped a couple dozen times by locals who demanded to take pictures with him. He would refuse and ask them to leave him alone; he would walk away and mumble angrily at these people.

*These fucking leaches don't give a shit about me. They want a picture to show their friends how cool they are. I won't give them this satisfaction! I am here to relax, for fuck sake! There is no respect anymore in the streets; I am even eating seriously, guys! Do I come and bust your balls while you are chewing your favourite food?*

“Are you-” the Manager passed a little kid who recognised him. He ignored him and kept walking. “Hey, stop! Wait! Are you the Fishmonger's son?” the little kid ran and approached his left side. “Your story inspired me, you know? I am an orphan too. My name is Irvin, and I want to become a manager like you one day!” Irvin kept talking, increasing his walking pace to stay on his side. “Everyone talks about an orphan saved in a dark alley by the angry local fishmonger and became the most famous manager in the-”



“What have you said?” the Manager interrupted him, stopped, lowered his Empanada, swallowed his bite and looked at the kid with puzzled eyes.

“Everyone knows what? Repeat, please!”

“That you are the most-”

“No, no, what you said at the beginning?!”

“That the angry local fishmonger found you in the dark-”

“Found?!”

“Yes, you were an orphan like me, but you had only one day. I have seven years and-”

“What else they say about me? What do they say about the Fishmonger? How do you know these things?” the Manager bombarded the kid with questions. He took the kid by the hand and dragged him to the side of the crowded street on a bench opposite the street food stalls. They both sat, and he gave his second Chorizo Empanada to the kid as motivation. The kid ate and talked at the same time while the Manager stayed there, appalled in shock at what he was hearing.

He told him about how he had been abandoned by the local street vendor and the butcher, about the encounter with the fishmonger, his hate for the baby at first, and how he changed him into the most loved man in the city. He sat there for almost four hours listening to the kid; that was his first normal conversation in the external reality outside his cage. He bought him more food to keep him talking and would not

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interrupt him for any reason. Those facts came down like an unexpected avalanche.

“Irvin come on! We have to go! Irvin, come here, or you’ll get your beating!” the nun called him from afar after finishing grocery shopping.

“I have to go now, but nice talk anyway, Manager! Can I have your signature?” he asked, opening a little notebook and handing him over a broken pencil.

“Sure, Irvin, thanks for the talk,” he mumbled, signing the page, overwhelmed by his thoughts.

*I have been lied to all my life.*

That same day the Manager hit the bar and ordered double malt whiskeys on the rocks. The sun was setting, and the bar was filled with workers who had just finished their shifts.

“Another double Whiskey for you, Manager?” the barman said while cleaning a wide glass with a white cloth. “We haven’t seen you around for a while. In fact, I have never seen you in this bar before. I am honoured to—”

“Cut the crap, please!” he roared, raising his head from the folded arms on the table and looking at the bartender with a craggy face. “I am— I am sorry, I didn't mean—”

“It’s totally fine; crappy day, eh?” he asked, laying the glass and moving in front of the Manager while getting a bottle from the counter. “This is on me! You look like you need it!” he said, pouring another round to the Manager.

"It seems that everyone knows me but myself. I am 18 now, and I am lost. How can my Dad be such an asshole?" the Manager said with disappointment.

"I used to know your Grandfather. Difficult man. He liked to drink. Sometimes I felt I was the one beating his son! I just did my job. Drinking is good for a bar but not for a man's soul. I guess he didn't want to hurt you." the old bartender tried to comfort him.

"But I am hurt. I just discovered it from an orphan I met in the market! I feel used! Why he waited so much to tell me?" he asked before sipping that disgusting whiskey.

"Perhaps you should ask him?" the barman concluded, moving to another customer down the counter.

*Yes, I should!*

The Manager bottomed up the remaining poison in one gulp and moved from his wooden stool. He walked on the clear sidewalk on a late evening day. The sun was now behind the Santa Ana Volcano, outlining it with pink light. The street lamps turned on, revealing the way in front of him. Everything was moving, and the street looked uneven: he was drunk. He put a lot of effort into walking in a straight line and getting back home. He desisted and sat on a bench on the side of the street.

The street lamp above him wasn't working, so he stayed in the dark, looking at the pedestrians on the other side of the

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sidewalk passing by. For once, he felt like a ghost: unnoticed. Being alone was a blessing; he rose his head and looked up. The stars shone through the dark clean sky on that warm night. There was a deafening peace; you could hear only some high heels banging on the sidewalk and some far-away laughter.

*What a beautiful sky today. I have never seen it before in all this time! I like being outside in the streets, observing people and imagining how they could be living their lives. I am too drunk for that now. I love whiskey! This bench is extremely comfortable! I may- I could-*

He fell asleep that night on that bench in the shadow. No one bothered him, as no one could notice him. He didn't snore or make any noise; that was probably his best sleep in ages (not that he lived many years). He was smiling. That night he had his first dream: he was a homeless man in the street of New York; he would work as a street sweeper in his orange fluorescent uniform and carry a two-wheeled trash bin cart. The cart would have two big bins carved inside, some cleaning tools, hooks for his two brooms (a soft and a hard one), and a dustpan.

He looked happy, he knew everyone in the streets, and everyone knew him. Some people would give him some presents to thank him for the work he has done others would shake his hand. He would know everyone's name, although

they wouldn't know his, and he would have long conversations with his mind. The money he received wasn't much, but he could survive thanks to his spartan living. One day he met a woman he helped; she dropped her purse, and he ran after her to return it. The two became-

"Sir, wake up! Wake up, Sir! You can't sleep here!" an officer said, waving a baton near his nose. "You have to leave, or I will have to fine you! If you don't have where to stay, I suggest you go to--"

"I am not homeless! I fell asleep!" he interrupted the officer, stretching his hands up. "I have a home. I didn't feel like getting back there! That's all." he explained.

"You smell like a distillery; get yourself cleaned up. I can give you the contact of--"

"I am not an alcoholic either!" he shouted, losing his patience and jumped on his feet, challenging the officer. "You should--"

"Fucking scum!" the officer roared, hitting his head with his baton, and the Manager fell on the floor bloody. "Central 136, here, Bravo23, we have a violent drunk in the street, I repeat, we have a violent drunk on the street. I request backup, over." the officer said on his radio while holding his foot on the Manager's chest.

"Ouch! I am not violent- You are hurting me! I am not--"

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“Bravo23, here Central 136. We are sending a car 5 minutes from your position, over.” the central replied with a mechanical and disturbed voice.

“Affirmative, I’ll wait here over and out.” the officer finished before releasing the VOX button and pushing his foot deep into his chest. “That is what you get when you mess with the law, Cabrón!” he scoffed after spitting on the Manager, now fainted on the floor.

The car arrived 7 minutes after the conversation with the Police station. People recognised the Manager on the floor, took pictures, and asked the officer what had happened. The officer reassured them he had everything under control, and it was an angry drunk. A second officer got out of the police car and helped the first one load the Manager in the backseat after cuffing him. They drove to the police station, slapped him to wake him up, and seated him in the commander's office.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here? No documents, no criminal record, no registered parents, no name. You are a ghost, aren’t you?” the commander asked, walking behind him and laying a hand on his chair. “Let’s cut the shit! Who are you?” he asked, slapping his face from the back, pulling his hair, bending his head, and revealing his dusty forehead.

“I am the manager of the fish shop place in the city,” he said, gasping and containing his fear.

“Which one?” the officer asked.

“The most famous one. I am the Fishmonger's son! Ask him if you don't believe me!” he replied in pain immediately while the commander put a hand around his neck.

“Pedro, Tacun, go and check on this ‘Fishmonger’ and bring him here,” he ordered the two officers who carried him there. “I hope you are not bullshitting me, or I will choke you with my bare hands!” he shouted, releasing the tight grip and moving around the table. He took a seat. “While we wait, is there anything else I should know? Why don't you have a name? What kind of weirdo are you?” he chuckled calmly while lighting a cigarette.

“None of your fucking business, Sir!” the Manager looked at him with sudden confidence. “While we wait, is there anything ‘I’ should-”

“Watch your mouth, you little shit!” he banged his fist on the table, and the noise bounced around the tiny office. “Being drunk, threatening and resisting an officer would cause you-” he paused and pulled out one finger at a time. “-like what? 4 years in prison?” he continued laughing, putting his boots on the table and crossing his feet. Some mud fell on his documents.

“I haven't done any of these things!” he complained, knowing he didn't have much leverage.

“We can even charge you for drug dealing. Who do you think the judge is going to believe? Us, the law or you, a

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nameless drunk?" he asked, shaking the ash off his cigarette on the table and exhaling a big cloud.

*I am screwed! These officers are one more corrupt than the other! I wouldn't be surprised if they were on the payroll of some drug lords. I bet they have tortured and killed before. Better lay low and don't piss them off too much! Please don't get yourself killed!*

The door opened, and the two officers entered with the Fishmonger. "What is happening here?" the man asked after breaking free from the grip of the two men.

"Take a seat, Mr—" he paused, removing his feet from the table and assuming his composure.

"Just 'Fishmonger', please!" the man replied while sitting on a chair on his son's left side.

"What a fucking joke!" the man laughed and put a hand on his face in surrender. "So, *Fishmonger* and *Manager*. Why don't you have names and no documents? For which drug cartel are you working? How do you smuggle—"

"What are you talking about? I own the most famous fish shop in the city and the nation! Ask these two dumb fucks who took me by force while I was serving my clients! We aren't associated with any—"

"Fuck! I can't believe my eyes!" the commander burped after wearing his glasses. "You are Vincent's business rival! The one we interviewed almost 18 years ago! Now, that was a weird case!" he said, recognising the man. The Manager was



clueless about what was happening. He was looking at the two men like a tennis match. "Hey! You two get the fuck out of my office and close the door!" he ordered the petty officers while putting his cigarette off on a thick stack of documents.

"Isn't this a small town! What a surprise!" the Fishmonger replied, faking interest in seeing an old acquaintance. "May I ask you what is this fuss about, Sir? Why is my son held here? What has he done?" he diverted the conversation, trying to find a way out.

"Nothing special, drunk in the streets, assaulted and threatened an officer, obscenity and drug dealing," the commander said carelessly like it was a shopping list while cleaning his nails and holding a tooth stick with his lips. "We can close an eye and settle for, say, \$2,500? Or we can entrust your son to the judge and make him decide. Between a good lawyer and a couple of months of your time, he may get 2-3 years in prison unless you get an expensive lawyer." he continued raising his voice and checking his watch.

"It sounds reasonable, Officer! Why bother with all of that?" the Fishmonger put a thick letter full of cash between the pages of a newspaper and left it on the table.

"I remember you were a wise man! You haven't changed a bit!" the commander said, sliding the newspaper to his side of the table and opening the letter under it. He counted for a while, moving his soundless lips. "That will settle it! I guess

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you know the exit, Fishmonger! Have a lovely day.” he chuckled, removing his glasses and pointing a finger at the men at the exit door. “Another thing, If I may! Keep your boy on a shorter leash, or, who knows, next time you may collect his death certificate,” he whispered with an evil smirk.

“Thanks for your time, officer,” the man said, opening the office door to his son and kicking him out. The two men walked back home in silence, side by side. The Fishmonger held his rage until he hit home while the Manager was thinking about that conversation with the Commander.

*What was that all about? Why Vincent? \$2,500 is a lot of money; it's two months of hard work, including weekends. Dad will kill me when we get back home. I can't live like this anymore. This is not life! I should run away and start a new life elsewhere! What do I have here? No friends, no girls, a family that lies to me and exploits me, a shitty city in a shitty Nation. I am going to do it! I am going to leave! Just wait and see! I will get my shit sorted once and for all and leave my past and present behind! I need to make more money and get out of this smelly business. Fuck I hate the smell of fish! I can't stand it anymore!*

The men arrived at the shop. The Fishmonger returned to his spot behind the counter while the Manager went upstairs to prepare his escape plan. The day passed quickly, and the man almost sold all his fish. Dogs were happier than ever that day, and cats appreciated the leftovers too. The Man closed

the doors, lowered the curtains and cleaned the shop. He shouted to his son and asked to meet him downstairs. The Manager entered the shop and noticed his Dad sitting on a table with two glasses and a bottle of whiskey. He gestured for him to sit with him.

“I guessed this was your poison,” he said, pouring booze into his wide glass. “On the rocks, right?” he asked, cracking a piece of ice from a big block and putting it in both drinks producing a clicking sound. The ice broke a bit with the contact with the liquid, and the glass got foggy. “Listen, son, I think I raised you well! Fuck, better than my dad did with me!” he said, sipping and squeezing his eyes in disgust. “You reached your major age a month ago and are entitled to your choices. I wish you knew it from me. I shouldn’t have waited that long! I have been stupid!” he said while taking another sip. “You will repay me the \$2,500, then you can go your way; whatever it will be, I will support it. But you will not work for me anymore after your debt is settled!” he concluded.

“I am your son and business partner; your business would fail without me. Without me, you would still be a rude asshole with no customers!” he replied angrily. “I am the brain of this business—”

“You found work here because I gave you a chance. This is my business; you don’t co-own it or hold shares. You are an employee who has been given a two months notice now. You

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are not legally my son and never will be, do you understand? Without me, you would be dead in that dark, filthy alley, so shut the fuck up and pay me back the money you cost me!" he shouted, banging his hand on the table, finished the glass of whiskey and stood up. "You better go to sleep; tomorrow will be a hard day at the shop!" he concluded, leaving his son alone.

*I can't believe that has been my dad for so long. He left me like that without even shedding a tear. Doesn't he recognise me like his son? Then, he is not my father but a grumpy and dirty old fishmonger! He will be alone soon and then realise what he lost!*

The Manager finished his booze, poured another glass and shot it immediately. He closed the bottle and went upstairs to his bedroom; they didn't have dinner that day despite their empty stomachs. They didn't talk for the next two months of constant work together. He was always outside expanding the business while the Fishmonger was inside the shop selling fish to customers. It wasn't long until the debt was repaid. The Manager packed his belongings in a giant hiking backpack that Tuesday morning. He left the building at 4 am while the Fishmonger was still sleeping.

He bought a one-way ticket to Florida online (on his brand-new smartphone); he had the entire day before his departure, so he walked towards the local market. He went

through the street food vendors' stalls in the market and stopped in front of his favourite one: the Empanadas stall.

"Why did you abandon me?" he asked, looking into the owner's eyes.

"I did- what?" Maria asked, shocked by that statement. She kept serving her customers, almost ignoring him. "I don't know what-"

"I don't care! I just want two Chorizo Empanadas, please!" the Manager ordered. She handed over the food to him and rejected his money. "I thank you for giving me life, but I despise you for leaving me behind," he concluded while laying the money on the counter and backing from the stall.

"Wait! Vincent was your father. I- I thought you deserved to know it. I am sorry!" she concluded, crying on the floor. At the same time, the Manager left the market quickly after hearing that last remark.

He embarked on a 2 hours bus trip to the El Salvador international airport. He paid for his ticket and loaded his backpack in the hold. He devoured his Empanadas and stopped in San Salvador for a while. He had never seen the capital, and that was the first time he had left Izalco. He didn't like it, so he left for the airport on the same bus after one hour. He didn't have to pay for the ticket again as it was valid for the entire day. The airport was the most exciting place he had

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ever seen in El Salvador; he loved speaking different languages and meeting other people worldwide.

The Flight to Miami, Florida, was on time. He boarded, and before he knew it, the plane took off. Three hours later, he landed across the Caribbean Sea at the Miami International Airport. It took him one month to get some brand-new documents in Izalco for this trip to happen despite his reluctance (the law is the law). Miami was a different place. He picked it because everyone talked about it; they said it was the American Dream for Latinos. It was full of South American, especially Brazilians and Colombians: he thought it was a reasonable first choice. His English was perfect, but he still had a bit of a Spanish accent; living in Miami would help him to get rid of it so he wouldn't be looked down upon by anyone (especially Americans).

That night he went to a hostel, and the following day he looked for a job as a shop manager in small markets or restaurants. He would go to Latino shops first and then try other places; he would apply online and visit them personally. In the meantime, he had taken a job as a street sweeper just to pay for his necessities. He would save money by squatting in an abandoned building for a while. He wasn't struggling much in the first months as he wouldn't have any vice despite the booze. He was an extreme minimalist, and he liked

staying outside. He gave up looking for a manager position and went full-time on his 'provisory' job: sweeping streets.

The job sucked, and the pay was low, but at least it was relaxing. You would meet lots of people, and you could manage your schedule as long as you covered the ground you were assigned that day. His lifestyle allowed him to survive on it and even enjoy life in the city of sunshine. Before leaving Izalco, his 'dad' and his past behind, he opened the shop safe and got half the money. He didn't feel like stealing but more like selling half of the business back to his partner. He had \$35,000 in his bank now, which in Miami was enough for one year (if you lived a spartan lifestyle).

Sometimes he would go to Miami Beach and chill with a cocktail in his hand. He would swim, keep fit and take a refreshing shower so he wouldn't require one in his abandoned suburban flat. He was living as a free man at 18 and loved it. He appreciated the nature of his job more; he had money in the bank and was living in the US. The city was always active, and there was always something to do. He would move into the most trafficked areas and start random conversations with people. Soon enough, residents began to get to know him and appreciate his thorough work keeping streets pristine.

Occasionally he would interrupt an enticing conversation with a group of teens to shout at someone who threw

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something on the floor despite having a bin nearby. “Hey, You! You pig! Have some respect for this beautiful city!” people would shout, giving him support against the thrasher.

He felt like he belonged there. That day he knew who he was! “Call me the Miami Street Sweeper.” he would say.



## The Streets of Miami

One day he read a book about a prince leaving his castle and his father behind to discover himself in the real world. He has been trapped in a dream for too long, living like royalty and non-worrying about finding food, looking for work or paying rent. The Street Sweeper wasn't a royal, but he empathised with the prince sharing his pain and will to discover himself.

*This book is the fictional me! That's how I felt for all my teenagehood! Life shouldn't be about keeping your kids away from dangers but giving them the freedom to make mistakes and letting them realise what is worth living for. It must be hard for a parent to let go of their kids in this wild world; my dad didn't seem to have struggled to let me go! Too bad this book is already finished. I'll get a new one at the library on my way to my shift tomorrow.*

He closed the book, looked outside the window of his abandoned flat and stared at the far-away Miami lights. He turned off his portable electric lamp and fell asleep on that filthy mattress, already dressed in his orange fluorescent uniform and working boots.

His alarm clock went off from his brand-new smartphone at 6 am. He would brush his teeth using a water bottle and a travelling toothbrush, floss and go to downtown Miami on foot. He would save money on breakfast, transport and much

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conventional stuff. He wouldn't suffer from the lack of these things. He enjoyed the peace of his early morning walk from his apartment to the cleaning company office, where he would collect his cart and equipment for the work day. On his way to the office, he would feel like he owned the street of Miami. Everyone would look at him respectfully while his uniform shone with the first morning lights.

He would encounter so many homeless people on his way from the suburbs. He would stop and say, "Hi Josh, how is the book going?" or, "Frank, look at you, you are so energetic today!" he had so much energy to give to the people around him: that's what pedestrians appreciated about him. He would stop to say hi to his friends in a cafe, and they would offer him breakfast, coffee and much more. The Street Sweeper would accept it out of respect and not because he was necessarily hungry. They would have long conversations, and he would love to stay there all day, but he would interrupt and say, "Well, Frank, I better go now! Thanks for breakfast, and see ya when I see ya!"

As he approached the city, the buildings went from high-rising public apartments for working-class citizens to middle-class buildings with better architecture and well-maintained apartments. You could see they were owned and not rented out; it was there where the majority of the Miami population used to live. Employees, school teachers,

white collars and office workers would live downtown between the centre and the suburbs. "Here we have 'The Society Limbo'," the Street Sweeper would say when walking there.

The city was like an onion: it had social layers, smelled and could make you cry if you didn't know how to handle it. After spending a whole year working in the city, the Street Sweeper knew how to handle the people and life on the streets. He could drive a car blindfolded, thanks to his extraordinary visual memory and logical skills. He would solve conflicts well with drunks or junkies on the streets, which he would meet countless times that year.

The cleaning company was shocked and could not understand his choice to become a street sweeper despite having such a qualified CV, but they had never asked. His boss would give him the 'Best Employee Award' every month, but he would refuse it as he said, "I do this job with pleasure, and I think someone else is more deserving!" His colleagues thought he was humble, but he meant it. The company would treat him with respect and give him even a raise in fear of him moving to greener pastures.

Finding an educated street sweeper with whom managers could have a constructive conversation was challenging. He was a blessing to his superiors, who even offered to give him some assistants and a cleaning car, so he didn't have to walk

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all day. He refused the car because he loved to walk and didn't want to drive in Miami's trafficked streets. He would accept all the promotions, but deep inside, he wasn't doing it for money: he had enough money in his bank. He would kindly refuse to manage assistants as he worked better alone. His bosses asked him if he could try to motivate other street sweepers to increase retention in their workforce, but he would say, "You love it, or you hate it; that's the nature of this job. There is no middle ground."

This profession allowed him not to integrate into a system he didn't believe in yet: and probably never will. He was an idealist, a strong nonconformist and a Marie Curie fan. He found joy in little things and kept his mind always fresh and sharp. He would read countless landed books from the libraries, and his friends would offer him food. He would not rent a place but live in his beloved spartan apartment, own a backpack of personal objects for his daily routines and wouldn't drive a car but always walk. We would make some exceptions and spend money when he planned a trip somewhere (if he had spare time). He was the happiest man in Miami but had less than anyone else; he would empathise with whoever had less than him as he thought they were living uncomfortably. He would help the most needed men and women: homeless people who could not get a meal that day or could not buy something. He would go around the

streets, speak with them and write a list; the next day, he would give them what they needed.

They wouldn't ask much, and that surprised him. They wouldn't ask for a house or a car but just for food and a blanket. They were strong people, proud and highly stubborn like himself. He got along with them more than the people he would meet on the street daily. The streets of Miami could be brutal if everyone were indifferent and cold. Still, luckily he wasn't the only one helping. One day he saw tourists giving some food to a homeless man and a couple helping a disabled woman cross the street safely. He would start noticing these random acts of kindness and feed on them like nectar for his soul. Without those acts, humans would be productive machines, always looking for something in return.

One day his boss told him they had some requests from a magazine, and a few reporters wanted to write a story about him: he would refuse point-blank. He was a reserved man who didn't desire fame or attention and hated being in the spotlight. He would hate and shiver at the only thought of his past life; however, the reporters wouldn't stop there. They would bother him during work and try to tail him back to his place with no success. His refusal made the story more compelling to reporters pursuing him nonstop.

Arrived in the streets of downtown Miami, he could smell real money in the air. Glass and steel skyscrapers and

## The Street Sweeper

luxurious apartments on top floors and penthouses. The long orthogonal and squared streets intersected with the vertical avenues; the highways ran across the city like big '+' signs. Miami's city plan looked like an accurate geometric art piece made with a ruler. The Street Sweeper was used to El Salvador's street plan: a disorganised entanglement of asphalt. Miami was accessible and easier to clean, thanks to its structured and organised streets. Miami didn't miss anything; it had all the possible services you may ever need, want and think of. Everyone was connected, tuned and online; you could pay everywhere with your phone: 'contactless' was the keyword. It was another world, and you had to live at least three lives to try all the services there.

He was approaching his office, and now he could see sports cars everywhere, people dressing in branded clothes, walking on diamonds and being hugged by golden chains. The Street Sweeper was disgusted by that sight; social equity there was a fairy tail and unbelievably frowned upon as plague. You had more because you deserved it and worked hard for it; hence you had a higher value: at least, that is what people thought. The Street Sweeper worked harder than anyone else, but he wasn't showered with gold: not that he cared. He valued people for what they would give for free and for the content of their characters: not the number in their banks.

That walk from his apartment to his office always reminded him why he was living that lifestyle and encouraged him to keep helping the people who (based on his judgement) deserved it and needed it the most. Sometimes he would not support some fake homeless or disabled person as he knew it was an act. Many people fell for it, and despite the fact he could stop some from falling for that bullshit, he couldn't stop all of them. These people will always exploit the sad reality of those in genuine need giving them a bad name and reputation.

Finally, after a 3 hours walk through the busy city, he arrived at the office at 9 am, where he met his moody and illiterate colleagues. He gave his bosses the 'good morning' and collected his gear from the locker. He took his numbered cart and checked the bins, brooms, and dustpan condition and, finally, if he had enough bin bags and products.

Off he went to his turf and cleaned his first blocks of the day near 'East Little Havan'. He stopped by the library and returned his book while picking a new one on the British Mathematician 'Bertrand Russell'. He loved reading and exploring new topics that would push his knowledge boundaries. He thanked the librarian and went to pick his parked cart back up. He learnt he could leave it anywhere because no one would steal trash.

## The Street Sweeper

That was a scorching hot morning and a tough day of work, as he had to clean more blocks due to the absence of a better workforce. It looked like there were more homeless people than cleaners; people would give up that career quickly, thinking they deserved more. It was a taxing job but had hidden pleasures, although only the Street Sweeper seemed to appreciate them. He was a humble man but still not a masochist.

He would not take a lunch break at noon and keep working nonstop. That was the perfect time to get more work done as people were busy eating and not walking as much as in the early morning and late afternoon peak hours. He could get 15 blocks done in 1 hour of work and save 3 hours of his day by skipping lunch breaks. With time he became a tall and extremely fit man with great strength and endurance.

The worst nightmare for street sweepers would be people, a lot of people. Crowds wouldn't allow them to see what was on the sidewalks or wouldn't make it accessible for them to clean. It would be constantly clean and reclean of the same areas as pedestrians would throw trash on the floor as soon as they cleaned. The traffic was hell, and wouldn't allow them to move the cart safely out of the sidewalk while trying to dodge people.

Working in those conditions was inconvenient, stressful and counterproductive. Hence, a wise decision was to wait for



the storm to calm down and collect the aftermath. It was easier to clean when more trash was grouped in a little mountain. People's feet movement would naturally move the waste on the sides of the sidewalk and make it seamless for the Street Sweeper to fetch it with one stroke of the broom. Cleaning without bothering pedestrians was pure art, like an undesirable dance between the two. On the first days of this job, it would happen that he stepped face-to-face with a pedestrian, and they both started an awkward dance to dodge each other. They would move in unison in a repetitive mirrored movement until one pushed the other with a hand. People hated that.

He would finish working at 6 pm while his colleagues struggled through the crowded blocks. He would relax sitting on a bench with a great view and look at people passing by. He would keep his cart with him because he couldn't badge out from his shift before 8 pm. At times, he would finish his shift in 4 hours, depending on the area he got assigned to. His excellent relationship with the manager allowed him to have the most requested areas from the street sweepers: the one near the coastline.

Even though they were the most trafficked, hence the dirtiest, they were the most requested by the most skilled workers because the pay was higher, and they had more services. Moreover, it was the city's heart and being part of it

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gave them a moral boost. New recruits would be assigned to suburbs and bad neighbourhoods; he has also done his time there but didn't miss anything from those blocks.

The Street Sweeper sat there and drank his water while opening his newly landed book. The sun was coming down slowly, and he could notice the colour of its light changing in the reflection of his old brownish pages. The Street Sweeper was a fast reader, but that wouldn't compromise his understanding of the topic. He would always stop and search on his smartphone for anything unclear he read in his books. He wouldn't be able to keep on ready until he fully understood what he had read and yawned every chapter. Reading was peaceful and sometimes a natural and pleasant sleeping pill without side effects.

*Mr Russell is a fascinating figure! What has happened to the world nowadays? We brag about being so advanced in knowing more and more every day despite making the same mistakes over and over again and treating each other like shit! I am still confused about my life, and I am 21, but what scares me the most is that I will never figure this world out. The people I celebrate and respect the most lived and died in the past: they made a real difference, not those in the present! I have no respect or esteem for the modern society I live in now! I wish I were born at least a century before or even two! Can we be so cocky to think we have reached the highest evolutionary peak? Every society thought that, but people who made a difference*

*were in constant doubt; they were never satisfied with the Status Quo, pushing the boundaries of the possible.*

*Where are these thinkers? Are people getting comfortable? Do comfort and convenience blind them? Is progress killing creativity and critical thinking? Why don't we have as many inventors and great minds as in the past? Have we hit the ceiling and now devolving? Are we an autodestructive race? Are we gonna get extinct? I see things that need to change daily here in Miami. It is not my opinion; it is objectively true and a topic of lit contemporary discussions. The streets are unjust! Would I ever be a change-maker? Is it possible to wake up a dormant society starting from the streets? What if-*

*"Ya, man! Great sunset, don't you think?" a black man said with a Jamaican accent while sitting on his left side of the bench.*

*It was beautiful before you arrived and ruined my moment of peace.*

*"I couldn't stop noticing you have been coming here every day," he said with a monotonous voice. "sitting here and reading books." he continued while leaning towards him and glancing at the book.*

*Are you stalking me, or what? Who the hell are you? Keep it cool! You can do this!*

*"Bartran Rusel? Who the hell is he? Is he like a brain or some shit like that?" he laughed while puffing and exhaling*

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another cloud of marijuana. The Street Sweeper kept his eyes on the horizon, ignoring him.

*Great, this guy can't even read a name. Fucking moron! Wait, give him a chance.*

"I wouldn't have thought you were the intellectual type- I mean-" he paused, looked at the trash cart and contorted his face.

*And I wouldn't have thought you were an asshole until you opened that mouth!*

"It must be difficult living in Miami cleaning streets! I am a professional tech developer; I run my own business to make ends meet. But you- respect, man! Ya man, you got all my respect." he said patronisingly while hitting his chest with a fist and passing his joint to him.

*Wow, you are such a successful man! You are as lost as me and anyone else here. Don't act like you got everything figured out; if you believe that, you must be a fool or a total idiot.*

"Sorry, I don't smoke." the Street Sweeper whispered with a movement of his hand while still looking at the horizon.

*Fucking idiot, leave me alone!*

"Everyone stared from the bottom. I am sure you will-"

"I don't need your compassion! You know what? The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts." he said, quoting Bertrand Russell. The man beside

him dropped his jaw. "Which one are you?" he asked, looking at him in the eyes with superiority, and sniffed up. The man left in disappointment and murmured some insults to himself. The Street Sweeper moved his eyes back to the horizon, now cutting the sun in half and reflecting a pinkish colour on the clouds above, mirrored in the still water.

*Have I said anything wrong? I may have made him realise a harsh truth. Thanks, Bertry, my friend.*

It was time to get back to the office; the man picked up his trash cart and walked through the artificially lit streets of Miami. He left his cart, badged out from his shift and went on his usual 3-hour walk back to his apartment while still wearing his fluorescent uniform. Walking towards the suburbs, he left the lights behind and entered a different reality. The suburban streets were dirty, and homeless people were on every corner of the blocks. Sidewalks were full of potholes and cracks, Street illumination was faint and created a lot of shadows. He didn't feel like he was in Miami anymore, and a gelid breeze crept up his spine. He was 15 minutes away from his apartment when he heard a noise from a dark alley, breaking his long silence. He approached the corner of the passage and listened in the darkness.

"Where the fuck is my money?! You are late with your payment! The boss will not wait another day; he will have his money back or ask for your head! I am sure he will get mine if

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I don't bring him something!" a man shouted, kicking another one on the wet asphalt.

"I- don't- know!" the victim stuttered in pain while taking a few blows in his stomach.

"Maybe Martina has an idea where the money is! I should visit her and her wet tight pussy!!" the criminal roared, now bent on his knees, holding the man by his neck. "Where is the money?! Where is the money?! Where is the fucking money!?" he punched his face at every question.

*What the fuck do I do? He's gonna kill him if I walk away! I am not an indifferent person. I should do something! No, I shouldn't get involved in matters that don't concern me. If I walk away, I will be a living contradiction. I should practice what I preach! Fuck! This fluorescent uniform can be seen from miles away!*

The Street Sweeper slowly unzipped and removed the two-piece uniform while the poor man shouted in pain, beaten to death. He wrapped it and left it in the corner where he crouched, then put on his black hood and walked in the shadow down that alley. The shouting got louder as he approached the two men; he kept walking in the darkness, slowly, looking at where he was putting his feet.

"Sell your car, sell your business, sell your fucking mother! I don't give a shit! You will pay our family one way or the other, understood?!" the criminal asked, stopped punching

him, and pointed a sharp butterfly knife at the victim's bloated bloody face.

*I am too close; he is gonna hear me, I know! I am gonna die today! What the fuck am I doing? This is crazy! I am too young for this shit! I should be home reading my friend Bertry! Get your shit together and do this! I said to do this, or that man is going to die! Do you want him on your conscience? Do you want him to haunt you in your dreams?*

"I swear we will taste your sweet daughter Giulia after I finish with her beautiful mommy! My men are going to pass her around like a horny whore!" the criminal scoffed, moved the knife to the man's eye and poked him. The victim screamed and held his bleeding eye. "Tell me where the money is! Tell me where—" The man fell unconscious on the floor on the left side of the beaten man. A loud sound echoed in the narrow dark alley while a black hooded figure held a rock high over his head. The stone was dripping with blood making a leaky tap sound on a little pond under his feet and creating some ripples.

"Don't kill me, please! I will pay you! Here is the money; take it!" the victim said, giving up and throwing the money at his feet, still in shock, half-blinded and not releasing what happened.

*What have I done? Am I going to prison? Is he dead? Fuck! Run!*

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The Street Sweeper dropped the rock and ran in the direction he came from, with the background of the noise provoked but the heavy rock. He exited the alley, fetched his clothes from the right corner without stopping and kept running to his flat. He didn't look back for any reason; he wanted to make it home to process what happened.

*I killed a man! I killed a man! I am a murderer! I will go to jail! Worst, I will get the death sentence and fry on a fucking chair!* He thought while running the fastest 2 km in his whole life.

Before entering his abandoned building, he checked if someone was following him. He wanted to be extra safe, so he went around another block and entered the back of his building to make sure to lose any potential tail. Once inside, he dragged himself up the stairs to his room and fell on his filthy mattress. Adrenaline was still running in his veins, and his mind was exploding with thoughts, but now entirely different ones.

*I saved a man's life! Yes, it was scary but necessary! Everyone would have done that. Right? No one would have stood indifferent knowing a man's life depended on their prompt action! Maybe I am not like most men. But sure, I know I am NOT an evil man. I saved a man's life today! I should be proud of myself! Then why am I so fucking scared?!*

That night was rough and sleepless for the Street Sweeper; he spent it thinking about how he could get away with



murder. He managed to calm down after realising his lifestyle made him a ghost, and no one could suspect him. He didn't even use any credit cards, and when he rarely both something, he used cash. He had read many criminal action books and was knowledgeable about the topic by now. However, he had to remove his fluorescent uniform more often, especially when returning home. He should have avoided troubles for a while and acted calm at work, keeping a low profile.

That day he went on his usual 3-hour walk in black jeans and a black hoodie (the only clothes he owned) while carrying his uniform in a shopping bag. He walked the familiar streets except for the one where he had the unpleasant encounter yesterday. It was still dark when he walked half his way to the office. Once in downtown Miami, he visited a friend (a bar owner) because he was too early to show up at work. He thought it was a good idea not to break the habits in case the police asked him for an alibi.

"Hey Luca, how is everything going? I thought to come and check on you. It has been a while since we saw each other!" he said after entering the bar, followed by a bell sound, and waved at the owner on the other side of the counter.

"Hey, man! What a pleasure is to see you after- what? A whole year?" he said, looking up and squeezing his eyes while holding his chin. "Come here; let me offer you a coffee!"

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Do you still drink coffee, right?" Luca asked with an Italian accent and a big smile, pointing at the stool before him.

"Yes, I still do, thanks!" the man replied, sitting on the stool and resting his arms on the counter, waiting to be served. "I'd say it has been more than a year! But good friendships never die!" he said, distorting the last word, almost eating it.

"Parole sante! Parole sante, my friend!" the barman chuckled while speaking Italian. He knew his friend would understand. "So what are you up to in your life? How are you killing your time? Are you still sweeping streets, or should I call you differently now?" he bombarded him with questions while handling the noisy coffee machine.

"Yes, I am still sweeping streets, and I actually enjoy it. I find it quite- relaxing," he replied, thinking about Luca's curious word choice. "People are difficult to deal with, but the streets have always been my place," he mumbled.

"I am happy for you, my friend! Don't tell me; sometimes I just want to kill some of my customers!" he said, raising the Espresso Moka with two hands and acting to hit an invisible head. They both laughed out loud. "Are you still seeing that cute girl? Was it- Katy, right?" Luca asked with a curious gossiping tone while laying the coffee on the counter on a PVC carpet with holes. He turned the little cup handle to the man's left.

“Katerine, you mean? No, we broke up after a couple of months. We weren’t meant to be together,” he sighed disappointingly, resurfacing old memories while reaching for the brown sugar. “She wanted me to—”

“Good thing you didn’t get her pregnant, man! You would be ruined by now!” Luca shouted, folding his arms and speaking from experience. “My divorce cost me an arm and a leg! Don’t get married and don’t have kids!” he ordered with pure disappointment, reaching for the remote and switching on the little TV hanging over the corner of the wall.

“I didn’t know you had a wife, Luca!” the man said, surprised, while stirring the sugar with a tiny spoon. “Did you manage to have kids as—”

“Wait, listen to this!” Luca turned up the TV volume and focused on the reporter.

“A violent crime was committed yesterday night when a man was brutally killed in this alley!” she said while pointing at a big blood puddle and a corpse in a black zipper body bag.

“That is Vincente Scaletta!” Luca shouted, pointing at the thug’s mug shot on the TV. “He is the son of the Miami Mafia boss. That is serious stuff! It must be another gang turf fight!” he continued, sharing his Italian knowledge. He turned up the volume a bit more.

## The Street Sweeper

“That shit happened every single day in El Salvador! We have way more gangs,” he said, sipping his coffee. “They would-”

“The crime was committed in a narrow alley in South Miami where the killer used a rock to crush the victim's skull!” the reporter pointed at a bloody rock near the black body bag. “And now it is all. Rebecca Mills. Channel 4. Back to-”

“Coff!- Coff!- Coff!- Coff!” the Street Sweeper was choking on his coffee while spilling it on the counter and his hoodie. “What- the- Fuck-” he coughed while moving his head, looking for something to clean himself.

“Are you ok? What happened? Please don't die in my bar.” Luca chuckled after removing his attention from the TV and patting the man's back in help.

“Sorry! The coffee must have gone down the wrong way! I guess I am not used to its taste anymore!” he said, trying to hide his apparent discomfort and cleaning his hoodie with a white tissue.

“Do you want another one? I can make another one if you want!” he offered while turning down the TV volume and cleaning the counter with a cloth. “Did the news shock you? Wait- you killed the man!” he laughed at his joke and pointed the finger at the Street Sweeper, who froze.

*What the total fuck?! Why would you even think something like that?! Calm down; he is joking! A bad joke! Joke back and laugh!*

“Yes, I did! That rock was quite heavy, and I untied my shoulder!” he forced a laugh, and the bartender laughed again.

“That was a good one! I thought you South Americans and Latinos were used to worse shit than this! Wasn’t El Salvador the most dangerous place on earth? I think Venezuela is on the top of the charts now.” Luca said with a mocking tone, noticing his friend’s apparent discomfort. “Anyway, I am from Sicily, Palermo, and I hear this shit every day! I am kind of immune to it now!” he continued. “My dad used to work for the Carabinieri and—”

“It has been an immense pleasure seeing you again, Luca, but I need—”

“I got it, man! You are free to go. The pleasure is all mine. Come back to visit me some other time!” he said, cutting him short before checking his watch. “Gosh! I need to take the pizza out, or it will burn!” he ran to the kitchen, making a loud noise, and opened the door abruptly.

“Thanks for the coffee!” the Street Sweeper shouted, amplifying his voice with a hand near the side of his mouth while approaching the exit door. No reply, just a loud pan noise from the kitchen. He opened the door and left the bar and a jingling bell behind.

## The Street Sweeper

*That was quite the start of the morning! I fucking hate Fridays! They have no clue who the killer is. They think it's another gang. Fuuuuck! A Mafia boss' son?! I am so screwed If they find out it was me! I heard terrible things about the Italian Mafia, even worse than MS-15. They cement people (alive) in active working sites; the building I live in now may have some in its foundation. I could be one of those poor bastards! That would actually explain why such a grand building was abandoned.*

As usual, he arrived at the office on time and said 'hi' to all his colleagues and managers. He badged at the reception and went downstairs to the changing room. He approached his locker where and couldn't avoid hearing his colleagues' conversation.

"Hey, Jules! Did you hear about that Mafia man who got his fucking head smashed with a rock?!" he shouted to a man across the other side of the changing room, attracting the attention of other street sweepers who weren't aware of the fact.

"Yes, man, that dude is fucking savage, and it is still free walking around Miami! They haven't caught him yet!" Jules replied angrily while smashing his locker close.

*And they never will, hopefully!*

"Lucky Mark, he has been assigned to South Miami today!" another street sweeper said, laughing and pointing at a short fat man looking like a human mole.

“Shut up- he will- not- kill me- I am a no-one! Why would-”

“Bring a helmet, Mark!” Jules laughed at the stuttering man while the others followed in chorus.

“Yes, Mark, get a helmet just to be extra safe!” the other man said, crying while laughing and holding his stomach.

“I am gonna smash your fucking head!” another one shouted, imitating the killer holding a rock over his head.

“You- you are not- you are not funny, guys! This- this is serious! Anyways, the- the killer is not- not that stupid to- to stay in the same-”

“Are we all ready?” the manager asked after smashing the door open. “Streets won’t get cleaned on their own! Miami is a big city! Chop! Chop!” he clapped his hands like he was guiding a herd of sheep out of a fence. He always had an obnoxious superior smirk stamped on his face.

*What a bunch of fucking idiots! This is probably the worst part of my day! Being forced to listen to these morons!*

The Street Sweeper finished zipping his fluorescent jacket, took his equipment, locked his locker and left the changing room after the others. That day he had a lot of ground to cover up North Miami, but luckily there wasn’t much crowd in that area of Miami; he could get things cleaned faster than downtown.

## The Street Sweeper

“Hey, you! Asshole! Pick the fucking trash and throw it in the bin, or I will trash your face!” he shouted to a teen who threw a pack of cigarettes on the sidewalk. The teen felt guilty and picked it back up and binned it.

*I can't believe that actually worked! I would work less if I spoke my mind more often when I saw people giving me more work!*

“Sorry, sir, I need to get that! Thanks!” he said to a man standing on a plastic bottle while on the phone, gently moving him away.

*His belly is soo big that he probably didn't even notice he was standing on it! Fucking cannonball!*

“Hey! Do you have eyes or breathe with your ass? Assface!” he said to a man who hit his trash cart, ignored his remark, and kept walking about his business.

*It is so liberating this job! I can release all this accumulated anger on these strangers! If I didn't, I would explode!*

The Street Sweeper could be very kind but brutally honest in his remarks. It all depended on the people he met and how they acted with him. He was a fair and square man with great intellect and an even filthier mouth. Indeed, he wouldn't be able to focus on his free time if he didn't release that anger.

“Why don't you leave her alone? Are you a man at all? Why do you treat her like that?!” he patronised an older man for insulting and pushing a young woman wearing a mini-skirt.



*Because of men like this, we get a bad reputation in the female community! They are right on so many levels, although I fucking hate Feminists! They should try to be more feminine and less feminist! I don't deny some men are fucked up, tho'!*

He would never get into a fistfight as he was a big and fit guy, and people knew the scary stereotypes about street sweepers. They thought they were all ex-convicts who couldn't find a job, and it was a pretty accurate picture. No one was as lunatic as the Street Sweeper to embark on such a 'career' on purpose. The general public thought people were forced into becoming street sweepers, not because they chose to be. Well, little they knew about this Street Sweeper.

"Stop! Stop! I said, stop! You idiot! Do you think you deserve to pass because you have an expensive sports car? You just have a tiny dick!" he shouted while parking his trash cart in the middle of the street to help an old woman cross it.

*Some people don't give a shit about humans! They want to go from point A to point B! Everything in the middle is superficial! They found ME between their fucking A and B, busting their superficial balls!*

"Here we have the funny moron! I am so cool, I am so cool, look at me I kick at the trash and spread it on the sidewalk!" he roared to a man imitating his action before hitting him with his broomstick.

## The Street Sweeper

*Sometimes I think spoiled brats are worse than men with a shitty childhood or a rough past! They believe respect is due to them and don't believe they need to earn it!*

That day would go on that pace until the man moved to a quieter block, and it would all happen again when he moved back to a busy one. By the end of the day, he exhausted his energies when he would return to the office where he'd leave his equipment, change into his black jeans and black hoodie, badge out of his shift and walk back to his apartment. He would walk, hoping not to avoid meeting anyone weird or not to bump into any problems on his way back home. We would be highly unlucky as he'd, sooner or later, always find trouble (due to the length of his walks). He would always feel like helping or intervening somehow. He didn't wish or ask for it but could not ignore it; the sense of responsibility was stronger than his justification. That day wasn't different!

"Aaaah, get your hands off me! You pig!" a woman shouted and slapped the pursuer, who now was in a rage.

"You slut!" he said, touching his red cheek. "You'll regret pushing me away like that!" he started running after her. "If I catch you—" A fist appeared from a corner, and the man collapsed on the floor, moaning in pain. The Street Sweeper would jump on him blocking his arms by putting his knees on them, and start punching and punching and punching. The

man lost his senses but was still alive. He got what he deserved.

“Stay away from her, or I’ll find you, and this time I will fucking kill you!” he whispered, holding the man’s long hair. “Do you understand?!” the Street Sweeper asked the unconscious man before standing and running away. The man was lying on the floor in a fetal position, crying and asking for forgiveness.

*Same shit all over again! I could get used to this, but It doesn't pay anything. I can't make a living out of this. I mean, I could! Right? There is no harm in getting money from these douchebags, right? Let's see it as a fine! They will not run to the police and deserve more than a lesson. Sometimes it is more painful when you touch their wallets!*

The Street Sweeper came running back to the man on the floor and looked for his wallet in his jacket. It was in his inner left pocket, so he took it, opened it and checked his content.

“So, Mr Bill Korny, I know where you live and your name. Don’t fuck up again, or I will visit you! I will take this \$200 as compensation for my wasted time! Have a lovely day!” he said, stood up, threw his wallet on his face, and ran away, leaving the man moaning.

*Fuuuuck! That is almost four days of my pay, and I made it with 15 minutes of 'help'! I like this! But I shouldn't go looking for trouble anyway! Stick with your life, man!*

## The Street Sweeper

When he returned to his apartment, he sat on the mattress and unlocked his smartphone. He opened the 'notes' app and wrote, "Bill Korny: assaulted a woman." on top of that, he already wrote, "Vincente Scaletta: almost killed a man." he fell deep asleep in pure peace, knowing that day he made the street of Miami cleaner than before.

## **The Street Sweepers**

He had just turned 22 when his bank account hit \$60,000. After reading several investment and money management books, he has decided to put half of it in a mutual investment fund. He could afford a normal lifestyle, but he was no typical type. The only ordinary things he had were a job he loved and a smartphone that allowed him to: read the news, buy essential things, write notes and his thoughts that sometimes overwhelmed his mind. He would use it to take pictures of iconic moments: mainly sunsets and strangers he met on the streets.

He avoided anything unproductive like social media, video games, funny videos and scrolling for hours. He had steel self-control, and any temptation didn't corrupt him easily. However, he would fall for booze and decadent dinners (the only meal he had daily). He practised intermittent fasting to keep his mind sharp and was aware of his health, treating his body like a sacred temple. He even wore a face mask to avoid breathing smog and dust out in the streets. He read lung cancer and respiratory complications were the leading cause of death in his career. He never considered using it initially, but he changed his mind after some of his colleagues died of lung disease.

## The Street Sweeper

Many said it was a farce, and they used to smoke a lot while using an experienced street sweeper as an example, "Take Adam, all he ever knew was the streets. He worked as a street sweeper since a young age, and now at 75, he is still healthy and working! It's all crap what you hear out there!" a manager said in the office trying to reassure his employees.

He didn't care and used the face mask anyway, while the others would not use it because it gave them breathing problems. He realised all the shit he was getting in his lungs only after he removed his face mask at the end of a shift. The face mask was completely black, and he showed it to his colleagues in the changing room as tangible proof. They didn't fall for it, disregarding him as they resisted propaganda. Adam died of lung cancer a month later, and suddenly everyone wore them at work and out.

He would keep fit by practising free body exercises: push-ups, pull-ups, squats, plank, lunge, shoulder bridge, burpees, running and many more. He would cut his hair short once every nine months to avoid going to the barbershop. He had his first full beard, which he would let grow long and cut after several months when unmanageable. He stopped growing up, and now it was 186 cm tall and 76 kg heavy. His weight would shift from 76 to 80 kg depending on the work he had to do.

Sometimes he was forced to take the street sweeper truck, making him touch his 80 kg due to his sedentary lifestyle. Sometimes he had the leaf blower when assigned near parks or streets with many trees. Still, he loved the traditional cart and broom style of street sweeping, which was the hardest and the less requested. He would trade his benefits with other street sweepers for more hours with the cart and the broom. What can I say? He was old-school, that's all.

Four years into the job and in the city of Miami and he was still with a big smile stamped on his face. The town was now tight on him because he knew all its secrets and every street on the map. Thanks to his terrific visual memory and a beautiful bright mind, he could sketch a perfect map of Miami blindfolded. Sweeping streets was his 'Ikigai', which meant 'Purpose of life' in Japanese. He read it in a book and immediately associated his job with this word. He would never stop loving his career and promised never to retire.

Despite his strong passion for his work, the strongest motivation to stay on the street was the possibility of making a fundamental change in people's lives. No, It wasn't cleaning the street or sweeping dirt. What kept him on the streets was the adrenaline and the pleasure he would get from beating criminals and the scum of society. He almost enjoyed sweeping those people from the streets as much (if not more) as cleaning trash people used to leave on the road. They both

## The Street Sweeper

deserved to be binned and had the same value for the man: none.

His job was part of a routine he needed to give a pace to his lifestyle, with a stable job and a decent income now (\$1,200/month). On the other hand, beating scum almost to death was not guaranteed and would rarely happen despite the fact he could profit him up to \$2,000 on a great month. His pocket would be full enough, but his lifestyle would always remain the same because of his choice.

He was earning between \$3,200 to \$4,000/month, and he could now integrate into this capitalist system like another consumer cog. He couldn't; even if he wanted, he would have the IRS and the tax agents on his ass. It wasn't going to be a problem for him anyway. Hence he invested heavily to make that profit untraceable and justifiable with his past business exit's profit. He thought about everything.

"Did you guys hear? The government announced that the public sector would cut the workforce by 50% this year? Damned recession!" Dave said to all his colleagues in the changing room. "I just started this job! I can't lose it now; I have a family to feed—"

"Then, maybe you should shut up and focus more on sweeping streets better! I heard the manager say you have screwed a tire up from one of their brand new street sweeping trucks!" Joel said with a patronising voice.



*Fuck! I shouldn't have given him the truck! He still is a Noobie, and I should have imagined he would screw things up! There is a reason why they don't entrust new recruits with such machinery!*

"But I- but I-" he stuttered while looking at the man who exchanged it for his cart and broom.

"No matter how much you screw up or work hard here, we are all expandable, the weakest link in the public sector! make your math, folks! We always will suffer the fuck-ups of the shitty leaders we have!" another man shouted while zipping his fluorescent jacket. "Dave, I am sure you will be fine; you are not the worst, trust me! If there is someone I will fire first, that would be Mark! He is such a prick!" the man shouted, gesturing to a man on the other side of the changing room.

*Don't give him false hopes, man! That would make things worst for him and his family! Fear is a good thing; let him be scared! Fear makes you focused and super aware of your actions. Fear is the only thing that will prevent him from other fuck-ups and help him keep his job. Look at the stupid smile on his face; that's a man soon to be fired!*

"Ready for the day of work?!" the manager shouted, smashing the door while entering the changing room. "What are those long faces? Is it because of the job cuts? Don't see it as a negative thing, guys; it's the circle of life. Survival of the fittest, as they say." he chuckled indifferently. "Now go out

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there and give me a good reason not to fire ya all! Chop Chop! Streets are not going to get cleaned by themselves!" he said with the sarcastic voice of someone confident in keeping his position.

*Fuck, I hate this asshole! I wish I had a good reason to smash his face in a dark alley. Please give me a good reason! I am waiting for it!* He thought as he moved across the changing room while staring at the manager.

"Hey, you! Yes, you!" he said, pointing at the Street Sweeper as if calling a dog. "You don't have to worry! You are the best here and will not lose this job soon! Happy now?" he asked. "Don't you worry! Come on, give me a little smile," the manager asked the Street Sweeper, laying a comforting hand on his right shoulder while holding the exit door open.

*As if I needed your meagre salary! Actions speak louder than words, man! Get your filthy manager's hand off my shoulder, or I will kick your ass!*

"Sure," he replied to the manager swallowing his thoughts and leaving the room without looking at him. "Asshole!" he whispered while approaching his numbered trash cart.

That day he was assigned to the Miami Beach area. His colleague gave him a lift as usual with the collection truck, and he dropped him at the Miami Beach Broad walk. He told him that he would stay around in the area and that he had to contact him on the radio if he needed to unload trash. When

the Street Sweeper had to cover more ground, he would be sided by a truck driver; the driver would get calls from street sweepers nearby to unload the trash from their trash cart to his trash truck.

“Sorry, Ma’am, may I get that trash you have there?” he kindly asked a woman seated on a bench eating a banana. She nodded, her mouth full. “I will be quick, thanks!” he leaned near the woman and collected her trash like thunder. He even cleaned the bench from the breadcrumbs she left eating chips. “Have a lovely day, Ma’am!” he concluded, moving to the next block.

*She was a quiet old lady. I wonder if one day I will be like that: able to chew with my teeth. I should floss more often!*

“You little morons! Don’t you see that your plastic bag is flying over there? Fetch it, or I will fetch you and trash you myself!” he shouted, pointing to a black shopping bag on the sand near a couple trying to sunbathe. “Hey! Hey! Where are you running? Are you scared of some trash?” he shouted ironically while holding his broom high like a knight with a long sword. “I beg you pardon, Mrs, they are just kids. Let me get that for you,” he said to a woman lying belly up topless while he picked the bag with his garbage stick pinch.

*El Salvador had better quality kids with great values. At least they did something: they worked, for starters! Sure, most were criminals, but they were still busy kids!*

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The man would go like that all day, and many people would recognise him. Some were his fans, others hated him, and many more were frightened by the men. In any case, he was respected, whether feared or loved! That summer was the hottest ever recorded in Miami, and the man could not bear to sweat his ass off in that uniform any longer. He removed his jacket and wore a hat, which was highly prohibited by the rules. However, he highly doubted that the man who created those rules knew how it felt to wear that uniform on an August morning in Miami Beach. He reasonably thought he could make an exception to the rules and get his body some fresh air.

“Street Sweeper! Hey you, why don’t you sweep this beauty?” a man shouted while bending over and lowering his underwear showing his bum to the man. “Please, I need a good sweeping. I am so filthy-”

“You assface!” he shouted after throwing a rotten apple at him he had just picked up. The apple hit his naked ass and made it run away. “There is no respect nowadays-”

“Sir, is there any problem?” a police officer asked, appearing behind him. “People here are quite ‘joyful,’” the second officer said, seeing the scene and explaining what happened to his partner. “Well, we are here to help! Give us a holler if you get bothered again!” the first officer concluded, patting the Street Sweeper's shoulder.

*I am good. I don't need your help to deal with this scum; thanks!  
Go on your way and leave me dealing with MY problems!*

The Street Sweeper finished his shift earlier and decided to move his trash cart to the seashore and remove all his clothes. He was in his underwear when he jumped into the calm, warm water. He stayed there swimming in all styles, floating belly up and staring at the beautifully sparse and dense clouds in that bright summertime sky.

*Is that a whale? Yes! That cloud looks like a whale, doesn't it?  
Wait! Now it is turning into a shark! I wish my life could be like  
those clouds: light, bright and open to change.*

The sun was setting, and the clouds went from grey, and orange, to pink. The man returned to his trash cart and pushed it to the showers. The cold water flowing on his body cleaned and removed the salt and sweat of the day, and he'd bring shampoo and body wash to his work for these occasions. He dressed in his fluorescent uniform and called his colleague on the radio to drive him back to the office. As usual, he left the trash cart at the entrance of the building, dumped his equipment and uniform in his locker n° 12 in the changing room, and badged out from his shift.

He was ready for his long walk, hoping not to get in any trouble this time. It has been two weeks since he didn't bump into any criminal activity in that neighbourhood. He expected the criminality rate to increase due to the latest financial news

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while unemployment was reaching an all-time high and inflation was growing daily. The word 'recession' was in rich people's mouths and poor people's ears, and his eyes were wide open. That day he decided to visit his old friend Luca at his bar and probably eat a pizza or two for dinner. Hoping he didn't burn them this time.

*What? Don't tell me this is what it looks like! It was such a great day today! Why am I always in the wrong place at the wrong time? I guess no dinner for me today! At least at Luca's bar!*

He approached the bar with broken glass making sure not to step on the shards on the floor to avoid making unwanted noise. He stopped near the wall and looked inside. He saw flashing lights coming from a flashlight; he immediately pulled his head back on the wall while the light almost reached his nose. He sighed and put on his black hood.

*Let's do this shit! Luca, you owe me a favour! Free pizza for an entire year!*

He entered the bar after the light changed direction; he walked in the shadow while carefully walking on his tiptoes. He took his smartphone out and texted Luca, "Man! It's me. I am in your bar; two guys broke into it. Call the police, don't tell them I told you. I don't want to get involved.". He could hear a louder noise of objects following on the floor and of drawers opening with a loud bang. He approached the voices

as he approached; a conversation was happening between two men.

“Did you find it? Gennaro, did you fucking find it?” he whispered angrily to the first man while looking in a file.

“I am looking for it! Calm the fuck down, Giuseppe!” Gennaro replied with a louder voice while opening another drawer. “This asshole doesn’t have a safe! He doesn’t pay for the pizzo, and he doesn’t have a safe! This guy is a genius or a total idiot!” he continued, throwing his hands in the air and giving up.

*They didn’t find anything they were looking for, so I guess I can go, right? I have done my part, and the cops will be here soon!*

“He may not have money here, but he will pay someday! I know where he lives and his wife too—”

*You mean ex-wife—*

“We should visit him, and he will open the safe for us! Pick that gasoline tank, Gennaro! Let’s show him what you get when you screw Scaletta’s family up!” Giuseppe roared, picking up the gun he left on the table and tucking it back in his hidden holster in his pants.

*Fuck! Not again, please! The fucking Mafia guys again! Why me? Why all of this is happening to me? I am a normal person! I want to be an average person!*

“Parole sante fratello! Parole sante fratello!” Gennaro chuckled, picking up the gasoline tank and unscrewing the

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cap. He poured it on the walls and all along the main rooms. "Do you have apiccio? Do you have a fire?" he continued throwing the empty tank on the floor and baking to the exit.

"Si Genná! Damme un'attimo," Giuseppe asked him to wait while he put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. The red light of the cigarette shined over the walls and revealed the lucid gasoline liquid. "Wait, did you get your gun?" he said before flicking the cigarette on the gasoline-soaked parquet floor.

"Gun?" Gennaro asked, touching his belly and waistband and finding the empty holster. "The gun-"

"It doesn't fucking matter anymore! Let's get this over with. I'll get you another gun later, fucking idiot! This is the second one you lose! How the fuck can you lose two guns?!" Giuseppe roared, looking at him in deep disappointment and mockery while he breathed the last puff of smoke.

Giuseppe stretched his arm straight and wrapped his index finger around the cigarette (now horizontal) while pushing it against his thumb. He was on the verge of flickering the cigarette in the air when someone shot.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Giuseppe didn't have the time to even react to the shots. The first shot hit his fingers, amputating his thumb, index and medium finger. The cigarette fell on the floor far away from the gasoline, and the fingers scattered around it. The second



shot Hit his left knee and crippled him kneeling. The last shot went right through his shoulder, putting him senseless on the floor.

“Fuck Giuseppe! Are you alive?!” the man said stupidly, running towards his friend to help. He pushed two hands on his shoulder to stop the bleeding. “Who is shooting? Show me!” the man continued asking, now losing a lot of blood and creating a pond of blood. “Who the fuck-”

“I am shooting!” a man said, appearing from the shadow before Gennaro. He had his left arm straight and was holding a silver 1911.

“Wait, wait! I can explain. I don’t-” Bang! Bang! The first bullet hit the man's knee and the second his arm. He was on the floor near his friend, still conscious. He moved his hand to his shoulder and knee to try to stop from bleeding out. “What do you want?! Who are you?!” Gennaro asked, gulping, almost crying from the pain while contorting on the floor.

*Your worst nightmare, asshole! Thanks for the gun, though!*

“No one fucks with my friends! I am the Street Sweeper bastard!” he shouted with a heroic grave voice as if he had rehearsed that line many times. Sirens were blaring far away from that block. The man Fainted, and calm was back again.

*Fuck! Why did I say that? It went out like that! I often rehearsed it before a mirror, but I never meant to use that line! My fucking*

## The Street Sweeper

*subconscious and the adrenaline screwed me up! I screw myself up! I am fucked!*

He ran away in the opposite direction from the sirens while holding his hoodie from revealing his face with a hand. It was a windy day, and the siren sounded so far away, but he could already see the blue lights! He ran like the wind that day; he ran so fast he thought he broke a 100 meters world record. Arrived home, he went over another block and entered his building from the backdoor. He would use to do this route whenever he was in trouble.

He was still shaking when he lay on his filthy mattress. He realised he still had his gun in his pants.

*Fuck! I could have shot my dick off! Get a grip, man! You saved a bar today and Luca's business!*

He put the gun on safety, raised it to the light of his little electric lamp, and explored his new silver 1911. He removed the seven-bullet magazine and expelled the round in the chamber. He put it back in the magazine and noticed only two bullets left. He left the magazine on the side of the mattress and investigated the Colt 1911. The stock was made of polished white silver, while the grip had shiny diamond-like little stones

*Could it be? It can't be right. Anyways not that I am going to sell it! He-man, look, I got this gun from a fierce and bloody Mafia family! Would you like to buy it?*

There was writing carved on the gun on top of the lower stock. You could see it by moving the gun and creating some shadow effect: it read 'Benvenuto nella Famiglia Domenico' or 'Welcome to the family, Domenico'. It looked like an essential piece of steel, and someone would come looking for it.

*I have to get rid of this gun! I like it, though! Should I keep it? I can't just throw it like that, right? I am going to leave it here under my mattress for now. No one would ever come here! I am in a good place.*

The Street Sweeper still had adrenaline pumping in his veins; he looked to see if Luca had replied to his message. Noting, he didn't even receive it. He fell asleep, hoping the two-man wasn't dead when the police arrived.

The next day he passed in front of Luca's and saw police surrounding it, and a black and yellow ribbon was wrapped around the entrance. Some people stood there checking what the police were up to.

"What has happened here?" the Street Sweeper asked with a poker face.

"They said a man killed to death one man and injured a second one! They were robbers, what I know. They didn't tell us anything else, just that they are running an investigation." a stranger replied while scratching his head and pointing at the crime scene

*Died? I am so fucked! I didn't want to kill anyone!*

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"Thanks. I hope everything will get solved!" the Street Sweeper replied to the stranger and kept walking towards his office.

The man got scared after he understood that one of the two-men died. He got mad at himself for not shooting him only twice as he thought it would have been enough for the second man (who survived). There were so many possible explanations why the first man died and the other one survived. He stopped bothering. He didn't have enough facts to understand what had happened to the man after he left.

Once he reached his office, he badged in and went to his locker in the changing room. There were a few colleagues that day, and that was unusual.

"What happened to the others?" the Street Sweeper asked, looking around the room.

"Fired. All fired! Consider yourself lucky that you still got the job in such downtime," his colleague replied sadly while he zipped his fluorescent jacket.

"How will we do the same job in half of the team? That is impossible to--"

"Good morning, my beloved colleagues!" the manager shouted, banging the door and opening a file. He checked the next page and wrinkled his forehead. "Well, we are all here, I reckon. Few but a great bunch--"

*You are not in the bunch, trust me!*

“The boss said we need to keep on with the same pace; unfortunately, that means double hours for you all.” the manager said with fake sadness.

“And that means double pay, right? We will not do the work of an entire team in five for the same pay, Sir!” one street sweeper scoffed, infuriated, while he echoed the approval of his other colleagues. The Street Weeper was silent.

“I don’t make the rules, guys! I can discuss that with my boss, but I can’t guarantee anything! Time to clean. Chop! Chop!” he said indifferently, like their lives were an annoying chore.

“I fucking quit!” another street sweeper shouted while throwing his equipment on the floor. The other workers were now shouting in approval against the manager.

“I quit too! Let’s see who will clean your streets!” another man scoffed, throwing his equipment on the floor, and folded his arms.

“I quit too! Let’s go, guys, we can find better elsewhere!” a third one shouted, encouraging his co-workers to do the same.

*What should I do? Everyone is quitting, and I can't do the job of everyone alone! Should I leave too?*

“Great! You can’t quit now you have given your week's notice, and you will be replaced! Today you work as usual or—”

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“Fuck you! You create discomfort in our lives, and we do too! I fucking quit too!” the more experienced man said while turning towards the Street Sweeper on his left side, looking for him to stand up of his honour.

“I fucking quit too!” the Street Sweeper shouted after reflecting on his other chances to find a job.

*I can afford this, and I hate the management of this place! Moreover, what am I going to do? Clean all of Miami on my own.*

“You can’t- Your contracts- Where are you going!” the manager stuttered, now in big trouble. He didn’t have anyone to manage anymore. “Come back, all of you! Or I will- I will-”

“Suck my cock, Benjamin!” the Street Sweeper Said threatening, almost kissing the manager while the other laughed from ahead. He left the changing room behind once and for all.

That same day the men when all downtown and sat in a bar together for a drink. They needed a strong one or two! Some got drunk until fainting in front of everyone, while others would pick them up and sit them on some chairs. “All ok, boss! They are going through a rough day, that’s all!” another man said to the worried bartender, slapping the men’s faces and giving them some water.

The Street Sweeper was sitting on the bar stool, looking at the scene from a distance while sipping his double scotch

whiskey. He was trying to empathise with the men who could have been homeless tomorrow. He couldn't manage to find that emotion inside him at that time. He finished his booze and moved the wooden stool towards the bar table.

*Need to bounce. I have more important problems to think of now. I need to get rid of that gun as soon as possible! That is the only thing that links me to the murder of the two thugs. I do not care about the police as much as I am about the Mafia! They can find anyone and anything: anywhere! Where should-*

“Breaking news! We just discovered that the only man who survived a gun shooting in South Miami was killed in the hospital just now, where he was recovered yesterday night! He was an undercover police officer! Here CNN, back to the studio!” the report said in front of a heavily surveilled hospital room door.

*Are you fucking with me now?! Did I shoot a police officer? How could I know? This is fucked up! This is more intricate than I thought, and I am in this shit storm! The shit hits the fan! I need to move somewhere else as soon as possible! Miami is getting too hot for me!*

“Wait- we had another breaking news- Julia, are you still there?” the CNN journalist said from the studio, giving the line back to the reporter.

“Yes indeed! The police officer notified us that the other man was Scaletta's brother! The police have identified him

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just now.” she replied while standing with a nodding police officer. “In less than two months, we have witnessed a fierce offensive to one of the most feared Mafia families in Florida and the US. The FBI is investigating this case but would not share more details with us!” the reporter screamed to overtake the volume of the noisy crowd. She looked shocked and excited for being the first to spread such news.

*I- I- What the total- Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck! So the FBI is now on me? The undercover agent must have had a microphone! The Mafia killed him after they may have learned what happened! They both know it is a street sweeper and a friend of Luca's who lives in South Miami! How many friends could Luca have like that? Me! Only me! But there is nothing that links me to their death! The fucking gun! The fucking message I sent to him! I need to find his phone! This is a total clusterfuck!*

The Street Sweeper waved goodbye to his colleagues and left the bar in total shock. He had the day off, so he went to Miami Beach and tried to relax; he didn't want to come back home during the day as someone may be checking the area for someone who matched the description. He thought it was a great moment to be fired, so if the FBI went through all the cleaning agencies, they wouldn't have any details about him. These agencies exploit their workers; the last thing they want to do is keep track of their employees. They are the most prominent criminal organisations, and they are even legal!



He lay low for a while before applying and looking for a new job. He had a new haircut and shaved his beard; he bought new clothes and went hunting for a new abandoned place where to move that same night. He had to steer clear from south Miami for a while and pause his sweeping job search while he pretended to look like a wealthy investor. He was great at faking appearances and making people believe what he wanted them to see. That same afternoon he bought an expensive black suit and a black briefcase.

He spent the rest of the evening eating exceptionally well in a high-end restaurant downtown. The Investor walked towards South Miami while looking at his phone and reading more news about the murder and the FBI investigation. He didn't get any helpful update on the status quo of the situation, so he kept walking the usual streets confidently. It was already dark, and the streets were pitch black. He got nervous while approaching his place.

*What is that man doing? Is that a crowbar? How can you be so stupid to try to open a door in the main street at this time? Did he think it was going to be easy and fast? What a Newbie!* He approaches the man with confidence, not scared by his incompetence.

"Hey, you!" the Investor whispered while pinching the man very hard. He fell on the floor and removed his balaclava, revealing his face. It was going to hit again when-

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“Wait- wait!” the mysterious man shouted, putting his hands forward in surrender. The light shined on his face.

“Dave? What the fuck are you doing?! I could have killed you!” the Investor whispered fiercely, removing his hood from his head. “Why are you doing this? You are not a bad man!” he continued, picking him up by his shoulders.

“I am desperate! I have tried everything, I promise! There is no job, and I can’t afford a week of break from this life! I have kids and a wife! They rely on me to survive!” Dave gulped and broke down in tears while lowering his head in shame. “What are you doing here? Why are you so elegant? Did you find a new job?! I knew you were always the best in that place! I knew you would-”

“Dave! Dave! Listen, I don’t have much time. I have to go! Take this; it should be enough!” the Unvestor said, reaching into his wallet and giving him \$300 out of a big stack of cash. “Promise me you will not get in other trouble! You were lucky-”

“Where did you get this much money? Wait- You are- You are him! You are, aren’t you? It wasn’t a street sweeper; it was The Street Sweeper! Your name! You are going South Miami, and I bet you have a black hoody somewhere. Why are-”

*Fuck! Dave, I didn't make you so bright! Doesn't make sense to lie to him! I don't have time to support my lie right now! I don't*

*want to contradict him or upset him! Who knows, he may rat me out for some kind of reward.*

“I am. Go back home now! It is dangerous to be in this area, especially now! We will talk later, ok?” he replied sincerely and got an agreeable nod back from Dave. The man left in the dark, leaving Dave in total shock.

The Investor arrived at his building and took the usual diversion route before entering the back entrance of the building. He noticed a sofa was not in its original position on the first floor. He had an incredible visual memory; he memorised all furniture locations on all the bases in the past five years. He noticed a table now on its side on the second floor while a carpet was moved to a side of the room. He finally arrived on the third floor and noticed his filthy mattress upside down near the wall. His backpack was emptied, and all his belongings were on the floor.

*They got it! The gun is not here! Who got it? The police? The Mafia? I am compromised! I need to leave now! No, they will never stop looking for me! They will find me anywhere I go; these guys have men everywhere! I need to take down the Scaletta! What the fuck are you talking about? Get out of this country as long as you are still breathing!*

He again packed his belongings in his big backpack and ran out of the building like the wind. He embarked on a 5-hour walk to North Miami, overwhelmed by any imaginable

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scenarios. His mind was going on fire, and his feet were moving uncontrollably, like on a treadmill. He put his phone out and called Dave.

“Dave, it’s me- Dave- Dave! Let me talk! I need you to gather all the street sweepers and meet me there. I will explain everything.” he said quickly without waiting for a response. He sent him the meeting point four hours away from his location. It was an abandoned shopping mall he had seen while looking for a place to stay.

*If I have to fight this scum of Mafia, I need to use the scum I know! I shouldn't tell them everything, though. Think- Think! I need to rehearse my pitch to the guys! It all depends on that!*

He was talking to imaginary people while approaching the meeting point. It was 2 am, and it was getting cold; he was rehearsing his speech countless times until he finally arrived at the location. He sent a message to Dave and asked him to meet him on the second floor at the abandoned H&M. That shopping mall was set on fire by a local gang a long time ago. It wasn't the best place to meet as the gang could have been the same family they would conspire against.

It's a perfect HQ for the team! They will never come looking here ever! I hope Dave took some precautions! I hope no one-tailed him here! He is an intelligent man! He went up the stairs and sat waiting on the shop's counter while playing with his tie. He heard some noises from the stairways, and

some people mumbled silently. He hid until he made sure they were his companions. The six men entered the shop and looked around.

“Hi, gentlemen!” the Investor said while standing up from behind the counter. Everyone jumped in fear.

“Relax, it’s me! Take a seat, buckle up because what I propose tonight will change your life!” he sat on the counter while the six men took some chairs and lined them up in front of him while sitting. They kept quiet in shock and interest. “From your silence, Dave already told you who I am and what I can do,” he said, keeping going more intensely while the other nodded. “We spent our lives sweeping trash, and I am fed up with being treated like trash myself! We work hard and clean streets for ungrateful people, and what do we get? Do we get fired like that? I loved my job but recently swept another trash: the scam in the streets that make this city a wild west! I am proposing you join me on a journey where we will get from the undeserving and give it to the most in need: starting with us! Many of you are broke, others have families, and I don’t even have a name, for fuck’s sake! I am telling you, folk; this is the only way. Today I am creating an anti-criminal organisation fighting violence with violence called *The Street Sweepers*, AKA SS for short. Few rules, guys. *You will not kill. You can rob criminals. Never reveal your face. You have no name. You will not own anything.* Is everything clear?”

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Who is it?" the Investor concluded, waiting for a response. The men were still in deep shock and still processing all the information.

"I am in!" one man said, standing up while everyone looked at him.

"I am in too! Let's fuck some criminals!" another man shouted, followed by the rest of the men who stood up and shouted, "I am in!" they all screamed 'Street Sweepers' in unison while the Investor stood up and shushed them. He approached them and looked at them one by one.

"I want you to recruit trusted men and explain what I explained! I want you to be my most trusted and make sure you allocate recruits to new areas of the city! You should be familiar with this scheme! Right street sweepers?" he shouted the question.

"Right, Sir!" they all replied in unison, focusing on his words again.

"I want you to identify the criminals and take note of their names, address, and family once completed the job. This is for insurance if they decide to pursue you; it is more to scare them out than anything else. I keep track of my jobs and advise you to do the same! At the end of every quarter, we will analyse the data and reorganise our resources based on the criminal activities in the different areas of Miami. Your earning will be based on the fish you hook, but expect

between \$2,000 to \$3,500/month. I don't need to remind you that this is a dangerous job and quite an unpleasant lifestyle. If you want to leave, leave now!" the Investor roared at them. No one moved; instead, they shouted, "We are with you, Chief!"

"You may know I had some unexpected troubles with some Mafia men. They are our priority; I will take down the most wanted man in Florida: Mr Scaletta! I want you to prioritise any information about this family to get to their boss. Something tells me you will master persuasion sooner than later!" the Chief laughed, and everyone echoed him. They didn't seem scared. They were desperate and ready to do anything. "This will be our HQ for this quarter. You will all receive a message from me with updates and meeting points. Now, any questions?" the Chief asked, but no one spoke. "You are all dismissed!" they understood what was happening well! Everyone left except Dave.

"I am proud of what you have created here! You gave a purpose to those men and me! I will not forget this day! Thanks, Chief!" Dave whispered, putting a comforting hand on the man's shoulder.

"Try not to get killed, Dave. You are a terrible criminal; I hope you will make a better street sweeper," the Chief replied while yawning and walking out of the shop.

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It was 6 am when the Chief arrived at his new abandoned apartment. He jumped on a pink mattress, unlocked his phone, and assigned the hunting areas to his men while eating some chips he bought on the way home. He fell into a deep, peaceful sleep while holding his phone on his chest.



## **Meet Mr Scaletta**

The organisation was proliferating, and The Street Sweepers were getting an excellent reputation among the general public. A bad one was around the criminals and the police, who didn't distinguish them from the criminals they were fighting. The men spread the word quickly in the past three months since Chief launched the project.

The family now counted more than 53 men spread all around Miami simultaneously. The Chief was a great manager but needed some support, so he nominated a right and a left arm. Dave and Simon were his trusted men, who he would assign special operations and entrust meetings and cash flow.

They elected a punisher to deal with rough men in the family. They picked some lobbyists to involve his organisation with the local politicians. May bills were filed in favour of the Chief's organisation. The most important bill they passed was the 'mortal self-defence', now legal if threatened with a weapon. He was running an empire and saw his first significant results.

Some journalists said the criminality rate plummeted to 1.3% from 6.4% in the past three months. The government fired police officers, and they hated the organisation even more. The high-up in command now focused more on demolishing the organisation than fetching 'real' criminals.

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The reality is that most of the commanding officers were on the Mafia payroll, which explained everything.

Despite efforts from the police and the 'justice' broken system, they couldn't get to any of the Chief's men. The Chief has planned the organisation structure too well to leave any substantial breadcrumbs to lead to any of his men or himself. The business model was fluid, untraceable and scalable, allowing his men to work on several jobs and disappear.

The organisation grossed over \$182,000 that month, making it now a multi-million activity run by a single man: the Chief. The Chief would be incredibly proud of his achievement and the difference he made on the streets with his street sweepers. He would think about the business he used to run with the fishmonger and laugh at it while counting a pile of cash on his desk. He was almost 25, and he was the head of an anti-criminal empire. He felt like Robin Hood and began loving his new lifestyle.

The Chief wouldn't reinvest the money in other businesses like many criminal organisations, such as strip clubs, drug dealing, human trafficking, etc. He would fight them on the other side by helping homeless people and giving them a choice preventing them from taking the criminal path. He assigns men to save escorts from their pimps, offering a new start elsewhere. He would provide unanimous help to the

authorities on drug deals and new cocaine and amphetamines batches' locations around the city.

The fight against criminal organisations had to start from the street. Still, he realised that if he wanted to make a real difference, he needed to hit harder than that. He invested in cybersecurity and hackers and would gather intelligence about the crime scene in the city while being a step ahead of everyone. He would hack into casinos and attack their system with malware allowing anyone to win nonstop at the slot machines.

A year after he founded the organisation, more than 300 men worked for him in more than 73 anti-criminal departments. The SS was the fastest-growing organisation conceived by a human being; it was the only organisation that used vanguard technologies like AI and machine learning to coordinate and execute operations and map criminal behaviour. They digitalised all the members while keeping them off the grid.

They knew when the authorities were on them hours before they arrived or showed up. They could intercept any type of communication and steal work from the police. Interception of the police was essential to avoid past mistakes like involving any undercover agents in operation. They knew all the undercover agents even before their bosses knew their covers were blown. Nonetheless, SS was looked down upon

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by the government, which described it as a 'rogue group of militants and fanatics'. The SS was called 'justice league'; 'criminals'; 'batshit crazy militants, and many more.

The SS made four times the progress in one month that Miami authorities made in years. The public knew it was not scared; instead, they were on its side and protested against the government for hunting the SS. People understood criminality could be defeated, and profit was the only reason it wasn't. Society needed an organisation that would not compromise with criminals nor fight for profit.

Everyone knew the SS made money out of the operation. Still, the difference is that they took it from criminals and not for taxpayers. People understood that the real criminals were the ones who were supposed to protect people from the same: the government. The SS was in the mouths of everyone, and news outlets could not get enough of talking about the SS. The organisation was starting to get international and intercontinental attention.

No one had the faintest idea of who the members were and who the chief was. It could have been their neighbour or school teacher for all they knew. The SS accepted ordinary people motivated to make a change in a specific department based on their skill set. Many of these SS members would earn more working for the SS than in their jobs. They would have quit, but they needed to keep a low profile and keep their jobs.

It was very taxing for some who decided to go full-time with the SS or part-time while keeping their jobs.

It would happen that some members would die, especially from the street department (the riskier one). They had to face the roughest operations, but they had the highest rewards. This department was mainly composed of strong men with little education or intellect. They would be ex-felons struggling to find a job or working class fed up with living in an exploitative system. The IT and tech departments would have professionals in the sector and so on; departments were ever-changing and ever-growing depending on the supply. It would happen when the SS top managers would refuse some possible members due to the lack of demand or because they needed to be more trustworthy.

The SS had a revolutionary selection process and bragged about its anonymity, which everyone respected. No one would dare to rat the SS out because they knew what they could and the values they were fighting for. One time (at its beginnings), the SS made the mistake of accepting a member who was an undercover police officer. The officer changed his perception of the SS and never spied on it; instead, he quit his government job and joined the SS full-time: he was Simon, the Chief's left hand.

Many members complained that Chief kept him in the SS, but he would always say with a wise tone, "There is no better

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man to trust than a penitent informer". The Chief may have been young for the average SS member, but he was extremely wise. Let's not forget he was a Salvadorian immigrant in the US and created the SS alone. He never believed in the 'American Dream' because he knew it was a farce made up by the States to trick people in. The US was still a Wild West with different buildings and people but still a Wild West. He always told recruits, "It is called the *American Dream* because you have to be asleep to believe this shit!"

The chief was in his office that Thursday morning and was counting money. He took a thick brick of cash from one of the 23 giant boxes and used a noisy cash machine. That was a taxing job, but he could only trust people with so much money. People can change when put in front of such an amount of money. He used cash to pay his members from all the departments, excluding the street department, which would cut them on the site. He would keep 80% of the money in offshore banks and several untraceable crypto wallets. Money was becoming a problem; he only thought this would be an issue once he earned them.

*That is embarrassing! Why do we have so much money? This year we gave away 3 million against poverty, 6 million against human trafficking, 15 million for lobbying and 46 million to all our members working in all our departments. We still have \$4,652,785 unused; someone screwed up! Let me-*

*Ring! Ring!* His phone vibrated on the table. He reached for it, slaloming through the towers of cash—unknown caller. No number is compared on display. He picked up the call and kept quiet.

“It has been difficult tracing you, Chief!” an unknown deep voice said with an Italian accent.

*Fuck! I know now where the \$4,652,785 weren't invested back into-cybersecurity!*

“Do you know who I am? Maybe You remember my son Vincente and my brother Giuseppe—”

*Scaletta! You motherfucker dog, you still didn't leave the bone! How did he—*

“You may be asking how I found you; great question! I think I should let your friend answer this lovely question!” he said calmly, moving the phone to someone. A snapping sound like tape echoed in the speaker.

“Little Hai—” a voice was interrupted by a punch.

*That is Dave's voice! They are in Little Haiti! Bastards! Do not dare to touch my business partner!*

“I thought your friend was more respectful; I don't like ungrateful guests!” Scaletta shouted while the Chief unlocked another phone and texted all his men, “Scaletta has Dave! Little Haiti! Find him!”

“Do you know what I do with people who disrespect me?” he shouted and cocked a gun. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

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Bang! Bang! "I like it this way. Dave looks more like an art piece now. I always knew I had an artistic vein; maybe I should hang it somewhere!" he laughed and hung up the phone before the Chief could react.

*What- What- What- happened? Is Dave dead?*

The Chief's primary smartphone chimed after it received a message. It was from Dave's phone. He read the text, "Me and you alone. Tomorrow. Little Haiti. 3 am. NW 61St and NW 1st Ave. Let's settle this once and for all. Don't come; I will tell my men in El Salvador to butcher your beloved Fishmonger!"

*What? How does he know? Ok, just say Yes! You'll figure out the rest later!*

The Chief replied, "I'll be there!" and sent another message with the burner phone to all the members, "Meeting at the mall in 2 hours!" and locked the phone. He stood up and went on his way to the meeting. Everyone showed up.

"Dave is dead! Scaletta killed him. I was on the phone with him now! I will avoid punishing whoever screwed up with our cybersecurity because we have bigger shit to deal with! We have 14 hours. Here is the plan-" the Chief paused before explaining the plan to the team and assigning specific tasks to all the departments. Everyone was dismissed and encouraged to have an excellent early sleep because the Chief's life would be in their hands tomorrow.



The Chief didn't sleep one minute; he received a message, "We are in place, whenever you already," he was off to meet Scaletta, disarmed but with a good backup. He was terrified to meet the most dangerous man in the country. The Mafia didn't play games; they were an empire, and the Scaletta family was at least 20 times more powerful than the SS.

The Chief arrived at the meeting spot, took out his phone and messaged his team, "Snipers, stand by." he turned the last corner and received a message from Dave, "I am here, my friend. Can you see me?" the Chief looked puzzled when of a sudden, a body fell from a roof and swung on a rope tied to a light pole: it was Dave.

"Shoot that bastard!" the Chief shouted, and the snipers opened fire on the man on the roof. They got him. The man fell on the ledge of the roof with one arm stretched. "Scaletta, you fucking psycho!" he whispered with contained anger while his pocket vibrated. It was Dave calling. He picked up the call and kept silent.

"I knew I was an unrecognised artist! So talented, don't you think? The red blood- the shadow effects- the hanging from the pole, your face and most importantly- the fireworks!" Scaletta shouted on the phone with an evil laugh.

"Fireworks? What the-"

*Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!* The buildings around him exploded, surrounded by a blazing fire. Concrete,

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shards of wood and metal were flying in all directions piercing the walls and cars around him. The first six explosions blew up the nearby blocks bringing them to dust, while the last one went off ten meters in front of the Chief. Dave's body exploded in thousands of pieces of meat, and the blast wave flew the Chief for more than 8 meters backwards. He fainted on the floor.

"Wake up. Chief, can you hear me? Chief!? Are you ok?!" Simon asked while slapping his face. The Chief could see his face through an intermittent eye flapping. "They- they are all dead! We had to leave the bodies there! That motherfucker called the police on us! He fucked us well this time!" he roared, banging his fist on the metal archive cabinet while containing his tears. "Don't move, Chief; a doctor is coming for you! He is from the SS; don't worry! I have taken the right precautions as you taught me!" he said, pointing at the Chief's severe stomach wound. A long metal shard was hanging from the left side of the belly. He had several bruises, a broken arm and his right foot was almost cut in half. His clothes were almost completely burned, and his neck and half of the right side of his face showed 3rd-degree burns. He looked like a hamburger and could barely breathe due to the smog he inhaled while lying on the asphalt unconscious.

"How many- Tell me how many!" he shouted to Simon while coughing a mix of black blood and snot. He gripped

Simon's arm and bent over him for as much as possible. The doctor now entered the room, looked at the man and brought his hand to his forehead in desperation.

"53 men, Chief, they are gone. They are all gone!" Simon mumbled, almost eating his words. The Chief was unconscious, and Simon pushed the Doctor to the suffering man with vigour. "Do something! Save him! You have to save him, Doctor!" he shouted to the doctor while the latter unpacked his tools and gave some orders to this nurse.

"He is in horrible conditions! He needs a hospital; we don't have the machinery here! He needs a respirator and—" the doctor said, panicking while disinfecting the Chief's wounds with cotton soaked in alcohol.

"Give me 5mg of morphine for the pain! You take the IV and hang it on this coat hanger! Hold his tongue and put a stick in his mouth; this will hurt like hell!" he commanded more than five nurses working in unison on the Chief. "Hey, you! Write a list of what I just told you we need and give it to Simon immediately! We don't have much time!" he kept shouting to a nurse who handed a piece of paper to Simon and returned to his task.

"I will get you whatever you need, Doc! I'll have my men getting it right now! Hang in there, Chief; this is not your time!" he said confidently to the doctor and touched the Chief's shoulder.

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“Don’t touch him! We just disinfected him. Out of here, all of you! Bring me what I need!” the doctor lost his patience, and Simon signalled everyone to leave the room while looking at his Chief one last time before disappearing. The doctor administered so many drugs to the man that he had been asleep for five days. Simon managed to get all the instrumentations the doctor needed for the patient that same day. He had robbed a clinic with his men, although it was against the SS values (that was an extreme situation). The doctor attached a respirator machine to the Chief, who was now struggling to breathe with his lungs. The nurses had to remove a black fluid that formed in his lungs three times a day, disinfect and change the bandages. Twenty-five men surveilled the room while Simon ordered the rest to locate the Scalettas.

That night the SS took its worst hit since his foundation almost two years ago. Simon was motivated to keep the organisation motivated and took the lead. In the meantime, the Chief was still under severe conditions. He was to take his place if the Chief died but didn’t want to as he still had to learn so many things from him. He looked up to the Chief like a father, although he was older than him; he was motivated to serve the Chief his revenge on a silver plate.

During those months, the Chief fell into a coma, and his team needed more machinery to keep him alive during his

recovery. He suffered a severe lung injury, but nothing he could not survive, said the SS Doctor. During this time, the guards have stopped two attempts from Scaletta's men to murder the Chief as the SS security weakened without a proper lead. After Dave's horrible death, Simon struggled to maintain the organisation's morale high. Many SS members quit their positions despite the excellent pay after the tragic loss they took. The Organization was on the verge of failing, counting only 50 members now. The street and the frontline departments were not working anymore, and the crime rate went up to 8.7% that month.

Progress was made by the IT and security departments (the few ones left) to track and find the Scaletta boss. Dave was working his fingers to the bone, and his hours kept doubling daily; it was all a matter of time before they could locate Scaletta and share the news once the Chief woke up. Other members kept giving up, thinking the SS would die with the Chief in the worst-case scenario. They couldn't see stability in this job anymore and lost trust in the SS security protocols. They were all scared to end up like Dave; the first to leave were the ones with families, and the rest followed. The SS was now standing thanks to the most loyal members who have been in it since its start.

After six months of coma and litres of black liquid from his lungs, the Chief woke up. His wounds almost healed, but his

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face looked like a half-cooked hamburger. He looked scary, and his face scared him the first time he looked at it in the mirror; he couldn't walk and had several movement impairments due to his long sleep. Nothing was in his mind as he got terrible amnesia due to a concussion; he had a foggy mind and disrupted memories. One thing he knew was that Scaletta ruined his life and killed his best friend: no trauma could have ever deleted that from his mind. The following week the Chief was motivated by revenge to get on his feet and start physiotherapy. The doctor was impressed by his quick mobility recovery and the Chief's mental strength while enduring taxing rehabilitation exercises.

He lost his right eye and didn't work well, and his foot was still painful, but nothing a cane couldn't solve. He was in bad shape but alive and kicking; he met Simon that same day and the rest of the remaining members to debrief on the lost months. They were 12 in his office; no one dared to speak unless spoken to. Simon stood on the phone with the cybersecurity department while walking back and forth. He was stressed, but you could sense the excitement in his voice.

"That's great news! Send me the coordinates now on my mobile!" Simon said enthusiastically and hung up the phone. He turned to the Chief sitting at his table and put a thumb up. "We got the Motherfucker! Should I send-"

"I'll go alone. I can only solve this. I won't put anyone else at risk, not again!" the Chief shouted while standing up and wearing his coat. "Dave- I mean Simon, keep everyone safe and be my shadow; today, I will need your full attention! Here it is my plan, and it is not negotiable!" the Chief explained the plan he had been going through since his awakening from the coma. There was a general discomfort in the room, but everyone listened politely. "They may help; we are on the same side after all! Simon, make your calls, and you guys be ready for my signal," he concluded while reaching his cost pocket and extracting a dirty and bloody phone.

*It is time to meet violence with violence! You will pay Scaletta.*

The Chief browsed the phone contacts and clicked on *Dad*; he signalled everyone to leave the room and approached the phone to his ear, leaving some dust on it. It was ringing, and it kept ringing for a while until someone picked up. They both kept silent.

"You sound like you saw a ghost. Maybe not the one you were expecting to hear from. I can still smell your son's stinky blood in this burner phone! You should have killed me, Scaletta!" the Chief said while tightening the grip on the phone and chuckling. "Tomorrow, same place! This time you better show up!" he whispered, hanging up the phone without waiting for confirmation.

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It was a cold night, and you could only hear the noise of his cane banging on the streets of Little Haiti. He walked the same street he symbolically walked first while turning the last right corner. New buildings were rebuilt in the six demolished blocks, and the road looked better than the rest of that neighbourhood.

*Reborn from the ashes like me! I fucking hate this street! I still have nightmares about- Dave.*

“Mamma Mia, you look like shit! I respect you, Chief; you have a pair of balls to show up here after all I did to you! Look at you; you barely stand up and have what? Like 12 men left, right? I thought you were smarter than this!” Scaletta said, revealing himself from the shadows while chuckling with his evil voice. Some shades were moving on the rooftops of the building while the crippled Chief kept walking toward him.

“Tell your men not to bother! I am no threat; my 12 men would never face an unfair disadvantage after all they have been through! They didn’t want me to be here! But I had to give you this.” he said, raising a hand with Scaletta’s son's phone while advancing confidently toward the boss. “I am ready to die if this is my destiny. I am not scared anymore; I have experienced the worst a man should ever experience: you,” he continued, increasing his pace.

“Give me my son’s phone, and I will let your men live. I can’t promise the same for you! I will keep you alive and skin



you slowly until I get my satisfaction! Nothing can compare to the damage you caused to my family, but at least it will create my anger! I am going to use--“

“Shut the fuck up, you dumb loser! Do you know what the problem is? You don’t listen--“ the Chief paused, putting his hand near his ear and a finger on his mouth to demand silence. “Do you hear that? Yes, right there! That is the sound of freedom!” He laughed out loud and coughed in pain.

The noise revealed to be ten helicopters flashing bright lights on the building while hovering over the building. FBI and SWAT soldiers rappel from them on the rooftops immobilising Scaletta’s men before they had time to respond to the threat. They were not risking an unfavourable fight against the authorities.

“You fucking cripple! You have become a pig?!” Scaletta said, and some armed vehicles approached them on both sides of the streets with machine gun operators on top of them. “You better look at your back! I will never stop--“

A soldier hit Scaletta on the face with the butt of his rifle. Scaletta fell unconscious. Another soldier cuffed him and dragged him into the armed vehicle with the help of another SWAT soldier. A man in a suit walked out of a car and approached the Chief.

“What a day, right?” the agent asked, sighing. “Thanks for--“

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“I haven’t done it for you! I have done it for my men’s families and this rotten city!” the Chief whispered while turning around.

“You’d make a great agent! Have you ever considered working for-“

“Respect your part of the deal, Sir. and we call it even. Have a great day, agent!” he scoffed, raising his voice. The Chief returned to the SS HQ, where he met his 12 members, led in the room by Simon. They all looked in disbelief at what happened on Little Haiti's street.

“What the fuck was that? Now you cut deals with the Feds?! What about our anonymity? What about the organisation-“

“What organisation Simon? Look around you! Look at me! It’s- it’s over! They offer us safe passage to another county of our choice, new documents and normal life. They don’t want us in the US anymore! What is the purpose of fighting for an ungrateful system? We nailed the biggest Mafia boss in history, and what have we got? I see them in my nightmares, Simon; all those people died. I am alive. What is right in all of this? Yes, cut a deal with the Feds; it was the only way! Don’t you think I knew that by doing so, the organisation would disappear? Come back to your families and start a better life.

You are all dismissed!” the Chief concluded. They saluted him and went out of his office one by one in silence.

“I guess that’s it; working with you has been an honour, Chief. Good luck!” Simon said while approaching the exit door and walking his saddest walk.

“One last thing Simon, I want you to pay one million dollars to all the families of the deceased members. I already took my share—burn- burn the HQ to the ground. You have been a great co-worker and an outstanding friend. Thanks for not giving up on me in the darkest moments!” the Chief said, dismissing Simon with his hand as if he was trying to avoid being seen shedding tears.

*Is it over? All these years of work done for who? All the people who worked in the organisation? They had great pay and felt they significantly changed the lives of ordinary people and the city. For the first time, the members thought they belonged somewhere. They were excited to come to work for the SS; they knew what our position was all about and embraced the risks!*

*Have I done it for the people of Miami? The one I used to shout to in the streets while trying to do my job? They don’t care about the city; they try to survive in a constant hassle; they can’t afford to watch, or they would be overtaken but a better hassler. I don’t blame their indifference; they are trying to find a place in the society they picked for themselves.*

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*Have I done it for the system or the authorities who don't give a damn about our security or even fighting crime? I don't think so, or I wouldn't have cut a deal with the feds. They are real criminals! Did you know they can hack into your laptop, access your webcam, or spy on you? They are outlaws and don't follow the rules, but if a 'someone' does that, they become 'criminals'! No, I haven't done it for these pigs!*

*I have done it for myself; who am I fooling? Everyone was in for something. I wanted to make a change, whatever it was going to be; I didn't choose all of this; I was happy with my job, lifestyle and streets. The organisation is over, and my time in Miami ends here; it's become too dangerous for me. My reputation precedes me, and my face is well known. I should 'thank' Scaletta for giving me a new one. Rot in prison, bastard!*

The following week has been a week of preparation, packing, closure and repaying some outstanding debts. The Chief packed his big backpack with all his few belongings; he had a brand new passport and a ticket to Paris, France, that evening. He has always talked about France with the Fishmonger in his free time; his dad used to tell him so many stories about Europe and would focus on Paris in particular. He would say it is the heart of Europe and the best city to live in Europe; everyone who mattered would live and work there: but he never did. The Chief never contacted his dad, and his dad never got him, although they both had their numbers:

they were stubborn like donkeys. The two didn't leave on a good note, but they were a family for as long as they lived.

The Chief could now walk easily without the help of a cane, and he was healthy enough to embark on a long journey to his new feature in Europe. His two years anti-crime endeavour earned him \$ 2.6 million and cost him half of his face and the entire organisation. He didn't see it as a failure but was more conscious of what he had become; he finally knew at 27 what he wanted. He could be anyone he wished to be and live in any place he could pick; his deal with the Feds made him well known in their circle but a ghost to the public once again. This part of the deal with the FBI was the most appealing. Although he hated their guts: they always knew where he was. The chief has climbed the FBI's most 'in-demand talents' and most 'to keep an eye on' lists; they contacted him again on his new burner phone: he threw it away and got a new one.

The Chief knew he would continuously be tracked and monitored despite how hard he looked for bugs in his clothes, electronics or even body. You could not play the game with the ones who created it; you could not ghost the ghosts, and you certainly couldn't escape from being engaged in some missions when (if) needed. Deep down inside, he knew he was deprived of freedom the day he caught Scaletta. He exchanged his freedom for his life: the only reasonable deal.

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However, he felt more relaxed when an infamous Mafia boss was after him than being watched by the FBI constantly. He could not screw up, or they would use him for their dirty affairs.

He was walking towards downtown Miami when he looked back at all his past since now. He constantly desired to be a normal kid and ordinary man; he tried to adapt to what he had been given by society, but he wasn't meant to be average. His life had never been so abnormal, and he knew that by now. He went with the flow and stopped running away from his destiny. He felt extremely uncomfortable to realise that he didn't have much freedom of choice in his future and that it was determined by random events he acted upon. One thing he knew was he didn't regret any choice he had made so far, and he was man enough to deal with the consequences.

"I am the new street sweeper! I am here for my first shift," the Chief said into a mic at the office entrance door. The door opened, and he entered with confidence while approaching the reception. "I need to speak with the manager. Is Benjamin here?" he asked the receptionist while she nodded and stood up to call the manager.

"What is the fucking problem? Why do you need—" the Chief punched him so hard that the man fell unconscious. The receptionist shouted and dialled the police.

*I told you sooner or later you'll get what you derived, piece of shit!*

The Chief returned on his way to the cemetery, where he visited all the deceased SS members; he spent five minutes on each grave and ten minutes on Dave's. He shed tears of regret and guilt and left that place behind him.

"Bonjour mon coeur, vous voulez—" He said, practising his French on the way to the Miami International Airport.

*My French could be more rusty, but I will survive!*

Seeing the Miami airport threw him back to when he first left his little city Izalco nine years ago. He felt like he was living in a flashback; some things did not change. He sat in front of the gate and unlocked his phone.

He discovered that Luca's father was in debt with some loan sharks from the Scaletta family. He inherited the bar and the troubles with it. He was killed by the Mafia the same day the Chief saved his bar from being set on fire; he was shocked when he discovered his friend had some quarrels with the Mafia.

*He didn't look like he was facing many problems when I met him! I could have helped him with his debt—*

Some articles wrote that his death could be linked with the murder of the boss' son and could have been mistaken for the killer. Luca knew the victim, and the Mafia knew that Luca was a friend of the suspected murderer.

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*Did I kill Luca? What if I didn't save that man? Would he have died anyway?*

Vincente Scaletta was the family loan shark and had bad fame for his impulsivity and skills with the knife. He was the main suspect for Luca's dad, and he was threatening Luca's business partner Mario. The three men were killed by Vincente, as the autopsy revealed from the knife wounds.

*Probably Luca didn't know much about the debt his dad left on the business and his business partner, and his business partner didn't have much time to tell him-*

Another reporter wrote about the clash of clans between the SS and the Scaletta family. They were portrayed as villains fighting for turf and street credits. The reporter would demonise the SS more than any other criminal organisation and portray it as a *private justice* and *outlaw organisation*. The article would end with the FBI arresting the boss and exhaling the Chief while shutting down the SS.

*I hate journalists! The government pays them to turn people into obedient ignorant zombies! This is pure disinformation!*

Crime increased drastically in the six months the SS was dying. Scaletta never stopped managing his empire from a comfortable prison cell. He was safer in jail than anywhere else; he would've served like a king and had all the perks any prisoner could only dream of. Everything returned to before;



people felt unsafe while the authorities could keep sucking the government's tits.

*All this work for being seen as the villain like every other criminal we swore to fight out of this city? Fucking jokes! That's what they are!*

He browsed a bit more and opened a CNBC article about him. They had a picture of the Chief before his encounter with Scaletta and knew everything about him. They even knew he was in a coma and that the SS was engaging ordinary citizens. This article was written before the mass resignation in the organisation.

*I bet the FBI shared this info to create discomfort in the SS and bring it to its knees while I could not react to these mediatic threats! As expected, they found a way to deal with uncomfortable things they could not manage.*

The chief got pissed off by the newspapers, journalists and the contorted news online. He was almost convinced all he did was counterproductive, as if he was gaslit by the media. He would walk around the airport and notice that the TVs were all broadcasting the 'clash of clans'; he was on the mouth of every reporter in the US.

*How long are they going to brainwash people with this shit before they go back to the lame news again?–*

"We inform the passengers on flight 3982 to Paris that we will start boarding in five minutes." a robotic woman's voice

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said in English and French. He sat on his aisle seat and left his life as the Chief in Miami to start a new one as a Tourist in Paris.

## What Are You Doing Here?

The flight gave the Tourist enough time to process all his thoughts individually, calmly and clearly. For once, he had been on his own uninterrupted for more than 1 hour; he missed the feeling of spending time alone with his mind.

*Why are evil people remembered more than good people? They are, for sure, more compelling and sell more in newspapers and the movies. Humans fear them, but they unconsciously demand a worse villain every time! We fantasise about things that would harm the people around us, but we disapprove when it happens. Is it our subconscious unleashing that forbidden evil inside us? Why is it more likely to happen when we think about something? Are we playing an active role in criminal activities?*

*I always knew we all have a good and a bad side in us; this always allowed us to live a balanced and complete life deprived of excesses. But in some people, one extreme takes the lead; how do we expect an ordinary world when we praise sin and put it on a pedestal? Why does evil unexplainably attract us? Why does it attract us? Why do we tend to focus more on the bad? If, for example, now, there was a car accident and we could see it from the aeroplane, I bet everyone would be gathered around in curiosity. We would say, "I am checking if anyone got hurt!" but what we mean is, "Did someone get hurt? Where? Point it at me!"*

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*What if those famous criminals used their talent for a good cause? What if great people used it for the wrong reason? Did people create evil, or evil popped from nowhere? People say criminals have their world vision; they see their actions from their perspective and know how to justify them. I wonder if I could glimpse criminals' thought processes when they commit a crime! I guess only criminals know. Should I become one? Maybe the newspapers were right; I may have always been one! Perhaps that's what every criminal thinks: they are on the right side of history!*

*Newspapers don't know anything about me and the SS! They don't see the good we have done for the city of Miami; reporters only think of the best way to put fragments of biased information so that people keep reading their bullshit. From what I know, they may be oblivious to their negative impact on a good cause. My failure is their failure, but readers consume this shit like alcohol! Where are my beloved 'Watch Dog' journalists? The good one, the one who would say, "I don't know!" or, "We don't have enough evidence!" or, "This is not an objective report; you can't write that!" or "The quality of my work will impact thousands of people!". Where are these journalists? We have storytellers as reporters who disseminate unchecked facts and embellish police reports as if they were playing god!*

*I advise readers to get their news fact-checked by independent reporters or freelance journalists! They, on the contrary, have a will and desire to fight these jokers; a public corporation does not pay*

*them, and they are not overseen and censored by the government. They have all the reasons to say things as they are despite being considered 'conspiracy theorists' or 'lunatics'. Take the Julian Assange case, for example; the West looks down on corrupted and dictatorial governments worldwide but should look itself in the mirror. The reality is that they are fucking scared of people with criticism and motivation to make information unfiltered and 'truly' available to the public.*

*I have seen this happening in the financial domain as well. We think we are free to do whatever we want (respecting the law), but the reality is that we are inside a matrix; we don't even get offered the blue or red pill – which I find to be the utmost gesture for an authority: giving us a choice to see reality as it is. We are deprived of that choice; we live in this big game with rules set by the winners to keep winning. A fun fact is that if people gathered together, they could change things as they happened in the past! People change what is legally driven by their morals and values (think about slavery). People can take down banks, revolutionise information, change governments, etc. You can't play a game without players, but they should agree on the rules.*

*The Government should be a player in this big life game, not the game itself! There is always a thin line between the two, and the government is exceptional in playing both roles. This is why I have never conformed to the system and the society that has been structured below it. I am proud to be a no-one and have my life back*

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*again. However, they always find a way to win, they always do, and they will do the same with me.*

*Paris is a great city to start everyday life; I hope I will get inspired by its beauty as much as many artists did during the 'Belle Époque' in the 19th century. I am no artist, but I surely can use some inspiration to sort my messed up life out! I see land out of that window seat; I could see lore if this obese American woman didn't cover it! I hope we are over Europe, maybe Portugal? This flight is killing me; I have gotten up at least twelve times since we took off! This old man's weak bladder interrupted my sleep too often! I don't want to arrive in Paris (CDG) tired! Maybe I should- sleep- here it comes- the accumulated- exhaustion-*

The Tourist fell into a long, interrupted sleep for the remaining flight. The flight encountered turbulence, and some people woke up from the noise (not the Tourist). The aeroplane could have crashed, but we wouldn't wake up. His suppositions were correct; they flew over Portugal and approached the *Pyrenees Mountains*. The pilot initiated the descent, and the passengers fastened their seatbelts.

"Mr- Sorry, Mr!" a flight attendant said, laying a hand on the Tourist's right shoulder and shaking him. He woke up and looked at her grumpily. "We are landing; I need to ask you to lower your armrest and fasten your seatbelt," she said, waiting for the man to execute her orders and then checked the rest of the passengers.

*Sure, beautiful hostess! Have we already arrived? I slept one hour and a half, but I am still so fucking tired! What sexy hips you have! I wish- I may- I need a girlfriend so badly.* Thought the Tourist, while looking down the aisle, the flight attendant who now leaned over to help a passenger. The long tight skirt framed her curves.

“Cabin crew, prepare for landing.” the pilot ordered with a robotic voice. The flight attendants took their seats and fastened their seatbelts. The descent lifted his stomach and made him realise he hasn’t eaten anything since he left Miami. He was so dreamy and lost in his thoughts that his stomach came second. He needed time alone with his mind, though his stomach was crying for being neglected for so long.

*Pilots always announce the descent 30 minutes before touching the ground. Why can't they leave me peacefully, catching up on my lost sleep? Why are Americans so fat? I am lucky I wasn't in the middle seat between the obese and an old man. I would have had her sweat in my nose, but the weak bladder man wouldn't have bothered me so much. You can't have everything! Do they pick flight attendants based on their beauty or their skills? I have never seen ugly flight attendants! Aren't ugly flight attendants skilled enough? I would ask her out, but I don't think having a flight attendant as a girlfriend is the best option for me. They may be the most beautiful women I have seen in years, or I am sex-deprived myself for too long. Americans women-*

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The aeroplane wheels gently touched the runway, and no one felt almost anything. The pilot taxied it to the exit gate, and the flight attendants asked to keep seated with the seatbelt fastened. Few people listened, and the majority were already reaching for their luggage. One passenger almost dropped his backpack on a woman's face, and the hostess told him off. Another two stewards were walking down the two aisles shouting, "Stay seated, and keep your seatbelt fastened!" but no one listened. That was an intercontinental aeroplane that carried 467 passengers: the aircraft was packed on that flight. You can imagine the chaos that the frustrated passengers have created.

Flying over the Atlantic Ocean for almost nine hours is not a pleasant experience (especially if you are in the 3rd class). However, nothing was worse than a grumpy and loud crowd of zombies pushing in all directions, ready to breathe fresh air. The *Tourist* never took such long flights and had never experienced the reality of those intercontinental flights. People would do 'literally' anything: remove their socks, snore, fart, smell like onions, burp, make noise, eat loudly, scream, babies would cry, turbulence would wake you up, the pilot would wake you up, and much, much more.

Disembarking that flight relieved the *Tourist*, who could now have eaten the aeroplane due to hunger. He popped into a burger place in the arrivals in T1 and had a decadent



brunch. It was late morning when he took the next train to the central station, where he was in his new home: Paris. He had planned his first three months in Paris in the aeroplane; he would look for a place to rent in the city and look for a new street sweeping job so that he could discover all the Parisian roads. He knew he could have survived only his cut from the SS, but he was still young and willing to in the job market. Besides, he loved sweeping streets.

He walked the streets of Paris while browsing his phone; he reserved a week in a boutique hotel near the 7th arrondissement. He collected his room keys and left his backpack in it; he wanted to sleep, but curiosity forced him out of that comfy bed. He couldn't stop staring over that beautiful architecture; the buildings had this rounded trapezoidal shape with blue roof tiles. A line of misaligned chimneys exited a concrete wall over the width of the roof. The Tourist could start feeling the vibrant city coming to life as the evening passed; people were now off from work, and some would stop for a meal in their favourite spot in town.

Miami could have been an advanced city with high-tech and avant-garde services, but you could not compare it to Paris. They were two different worlds despite being part of the 'West'; the Tourist thought Europe was the place to be, and Paris was undoubtedly the centre of the world. The culture, food, art, fashion and business were the contradistinctive

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traits of this beautiful European city. El Salvador can't even compare; there was something magical about this place that no one could explain: they would just say, "It is Paris!".

The tourist didn't go far from his boutique hotel, and he covered much ground despite his exhaustion (far less than his excitement). He visited: the Tower Eiffel, a couple of museums, and some restaurants. He rested in an astonishing traditional Parisian salon-styled cocktail bar; the ceiling was covered with yellow glass skylights, and wooden-framed windows and interiors were old-fashioned. The floor was a mosaic composed of bright brown tiles with different tonalities; the bar counter had some white and black veined marble with some bright wood; the tables' top was marble and the rest wooden, and the stools and chairs were padded with a Bordeaux seating.

He sipped a *French 75* while reading *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* by Patrick Süskind; a piano played soft jazz while the sun turned the clouds pink. Time flew in that bar that now felt more like a time machine while he flipped page after page. The Tourist felt like he was in an 18th-century bar; he could connect with Jean-Baptiste Grenouille as impulses bombarded his senses. He connected deeply with the story of the orphan adopted by a master perfumer as he lived his first hours in the streets between the dirt and the stingy smells.

*It's crazy to find so many things in common with a fictional character. This German writer is good, excellent indeed! Wow, am I already at page 53? How long was I lost in Jean-Baptiste Grenouille's world? Is this book a coincidence, or is Destiny playing a bad joke on me? Why, out of all the people I could have seen myself, it happened to be a French murderer? Is life sending me subconscious signals that– I am– a murderer? Stop it with all of this mental masturbation! You know who you are! Do I? Sure you do; look what you have–*

“Interesting book you have over there.” a woman said with a French accent, sitting on his right side. She was sipping a *Bloody Mary*. “I wish I had his vision of the world, fighting for my beliefs and having such a passion about something that I would be able to murder anyone who stands in my way.” she crossed her legs and tilted slightly on her left side, now looking at the man. The Tourist was still and quiet, but he was listening. “Ohh, books, they are great, aren’t they? They allow us to be what we wouldn’t dare to be and do things without suffering consequences,” she said, finishing her drink with a noise from her straw and returning to the counter, observing the bartender juggling cocktails.

“Books, for me, are a reminder of the untold reality we all live. They hold some truth for how fictional they can be; for example, the thought of the writer who wrote the character. He is a living human who expresses his true vision of the

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world through a harmless book. Writing could be his vent as much as boxing is for someone else. However, writing is the only vent that gives the reader access to an author's traumas, vision of the world and philosophy." he said, interrupting the silence with a monotone while keeping his eyes on the open book pages. "I do think this book is as far from reality as much as we are right now," he said, closing the book and looking at her, waiting.

"Then, I guess I should get even closer." she chuckled and approached the man, moving her stool closer to him. "Your perspective on books is- quite different from anyone else's. Are you an enthusiast reader?" she asked with a friendly voice as she leaned over him.

"You can say so- when I find the time- I like reading fictional novels about crime. Not being restricted by social scrutiny makes an author brutally honest; his truth would mingle with fiction, and no one could distinguish it. It's a beautiful way to tell harsh realities making a fictional character accountable for it. I don't blame readers for liking Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, as this could mean liking Patrick Süskind's beautiful mind." the Tourist concluded.

"Are you the one who like Jean-Baptiste Grenouille? I don't judge," she asked with a judgy voice. "I don't like--"

"Yes, I do," he replied, interrupting and not caring about contradicting her last remark. "I see myself in him--"

“Wait- are you a murderer?” she asked with a chuckle.

“Yes, I am,” he replied heedlessly and honestly, putting a scared face on her. “Aren’t we all? Aren’t we killing time just now?” he chuckled, trying to make up for his lack of caution. “Besides, what is that astonishment in your voice? Aren’t you drinking a cocktail named after The Tudor Queen Mary, considered a ‘Murderous Monster’?” he asked, diverting his attention to her while smiling. She laughed out loud, resting a tiny hand over her mouth to hide it.

“I wouldn’t have thought you were the funny type!” she continued with ecstasy for that joke.

“Well, you shouldn't judge a book from its cover!” he replied with another chuckle that busted another fruity laugh out of her mouth. “Can I offer you a drink? What is your poison of choice? Do you mind me offering you one?” the Tourist continued cracking jokes while approaching her stool.

“I don’t mind at all! Please poison me with another *Bloody Mary*.” she laughed and looked at the man flirtatiously. “So what is your name, mysterious book lover man? What do you do here?” she asked him, almost following into his arms.

“I arrived today from Miami. It has been a long trip, and I didn't have much to sleep, so I guess I better go now!” he said, glancing at his watch. He stood up and paid for his drinks and the women.

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“Thanks; it’s a pity you are leaving now; I was starting to have fun after a long work day. I work at a local library near Notre Dame called ‘Shakespeare Library’. Come and visit me if you are interested in some fictional crime novels!” she said to the man now on her right side, inviting voice. “By the way, my name is Sophie,” she said, stretching her arm and shaking his hand.

“Nice to meet you, wise Sophie,” he replied, holding her hand and leaning over, imitating a touchless kiss followed by piercing eye contact. “Now is the winter our discontent made this glorious summer by this son of York And all the clouds that loured upon our house-” he recited the Richard III by Shakespeare while walking away. His voice faded, and Sophie's eyes were glaring with shiny light.

The Tourist returned to his boutique hotel in streets lit by city lights and the vibrant young energy of the Parisian lifestyle. He noticed kids and teens running on the streets alone, Men laughing outside some bars with a glass of wine. He could see the light from the windowed restaurant, revealing couples in love eating at candlelight. He never imagined that his wish to live another day would have ever been as strong as his first night in Paris.

He opened his room door after he disposed of his alcohol content on that 45 minutes walk. He fell on his bed without removing his clothes and didn’t move; he wanted to sleep, but

his mind could not stop thinking about his first move in such a beautiful place. He removed his shoes with the exclusive help of his feet, checked his phone and set an alarm clock for the following day.

*Sophie, cute name! Her beautiful black hair fell on those frail little shoulders. Her dress was breathtaking tonight! And her legs had all I was looking for. It is such a relief she is into books; I wonder if she owns that library. What if she was into sports? I couldn't have met her on a football court or a basketball match! I hate sports, a great thing she is single. From how she was flirting with me, it was straightforward, right? She didn't seem to care about my hamburger face. Is she playing with me? Go figure- women- He fell asleep thinking about her.*

Ring! Ring! The alarm went off, and the man painfully awoke despite not feeling fully rested. It would be a productive day, and he had to sort out many things before he could focus on exploring Paris and finding a job. He went to the ground floor of the same boutique hotel and took advantage of the included breakfast; he had coffee and macarons, which he hated. He unlocked his smartphone and hunted for one-bedroom apartments around the poshest arrondissement in Paris. He had seven viewings scheduled. Two around the 6th arrondissement, three around the 7th arrondissement, and other two around the 8th.

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He wanted a complete Parisian experience while he tried to understand how his future would unfold. After all those years of constant struggle, he deserved to treat himself for once he could. Hence, he was looking for a place in Paris's most expensive areas; after attending all the viewings that week, he fell in love with a penthouse in the 7th arrondissement: so he took it. His rent was \$5,000/month, bills included in a fully furnished new and modern 65 sqm apartment. The deal breaker wasn't the amenities (which were over the average in the area) nor the spacious plan, but the beautiful Eifel Tower view he had from his big kitchen window.

The agent and the landlord visually expressed their suspicion about the 'half burned face' man but closed a blind eye (no pun intended) after seeing his healthy bank account, so they didn't dig into his past. They thought he was a wealthy investor in Paris for business - at least, that is what he made them believe. His time as the SS Chief made him an exceptional liar and a more exceptional persuasive individual. It wasn't hard for him to get what he wanted: to live an ordinary life. Ironically, he could afford such an apartment but could not point anything higher than sweeping streets. He didn't want to, or he would have; that was the only job he would accept as society wouldn't notice him.



He quickly received six job offers around all Paris; He applied online and attended face-to-face interviews. He noticed a repeating pattern: managers would be so excited to have him on the phone. They would be almost surprised to hear his perfect English and a decent level of French. They had so many questions about why he wanted to do this job, despite having almost ten years of experience in the field. He would say, "I know it looks weird to have such qualified individuals sweeping streets, but I see this job differently. Thanks to this job, I have learned three languages, which allowed me to meet and interact with people on the streets. This field needs more motivated professionals who see more than sweeping streets; we make this city cleaner and make other people's lives easier; we interact with its streets, making us feel like we belong somewhere! I love this job; give me a chance, and I will show you what I am capable of!"

He would persuade anyone with that elaborate pitch and with his rhetoric skills. He was even better than the manager he was interviewing with: he used to be an exceptional one. After meeting the Tourist for face-to-face interviews, the managers' faces would wrinkle in disgust. They wouldn't change their minds about him, but they had biases over his past and how he got that burn scar. The Tourist would say, "When I was little, my babysitter poured boiling water from the kettle onto my face by accident." Still, no one believed

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him, although they nodded in approval. He didn't feel discriminated against and was used to those reactions, especially when people pointed at his face in public whenever he walked in Paris.

He finally accepted a *Head Street Sweeper* position in North Paris. The company office was near *Gare du Nord* station in the 10th arrondissement. He would have managed a few teams around the 18th, 9th, 10th, and 19th arrondissements. He chose this position for a few reasons: it allowed him to discover new areas from where he had his apartment, and the salary was super competitive. He would earn \$2,500 net, covering half of his rent, an excellent salary for a street sweeper in Paris.

After double-checking the average salary online, he suspected that this salary was suspiciously higher than average. When he sent his details over for the contract, the employer noticed his brand new French passport and apartment in Paris's most expensive arrondissement. They may have thought he was some rebellious kind of rich dad's kid who ran away from his wealth, and they wanted to help him out. However, they would never push for such a salary if he didn't demonstrate enough experience and attitude: he sure did.

His first day wasn't that difficult despite remembering new names and speaking with native French professionals. The

level of education and the attitude of his street sweepers' co-workers was way higher than the one in Miami. His Miami co-workers were all South American and some Asian immigrants; he constantly spoke English and Spanish at work. In Paris, things were different; people refused English and were loyal to their mother tongue: French. People may have to know English perfectly, but they would still speak French: taxi drivers were the worst with this.

They are correct; you are in Paris, speak French, you *trou du cul*. That was good news for the Street Sweeper, who wanted to improve his French after a long nine years pause. His job was way more chill and flexible than his previous one in Miami; French people were kinder and had a different mentality about work culture. They looked down on hustle cultures like in the US, the UK, Japan, China and other parts of the world; They believed that a healthy mind would deliver better performance: this applied in all fields, especially the manual ones. Some professionals would take advantage of this, but it all made sense overall.

People looked slower in their work, but the quality was way better; sure, you had the slackers, but the Street Sweeper loved it this way. Parisian work culture made an already pleasurable job way more appealing to the man. His routine was likely like this: he would wake up at 7 am, walk for one hour, cross the Seine, and arrive at his office. He would badge

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in at the reception, go to the changing room, meet his team and change into his fluorescent uniform. He would assign his men to different areas and work alone; he would always have a radio to communicate with his team and the collection trash truck, which sometimes would give him and his trash car a lift.

His team was composed of 18 men, and they were all French; he earned their respect by giving them reasonable ground to cover. He would know who the men that didn't get along with the other co-workers were, and he tried to consider that by creating healthy teams. His conflict management and problem-solving allowed the company to have more efficient and less stressed employees. However, quarrels were always unavoidable; sometimes, a team member was sick at home, and he would balance the team out with someone else. The man would fight for silly things like leaving more work to the teammate or forgetting not to drive them back.

*I remember I had to deal with more significant problems in Miami. My co-workers were ex-felons and criminals; there was no 'teamwork' there! Everyone had to survive, and they had more work than they could have handled. My ex-employer was a public cleaning company managed by the government; pay was low, and we have been exploited more than once. The company I work for now is private and can afford better employees thanks to its budget; meritocracy here actually works and helps to be a native French.*

*Paris is a fucking paradise, but still, people were complaining. I guess human beings will never be satisfied! We only appreciated what we have after we have been in the real shit: I have been there, and I doubt my Parisian colleagues were!*

Nonetheless, after two months on the job, life in Paris seemed ideal for the Street Sweeper. He loved the alternation between sweeping and managing; he spent his time in front of a laptop but was on the field with his team like a natural leader. He would be the first in line and would be the one showing how it is supposed to be done before delegating responsibilities. The company fired two slacker managers and gave him a raise after the second month; he was earning \$3,000/per month. He didn't take much before other organisations noticed his progress; offers came flowing at him. However, he stayed loyal to his choice, although they could not give him another raise immediately.

The cleaning company saw substantial results on its bottom line; it saved money from useless management and relied on 'on-field' management and the Street Sweeper. They even restructured their business model and operation thanks to The man's advice: he was a natural. He has become an essential resource, and he knew although he was always a humble employee; what made him so confident of always trying was the fact that he didn't need that job. He wouldn't be scared to put himself in a troubling situation or

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compromise his values; he would always speak his mind and have nothing to lose.

The CEO would communicate directly with him, and he would report directly to him; he even offered to get into the expansion of the business, but he would refuse. He would say, "I would love to accept this role, but I will never stop being a street sweeper. It is the only thing that reminds me of our contribution to the city: besides, I like walking outside and staying with my team." They met in a middle ground; he would work with his team as usual mornings and deal with the expansion in the evening.

He became the only *Senior Expansion Manager* sweeping streets in Paris. He was climbing the corporate ladder and now earning a whopping \$3,500 net per month; some reporters wanted to write an article about him, but he refused. Luckily his new French passport made him a ghost from unwanted attention. His reluctance was an absence of pride but more the consciousness of death, which he feared. He knew a simple *No* wouldn't be enough to stop these annoying reporters.

His French improved quickly after four on the job, but he wasn't socialising much outside his workplace. He decided to take a long weekend off and focus on exploring that magical city he could only see during his shifts. He was living more in

North Paris than in his apartment; he decided to dedicate his time to exploring other areas of Paris: his home.

*I feel ashamed for not calling my 'dad' back after I left the shop. I know we are both so stubborn, but sooner or later, someone has to take the first step and show that he is better than that! Why should it be me? I guess that's the same thing the Fishmonger has thought all these years. I wonder how the shop is doing now that I have been away for ten years. Is he still in business? Should I put my pride aside and call him? Is he even going to reply to me? I bet he blocked me! I wouldn't be surprised, or maybe he renamed my contact 'Asshole'. I killed men, suffered immense pain, and ran an empire, but I couldn't pick up the courage and call my dad. What kind of man am I? How long should I wait? What if he dies and I never tell him how I felt? I shouldn't wait longer; life is so unpredictable. Look at me now; who would have ever thought! I am going to call him now! Ready? Here I go! Here I go!*

The Street Sweeper unlocked his phone, and he looked for *Fishmonger* on his contacts; He lingered a while looking at the number. He initiated the call, but a voice said, "The number you are calling does not exist." It was plausible he changed his number like the Street Sweeper would do regularly due to the nature of his past profession. He still has a burner phone, but it has been turned off for a while now; he didn't need it: but somehow couldn't let go of it.

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*Why would he change his number? Is he in some kind of trouble? I have never checked how the business is doing! I should check now! What was the name? I have it on my tongue— was it just 'fish shop'? Wait, was it 'The Fishmonger'! Yes, it was; someone must have written something about it somewhere. It is the most famous fish shop in the country, after all!*

The man bruised the internet and wrote, “Fishmonger Izalco El Salvador” on Google. He scrolled for a while, but nothing; he opened some articles that weren't relevant. He was almost giving up when he opened the third Google page and found an article written in Spanish. He opened it and read it out loud, “A local Izalco fish shop near the central square was burnt to the ground today. The owner said during an interview, “This shop is my home, my life, all I know, and all my life investments.” The authorities don't have a good lead. Still, they suspect someone from the Vincent (his business rival) family may have sought revenge after his tragic and sudden murder. “The two men were always fighting. They hated each other,” a customer said—

*This can't be real! At least I know he is still alive! He had luck not being in the building that day! He rarely leaves that building, so he was extremely fortunate! Maybe his routine changed after I left; perhaps he was broke and asked for a loan he couldn't repay! That looks like a loan shark work! I know the type; I have been fighting them with the SS. There is no way I can contact him; he doesn't use laptops, and I don't know anyone who could understand him; he doesn't have close friends. This article was written two years ago, I could have helped him, and I still can now! If I only find a way to—*



“Hé! regarde où tu mets les pieds! Connard!” a man shouted from a car while dodging the Tourist who found himself in the middle of the road. He ran back to the sidewalk, still shocked by what he had read on his phone. He couldn’t forget himself for neglecting his only family and allowing pride to stand between him and his dad.

The Street Sweeper locked his phone, put it back in his pocket with a sigh of disappointment and crossed the street. He looked up and saw the majestic Notre Dame; the Seine was flowing dirty on his right side while he kept walking on ‘Quai de Montebello’. He almost reached the ‘Petit Pont - Cardinal Lustiger’, which he wanted to cross to get to ‘Île de la Cité’. He couldn’t believe what he saw when by pure chance, he turned his sight left; there it was standing: the *Shakespeare Library*.

“Come on in, don’t be scared.” a faraway voice said, covered by bookshelves echoing with the ringing of a bell coming from the door. “Can I help you with something? Are you looking for something in particular?” Sophie continued, peeking out from her stool and through the bookshelves.

“I am looking for something regarding Queen Mary from the English Tudor family.” the voice replied with a faint, unrecognisable tone. His steps became clearer as he slowly approached the counter. “They used to call her *Bloody Mary*,” the man concluded, chuckling, revealing his half-burned face.

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“Do I-” she asked, scanning the man. “Yes, I remember you now, Patrick Süskind’s lover!” she jumped on her stool, noticing the distinctive burn on the man’s face. “Why did it take you so long to come to visit me?” she concluded with a flirtatious voice while blinking her long eyelashes.

“I- I was busy- busy with this book!” he showed her *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*. “I finished it yesterday, and I thought to come and get a new one in my *new* favourite library.” he approached and looked at her passionately.

“An intelligent man like yourself would eat ten books in four months. I don’t think it was a 300-page book that kept you away from coming here!” she fired back at him with some notes of disappointment. “Was it work? No, *please* don’t tell me you have a family! I can handle more-”

“Yes, it was work indeed! What can’t you handle any more? Wait, Let me guess!” he said, raising a finger. “You were married to a great man, but one day you discovered he had another family and another life somewhere else in-*Belize!*” he said, leaning on the counter and chuckling at her.

“I was married, and he was gorgeous, but he passed away last month. Cancer. Nothing exciting, as you can see,” she said, avoiding his look and fetching some books from a bookshelf.

“I am so sorry! I am terrible at this game. I thought I was better at reading people!” he said while following her.

“Let me guess. You are a man who doesn’t like to share his name (probably has none). You are new in town, but you speak French; you read crime books because, deep inside, you want to kill someone, and you have been in trouble seeing that fresh burn on your face.” she said, looking at him confidently while picking up a pile of books and moved back to her counter.

*How the fuck! Is she a spy or what? Am I so obvious, or is she good at reading people? Is she an undercover FBI agent? I knew it!* He stood there for a few seconds like an idiot.

“I bet I didn’t go far off, right?” she chuckled. “So, tell me, how close am I?” she asked, looking at the shocked man from behind the counter.

“Pretty close; I am impressed!” he said, returning to the counter, leaning and squeezing his eyes. “I was the Chief of an anti-criminal organisation; I killed bad people, and a Mafia boss gave me this scar, but then I made a deal with the FBI, who sent me here with a new French ID,” he said, spilling his guts. They looked at each other for five seconds, and both laughed.

“Mom, what is this noise?! I am trying to sleep! Who is this man?” a little kid asked, appearing from the door behind the counter.

“Chloé! I am so sorry, my sweetheart. I want you to meet a friend of mine—”

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"Isaac! You can call me Isaac!" he replied in shock, revealing his French name for the first time. "Nice to meet you, Chloè. I am sorry if I woke you up! I also hate when people wake me up like that; I become grumpy when they do." he said, wrinkling his forehead.

"Well, the sooner I serve you, the sooner I get back to sleep. I got this, Mom! " How can I help you today?" she asked, disappearing behind the counter. She stepped on a three-step ladder and popped up like a mushroom. Her mom looked at the man containing the laughter.

"Ah- sure! I love fictional crime novels, murders in particular," he said, changing his voice into a graver tonality like he was trying to scare her. "Do you have any suggestions for me?" he asked, bringing his left index finger to his mouth.

"Let me check, *murders, murders, murders-*" she typed in the big laptop. "Ah! Here we go. I bet you may like *Murder on the Oriental Express* by--"

"Agatha Christie!" he shouted. "Do you read my mind?! I came here for that book! Are you a sort of witch or what? You are too cute to be a witch." he said, looking surprised.

"I am good at reading people!" she laughed and winked at him. "That would be 4.69 euros. You can pay my mom; my job is done here," she said with a snobbish and proud voice while leaving the steps. "It has been a pleasure, Mr Isaac; good night, and please, mind the noise: *both of you,*" she concluded

with a sophisticated tone while gently closing the door behind her.

“They grow fast, don’t they?” she laughed while looking at the door, now shut. “Wait, did you come for that book or–”

“I swear she read my mind! She must have taken this talent for her Mom–”

“She just turned nine; she is a tough one; she went through a lot the past month–” she sniffed up. “I have never seen her laughing like that; thanks!” she exhaled. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have so much work!” she scoffed, echoing in the little wooden library.

“My pleasure Sophie; thanks for the book! Say my goodbyes to your daughter for me,” he said, walking away.

He stopped on the spot for a second.

*Do It, idiot! Aske her! Come one, ask her! Now or never–*

“Wait!” he turned back and approached her counter. “Would you like–”

“Yes, I am free tonight at 7 pm. Where?” she asked, taking a risky guess.

“I’ll surprise you. I will be here at 7 pm on time! *At 7 pm* here on time! *At 7–*” he stuttered, retreating from her without breaking eye contact as if she was a dangerous animal.

The woman blushed and bit her lips while the man lost himself in the maze-like bookshelves. He had never been so

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awkward around anyone; her presence made him a different man.

“Go left, then turn the second right!” she shouted, pointing at the exit door before chuckling.

*What the hell was that? What was that? Why I behaved like that? How come I lost my composure? I have been through many unpleasant situations, but I never thought a conversation with a beautiful woman could do that to me. Am I getting old? Is this—love? How am I supposed to know? I have never been loved!*

*Why did I tell her my name? I shouldn't have revealed it to anyone! Don't be stupid; a nine-year-old girl was there! There was no threat, no reason to keep it secret, right? I felt so comfortable around them; I wasn't thinking about anything else. My problem disappeared, and I felt like living in someone else's body! Now that I am outside, I feel myself again: a lost man.*

*Cut the bullshit, Isaac; you have a date today! Think about what to do with her! I'd like to bring her to an expensive restaurant; I got the money, but I don't want her to think I am a pompous prick. Maybe we should walk and drink a coffee? That's too cheap; I can do better! Wait, I got it; she is gonna love it!*

The man spent the rest of his day running around Paris while constantly checking his watch. He Changed his clothes into smart casual attire, avoiding any excessive look. When a black car with black windows suddenly stopped, he was walking to pick up his date. The car doors opened, and a man

in a black suit and sunglasses jumped on him. He spun the heavy shopping bag and hit the man in the face knocking him out with a loud cracking noise of expensive champagne.

“Get that motherfucker!” the driver shouted while another man ran towards him at knifepoint. “I want that son of a bitch alive!” he ordered. Isaac used the towel on his shoulder to grip the man’s hand and disarmed him; he pulled and kicked him in the face.

“Not my shoes! They are new!” Isaac roared and ran away before the driver could pull the gun on him. He ran nonstop back to his building, where his apartment door was open. He took the knife he stole from the man and slowly opened the half-closed door. Some broken glass shards stuck under the door, emitting a short but high-pitched squeak. He stopped pushing, held his belly in and entered sideways. He didn’t have the time to turn his head when he saw his favourite vase smashing on his face. He fainted.

“Wake the fuck up, you scum!” an old man said while slapping his face. “Where are the others? You are going to pay for this!” he shouted and punched Isaac, now tied up on a chair with electric tape in his mouth. “I have no time to waste!” he said, punched harder again, provoking heavy bleeding from an eyebrow.

*“Mmm! Mmm! Mmm-”*

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“Speak up, or the next will be a knife in your throat!” he snapped the tape from his lips so hard that he almost removed the man’s skin.

“Fuck! What are you talking about? You lunatic old fart?!” he shouted in pain and anger. “This is my fucking apartment!” he said, immediately stopping the man's charged punch.

“Don’t fucking play with me! Do you recognise this? Because I do!” the old man shouted, waving his knife before his face.

“That is not mine! I got attacked on the way to a date! Are you one of those men? What do you want from me?” he asked, looking at the stranger holding a wound in his belly. “That looks bad-”

“Shut up! What is your- Fuck it!” he touched his jacket and opened his wallet. “You are the Street Sweeper: Isaac?” he asked, dropping the wallet and untying the man from the chair. He sat in front of him.

“Who are you? Why would the same man attack you? Why are you here? I should fucking kill you right now! Talk!” he ordered, losing his patience.

“I am sorry if I brought them here. I needed to talk to you, Manager,” he said, lowering his voice.

“Finshmonger? Is that you? How did you find me? Why is the Mafia looking for-”



"You tell me! Why is the Mafia looking for you? They threatened me; They burned my shop to the ground! I had no choice but to leave the country! Here I am!" he said with a shaky voice while holding a red cloth. "I wasn't expecting to meet you in such circumstances!" he concluded while coughing.

"You are bleeding out! We can't go to a hospital. I know the place. Follow--"

"Remember, I need him alive! You can kill the old man." a faraway voice said downstairs.

"Fuck they are already here! Hold my shoulder and hang in there." Isaac said, carrying the wounded Fishmonger down the emergency exit staircase to an alley. "I promised myself not--" he paused and heard a noise behind them. "Get in the car quick!" he said, breaking the window and opening the passenger door.

"They are coming, son!" he said weakly. "They are--" he fainted.

"Fuck these cables! Please don't tell me I forgot how to-- Yes!" the car engine started. "Fuck!" Isaac shouted while a bullet shattered the back car windshield. "Hold on tight, Dad!" he said while other shots hit the car while leaving the alley. They escaped.

"You idiot! I said *alive!*" the man scoffed, punched the shooter, and looked at the other. "If you killed him, *you* will

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tell the boss! He wants him alive to cut him into little pieces," he said, imitating a pair of scissors with two fingers. "You don't want to be the one taking this pleasure away from him!" he said, walking down the stairs. "They escaped, but not for long," he concluded while entering the car and driving back on the streets of Paris.

"Please don't fucking die! There are so many things we need to talk about! Dad! Dad!?" he said while dodging cars and speeding up. "Stay with me, Dad! I am sorry, I tried to call you! Dad! Stay awake!" he ordered, slapped him, and he woke up. "You stay alive! I knew you were a tough motherfucker. Wow! That was close!" Isaac shouted, dodging a bus after going through a red light.

"Tough motherfucker- I am-" the Fishmonger mumbled, spat blood on his blue shirt and fainted again.

"Hey! Don't you- don't you dare die like that! Did you hear me? Don't you fucking dare!" he shouted at him, honked the horn and drifted a bit. "We are almost there! Come on, stay awake! I will get you a brand new fish shop! It will have the freshest fish in Paris! We will get our lives back; I promise!" he shouted, slapping him again. He woke up.

"I killed him, I killed- I killed him-" he fainted again.

## My First Date

"We are here! We arrived!" he roared, parked the car sideways on the sidewalk, and picked the man up.

"Come on in. I don't have much to do today. My date--"

"Arrived!" Isaac shouted while approaching the counter. "I will explain! Promise! I need help!" he roared, sat him on a stool, and put a first aid kit on the counter.

"What- what is all of this?" Stephie asked, shocked.

"Please! Get disinfectant, thread and the needle! I'll explain as we stitch him up!" he southed with understanding, pointing at the kit. "Please hurry; we don't have much time! He lost a lot of blood!" he said, slapping the old man again. "Wake up! Come on!" the Fishmonger woke up.

"Is this an angel?" he asked, pointing at her a bloody finger. "Son is this--"

"Son? Is he your--"

"Dad, stop it! Focus on my voice!" Isaac ordered him, pointing at the wound the woman was disinfecting. "She is my- my date!" he said, looking at her.

"Yes ', Dad' I was!" she replied angrily. "His wound is not deep. No vital organs were injured, but he is bleeding a lot!" she said, wearing blue gloves and picking up the needle.

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend--"

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"Date, date, she is my- she was my date!" he said, looking at her handling the needle.

"Nice to meet you, date. *Ouch-*"

"The pleasure is mine. *My crazy date's Dad!*" she scoffed, piercing his skin and holding the two extremities thigh together.

"So, you are 30 minutes late!" she growled and went for another stitch.

"*Ouch!* That stings! Fuck--"

"I ran in an unforeseen- encounter!" he said, looking at her apologetic eyes.

"How unforeseen? Like *Mafia man wants to kill you* unforeseen or more like *FBI is hunting you down* unforeseen?" she asked with irony, pulled the needle up, and tightened the tread around the three stitches.

"Son, don't tell me you, too, have the FBI running after you! This is--"

"Fucked up! How dare you tell me the truth like that? I don't know if I should kill you myself now!" she said and went for another stitch.

"Fuck, that burns! I would worry more about the Mafia men in your apartment, right--"

"Come and join the team. That's the last thing I need right now! I don't know what would scare me more; a crazy woman or two of the most powerful criminal--"

"Who did you call crazy?" she scoffed at him, pointing the curved needle at his eye.

"You are here because you have nowhere to go! I am risking my life here helping you, and I demand--"

"Mom? What is happening?" Chloë asked while holding her teddy bear with one hand now hanging. "Hi, Isaac. Hi, bloody old man. Can you keep it down, please? I am tired. Clean the floor after you finish; blood is everywhere, " she said calmly and left the room. "Good night!" she concluded, closing the door quietly.

"You motherfucker! I knew you were a sex machine! You couldn't even wait for the first date--"

"Shut up, Dad, that is *not* my daughter! She is Stephie's!" he said with embarrassment.

"Who told you she was *my* daughter? She is--"

"She is *not mine* either!" the Fishmonger laughed in pain.

"You lied to me! Isn't it? I was right! Ironically, you couldn't believe my truth, and I believed your lie. Why did you even--"

"You are so cute together! Almost made one for the other! *Soulmates*! Can we focus on the dying man here?! You must want your date's father's blessing, right?"

"I see you are feeling better, old man!" she said disgustingly, making the last knot and cutting the tread. "It is

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complicated; I hoped to explain as we- you know- maybe dated?" she said, shrugging and standing up.

"I promised I was on my way with--"

"I believe you this time and sorry for--"

"Dad is dying here, hello? Can someone pick me up? Manager? Beautiful lady?" The man said while waving his hand.

"Manager?- Look, I don't wanna know! I am scared of the truth!" she sighed at him. "You can stay here for the night. Tomorrow morning you will leave. I have to work. I am not putting in danger my- Chloé again!" she said and left the men. "And- Isaac, you should find a new library for your reading. Keep the book!" she whispered and smashed the door behind her.

"Well, that went well, right?" the Fishmonger asked, holding Isaac's shoulder.

"I didn't remember you like this- you used to be- quieter!" he said, throwing the man on the counter. "Since you arrived here, nothing has gone right! You--"

"I am here because of you! A little piece of shit! If you didn't--" Isaac's phone rang.

"Hello? Yes, It's me! What kind of man? I have no idea! Boss, you can't do this! Hello? Hello?!" he shouted before smashing his smartphone on the floor.

"Good news, I hope." Said the old man.

“You motherfucker! I am going to kill you!” he shouted and jumped on his throat, and tightened the grip. “I lost my job! The Mafia went looking for me in my office! they threatened my boss! They knew because you led them!” he said, releasing the grip.

“I came here to warn you, son! That is why I was in your apartment! That is why I got stabbed! I am on your side!” he said, catching up with his breath.

“I know about the SS, and it is all clear to me! You were their Chief! Your face doesn’t lie. When I hear about the incident with Scaletta-”

“How do you know all of these? Who are you?” Isaac asked in shock.

“I am not the person you think I am, son! I didn’t use to be a fishmonger all my life. I was working for an organisation-”

“That explains how you found me! All this time, all these lies. How do you pretend I ever trust you if I don’t know anything about my dad?” Isaac asked, shrugging.

“I thought you were dead! I was furious with myself for letting you go! I wanted him to pay so-”

“You were delirious in the car! You killed someone, you said. Who was- No, wait! No! No!” Isaac shouted, shaking his head

“Yes! Yes! He messed up with the wrong person, son! Scaletta had to pay!” the Fishmonger shouted.

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“Are you out of your fucking mind? The Mafia—”

“That is not the Mafia, son! Focus, Isaac!” he shouted, clapping in front of his face “Scaletta family fell apart after the boss died- he was killed. It can’t be the Mafia; they don’t have the resources,” he said with a wistful voice

“You are not telling me all the truth? Speak up, old man! Or I swear—” he interrupted and charged a punch while holding him by the collar.

“Fuck! We are so fucked! Wait, I know who those men are!” he said, removing his hand from his neck. “That must be the FBI or at least some contractors. The FBI would never be on the ground for such a thing,” he said, scratching his scalp and standing straight. “You see, I used to work as a secret agent for them before quitting and opening my shop in El Salvador. Their methods were- how can I say- unorthodox.” he stuttered, looking his son in the eyes. Isaac kept silent.

“My real name is Ben; I was born In Paris, France. My parents didn’t abandon me; I killed my dad: I was 6,” he said, opening up for the first time. “He would come back home and hit my mother. She suffered so much and never reacted against that asshole. I hit him with a metal statue in the head while he was raping my mom.” he said, sniffing and raising his head to the ceiling to contain the tears. “I couldn’t save her; she was already dead; he was so drunk he didn’t even realise he was fucking a corpse!” he scoffed, brushing a hand



on his eyes quickly. "I was protecting you. You don't wanna hear this shit--"

"Clean yourself up," Isaac whispered, handing him some tissues.

"I pissed them off, the FBI! They are looking for me, not for you! You were right; I put you in danger." he said, blowing his nose. "I know things, uncomfortable things for the FBI. Something that would destroy them. Things that--"

"I don't wanna--"

"The FBI has used Scaletta as an informer to fight anti-criminal organisations. I worked for one, and you somehow took the same path." he sighed disappointedly. "I killed the most valuable informer the FBI ever had! They used to rule the game with him; they financed him to overtake smaller families, and he would rat someone out. The FBI would close an eye on him." he said, untucking his bloody shirt from his trousers.

"You are telling me they planned to kill me with Scaletta? But they arrested him and gave me a safe passage to Europe? That is fucked up!" he shouted, banging a fist on his palm to keep quiet.

"No, that is the FBI! And there is nothing they are not capable of doing! Starting with getting rid of me." he said, touching his wound. "And now you as well. Don't worry; I have a way out! I still have some contacts who owe me some

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favours in the FBI.” he coughed, approached Isaac, and explained the plan.

The men left the library before Sophie woke up; Isaac cleaned the floor and reordered the counter. Once outside, Ben received a call.

“Are you ready? Good! On our way.” he said, putting his phone in his pocket and looking at the son. “We need to get back to your apartment, trust me!” he said, pushing him, and off they went.

“I feel like you didn’t tell me all the plan!” Isaac shouted. “After this, we will be free, I promise you,” he reassured and patted his shoulder.

The old man struggled to keep up the son’s pace, but they were in the building after an hour.

“Let me speak, ok? These are old friends of mine- were old friends. People change, especially in the FBI.” he whispered, passing in front of him up the stairs.

“Agent 476, what a pleasure.” a man said in a monotone voice while opening the broken door and letting them in. “He must be ‘the man’ you were talking about!” he said, surprised. “We heard so much-”

“Don’t worry about him! Let’s get down to business!” Ben scoffed. Everyone sat on the broken sofa.

“Sorry for the mess. Not all the agents in our borough are like us,” the FBI agent said with a cynical chuckle. “We are

classier, and we tend to be quite sophisticated! We would make all this look like an accident." he chuckled, looking at his partner.

"What are the conditions to make this believable?" Ben asked the agent.

"I need all your ID, Agent 476, yours too!" he ordered, pointing at Isaac. "This is your new identity." he said, taking their IDs and handing over new passports.

"French Passports? Weren't we supposed to disappear?" Ben asked, looking puzzled at the agent with anger.

"Disappear?"

"They would never suspect you are still here. People tend to move around. As I said, we are more sophisticated!" the Agent interrupted Isaac.

"I have the feeling you are not telling all of it! Agent, speak up!" Ben ordered, looking at the son with disappointment at his remark.

"You are not going to like it, but it is necessary! The FBI needs proof of your death." the Agent said, pointing at their fingers. "Do it, Agent!" he shouted at his partner.

The two FBI agents jumped on the men, held their hands on the table, and cut off their pinkies with a knife.

"Aaaaaaaah! You fucking bastards!" the men cried in unison while the Agents were sealing the fingers in a plastic bag.

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"That would do, gentlemen!" the Agent said, exiting the apartment while the men held their bleeding hands. "You have 2 minutes before the fireworks," he concluded and ran away.

"I hate you, Dad! Did you know about this?!" Isaac asked, infuriated, kicking him with anger.

"I swear I didn't expect this when he said 'it is gonna be painful!'" He scoffed back in surprise. "Come on, get up. We need to run!" Ben shouted, taking him under his shoulder and looking out the emergency staircase window. They managed to go down two floors when *Boom!* The apartment exploded in a ball of fire and smoke. Debris was falling around them like rain; Isaac dodged some while his dad guided him into a car parked in the alley.

"Look how it is supposed to be done, amateur," Ben said while connecting the cables and starting the engine immediately.

"There are some things you never forget!" he laughed out loud while punching Isaac's shoulder.

"Who are you?!" Isaac asked in shock.

"I am your dad and a badass Agent! We are free now; you can thank me!" he said with pride.

"Without a finger but free! At least we are not dead!" he refrained from punching him in the face. "Look the bright side, son; you can finally have an ordinary life, impregnate

your cute girlfriend and sweep the streets. I am going to retire; I think I deserved it," he said while driving calmly in the traffic.

"You are a sick old man! Anyway, thanks," he said sincerely while checking his missing finger. "I'll need to get used to it!" he sighed.

"It suits your face!" Ben said and paused. They both burst into loud laughter.

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### **An (Almost) Normal Life**

Isaac didn't hear from his date for almost two months; he didn't dare to visit or send her an apology letter with some flowers. He was a stubborn man and still recovering from the shock his dad had put him through. His hand injury was getting better, and the stitches the dad put him had done their job.

The two men laid low for a while in Paris, out of any spotlight, waiting for a positive response from the FBI agents. After Ben received a call confirming their freedom, they went out again. Isaac had been hunting for a two-bedroom apartment in a central area with his dad while waiting for the call. After countless viewings around Paris, he bought one.

His dad would rent a place downtown and visit him to keep him company. Isaac found another Street Sweeping job in town; it hasn't been difficult. He would Sweep Streets Part-Time and write books (another passion of his) as a side job. However, he would never quit being on the street. Besides, it inspired him and allowed him to meet people with extraordinary stories he could have used for his books.

He would save a cat from the streets during a shift, put it on his cart and bring it home. He was alone, and Tom gave him some love; he and his dad were proud of that choice. Isaac had his first book sales, getting some attention from

more prominent publishers. His stories were rough, sharp and brutally honest; he would say, "Don't read this book if you are scared of reality." Ben constantly reminded his son about the promise he made when he was unconscious in the car during their escape from the FBI agents. We would say, "I am pretty sure you promised me a fish shop with an apartment on top and fresh fish from the best suppliers!" Isaac would reply, "I thought you wanted to retire?! Anyway, you must have been delusional in that car!" They would both laugh.

They were happy to be reunited after such a long time apart. Finally, they put pride aside and focused on catching up on time lost; Isaac would treat his dad with delicious food and excellent manners, and he would respect him and feel more respected. His past and suffering gave his dad a point of comparison. They live always meant to cross, and Isaac's choices reminded Ben of himself when he had his age.

Isaac had spent weeks looking for Ben's present; when the time came, his dad was in disbelief! He couldn't imagine that his son would be a man of his word. The Building had two floors and was located on the east side of the town near the Seine. They both worked on installing brand-new refrigerators, furniture and much more. The second floor would be his spacious two-bedroom apartment that would soon be full of things. Isaac would say, "I hope you will fill this space with a good wife and not with useless objects."

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Ben was emotional when he discovered that his son had picked that building because it resembled the floor plan of his old shop in Izalco. It wasn't usual for him to show his emotions, but many things have changed lately. Isaac would say, "It is never late to make a change, old man." He has wised up in the past years; mistakes have that effect on people: he made many. One was that he still didn't visit Stephie after the messed-up date.

Ben was messing up with his subconscious during the day, saying, "It would be great to have someone to cook for us now." or, "I wish I could live long to see my grandkids." or, "What was the name of that cute library woman?" or, "Haven't you already finished that book? What is the next one in line?" These tricks wouldn't work on such a stubborn individual. His dad gave up.

After his significant life expenses, Isaac still had \$300,000 in his bank account. He was working hard and now focusing more on his writing than sweeping. His books brought him fame and attention, although he didn't show his face often: he was more of a ghostwriter. Thinking of books pushed him to think about Stephie; he picked up his courage and made the first move.

"They threatened me in my house Sophie! This has been gone too—"



"Welcome to the Shakespeare Library! How can I help you?" she asked the customer while looking at the man.

"Is this a good time? Maybe I should leave you alone?" Isaac asked after revealing himself from the bookshelves.

"Not at all! Gabriel, this is--"

"Francis, my name is Francis!" Isaac interrupted, looking at her with shame and shaking his hand.

"And he is Gabriel, my--"

"*Boyfriend*, I reckon?" Francis said, disappointed, stepping back.

"No! *Francis*, my older brother!" she approached him with a gloomy look.

"I guess you know each other?" Gabriel said while lighting a cigarette.

"Yes--"

"No!" she scoffed, interrupting Francis.

"It looks like you do; you are acting like my- our divorced parents," Gabriel said, looking at Sophie and blowing smoke rings. "I'll leave you two to sort out whatever you have going on," He said, moving to the bookshelves away from the counter.

"You have such courage to show your face after--"

"I have been quite busy, but I am here for our date now. It is 7 pm, right?" he touched his watch with his index finger.

"What happened to your pinky? What--"

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“Can you *handle* the truth? I was—”

“Stop! Let’s go on our date! Let’s get it over with!” she took him by hand and rushed to the door. “Gabriel, I need to close now. We’ll get back to it tomorrow morning.” she grabbed his hand and carried both outside.

It was hot, and the sun was diving behind the building while Isaac led his date. He confessed everything: his past, the Fishmonger, Miami, the SS and the latest events. She was more interested and excited than shocked; she would say, “Don’t stop, please! What happened next?” he added all the details, spoke gracefully, and changed tonality as he imitated other people in his story. He was a great storyteller, so talented that all he said could have been a lie, but she didn’t dare to believe him this time.

“Close your eyes. Come one, trust me,” he said while guiding her by her hand. “Sit here and keep your eyes closed. Don’t peek!” he opened a refrigerator that his dad had just left there. “Now count to three and open your eyes,” he ordered, smilingly thanking Ben. He took a bottle of Champagne and opened it.

“Three!” she opened her eyes and was startled by the surprising popping on her left ear. “That is—”

“Beautiful!” he concluded by looking at her.

“Beautiful indeed!” she said, looking at the view from the ‘Square Louise Michel’. “28 years in Paris, and I have never

been here! How did you know? You have been here for a few months!" she asked without removing her sight from the city line.

"I have some aces up in my sleeves," he said flirtatiously while looking at Ben, who was behind the three, spying on them like a *true* secret agent. "Since I saw you in that old-fashioned bar, I wanted to bring you here," he said, pouring some champagne into her glass and returning it to the refrigerator bag. "I hope it--"

"It is lovely! I thought you would reveal something boring and bring me to an expensive restaurant!" she chuckled while touching her nose. "I was so wrong. I bet you have many more aces up in your sleeve!" she said, sipping her champagne and looking deeply into his eyes.

"May I kiss--" She ate his last word with a passionate kiss and looked at him. "Yes, you may." she whispered before kissing him again.

"I didn't expect you to be a romantic!" she said, touching his nose and kissing him again.

"I didn't know either!" he said, biting her lip and popping a bouquet under her chin.

"They smell so nice! But now, seriously, you are *scaring* me!" She said, and they both laughed out loud and ate strawberries. "This fruit is delicious! This date is--"

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"Is not finished yet!" he whispered, holding her hand, and they said goodbye to the pink sky while packing everything together. It was getting dark when the two hit the road.

"After you," he said, opening a tiny building door. "I hope you like seafood--"

"I am vegan!" she shouted with an angry face.

"Fuck." he whispered, looking at her bursting with an evil laugh. "You got me! Nice one! Now get your beautiful ass up!" he said, slapping her while climbing the stairs. "You know the routine, close your eyes," he opened the door and sat her.

"Is that- It can't be! That is the Eiffel Tower!" she pointed at it for a while, almost jumping off the balcony. "Where did you find this restaurant?" She asked, sitting back, looking like an excited girl.

"You mean my apartment? I moved in six months ago! Do you like it?" he chuckled at her confused face.

"How can a street sweeper--" she paused. "Right as I thought!" she laughed back at him.

"And here we have two *Bloody Marys* and some savoury snacks!" the waiter said, serving the couple from inside the room before disappearing quickly behind the curtains.

"I see he recovered pretty well!" she chuckled.

"I told him to be subtle! It is--"

“Cute! All of this is extremely cute. Thanks! I needed it,” she said, laying her hand on his to reassure him. “No one ever treated me like you did today! We can leave our past behind and start all over again together,” she whispered like she was revealing a secret.

“What was your brother worried about today?” he asked, removing his hand from under hers.

“My dad left my mom alone after the divorce. He went for a younger one and left us an unsettled debt. That explained why he gave us (me and my brother) the library. It wasn’t a gift but a curse!” she said, closing her hand into a fist and looking down in anger. “Here we have a trout backed in salt with rosemary and potato. Enjoy!” Bob said, trying to protect his anonymity from behind the curtains.

“After my husband died and left me his daughter, I have been in deep financial trouble. Gabriel has always been a strong column, and mom tried to help in any possible way-”

“That must be such a load to carry yourself at such young age! You are so strong, Sophie! You are an unconventional woman with more ball than your husband and dad together!” he whispered, wrapping his comforting hand around her tight fist.

*She is too proud to ask for help! I shouldn't offer help; it may piss her off and ruin our moment together. Try to move the discussion to something else.*

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“Look! The Eifel Tower is lit in shiny yellow! Isn’t it beautiful?” she shouted in awe.

*This woman reads my mind!*

“Did you know that all Parisians hated it? No one ever believed in Mr Eiffel's design for the exposition fair in 1889. After the exposition, it brought tourists and money from all over the world. It magically became a Parisian Masterpiece.” he scoffed in disgust. “It’s in our nature. We are a bunch of indifferent and pessimist pricks. We discriminate against the different, and we eulogise the ordinary. There is nothing attractive in the ordinary, and we all know it. We are a herd of contradictions-”

“Better to remain silent and be thought of a fool than speak and remove all doubt!” she said, not specifying to whom he was referring.

“Abraham Lincoln! Touché,” he said in embarrassment for the long digression. “All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone!” he continued while removing a fish bone from his mouth.

“That’s easy! Blaise Pascal! I am not that bad of a French!” she laughed at his quote game and took the last trout bite.

“Weak people get revenge; strong people forgive; intelligent people ignore!” she fired back at him, laid back on the chair and sipped the champagne.

“The dessert is-”

“Albert Einstein!” he shouted after scratching his head for a few seconds. He smashed his big hand on the table, losing his composure for the excitement of the game.

“The secret of happiness is to face the fact that the world is horrible, horrible, horrible!” he said with his mouth full of chocolate cake.

“*Mmh*– I need help with this!” she laughed, almost spitting her ice cream.

That was the most sublime night, dinner and day of his life; he was enjoying everything; it was all so spontaneous and effortless with Sophie. They ate like pigs and had to unbutton and unzip their pants to let the expanded belly out. They fed each other fruit and initiated a seed war, spitting them with vigour. Some hit passing pedestrians who shouted at them in rage; they shouted back, completely drunk with happiness and champagne.

Stephie was way drunker than him, so they agreed to spend the night together because unsafe to walk her home in that condition. They both knew that wasn't the real reason; they wanted the night to go on in the bedroom. She fell into a deep sleep on his, and he returned to the balcony.

“I know what you are thinking!” Ben said, cleaning up the table. “Don't do it! Be the man she deserves to be! Don't make my same mistake!” he scoffed, laying the cloth on the edge of the opposite chair and sat. “She was so beautiful, Josephine. I

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met her in Paris; we were so young and dumb. He loved each other; things worked between us—”

“But?” Interrupted Isaac looking tired at the man.

“When I became— you know, I changed. She could not recognise me, and after we lost our second baby by miscarriage, I could not handle it anymore,” he mumbled, laying a bottle of whiskey on the centre of the table and pouring some into two glasses. “I found an excuse to escape a life I was not ready to fight for; I used work as an excuse. That was my biggest regret of all my life, don’t make the same mistake—”

“How can I have a normal life knowing I could have helped her, but I didn’t?” he asked, sipping his poison. “I know this scum, Dad? I know it extremely well! They are no different from the one in Miami!” he shouted, clinking his nail on the edge of the empty glass.

“What I am saying is not to go there with blazing fire! Plan this, thinking about the consequences!” he warned, pouring another shot into his glass. “Things become tricky when there are people you care about in the equation! Look at what we have been through in the past months!” he whispered, emptying his glass, took the bottle and stood up.

“Thanks, Dad, but I know what I am doing! I will never put her in danger as you did with me!” he scoffed, letting the



alcohol speak his dizzy mind. He clinked his glass, asking for more.

“Enough, kiddo! Get a fucking grip! The address is on the table. Anyway, I reckoned you would find it out sooner or later.” Ben said, ignoring the last lacerating remark and pointing to a paper.

*I know well how to deal with these loan sharks! They may be French, but they are all the same deep inside. They move the same way, and they run businesses the same way.*

*You shouldn't do anything now, you dumb drunk! You will get yourself killed, and then bye-bye, ordinary life. Sophie is going to lose you, and you will be the cause of another immense pain in her life! You don't want that?! Right?! He slapped that thought out of his mind.*

*You should sort this here and now, go to the address and show the man you are! Don't act like a pussy! Sophie has more balls than you! She is relying on you, or she would have lied about this! She asked you to solve this for her!*

*From what I see, you have three choices. Choice one, you do nothing and probably someone she loves dies, or even worse, they set her business on fire. Choice two, you pay out the debt. She may hate you or love you for such interference in her affairs, or even worse, these greedy bastards will go after you for more, thinking you are some kind of rich dumb pussy. Last option, well, you know well what the last option is—*

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*You have fought so hard for the position you find yourself in! Have you done all of this to risk it all again? This is your chance to get that ordinary life of yours, don't fuck it all up. Think carefully about your next move- think- next move-*

He fell asleep.

It was a scorching hot morning in Paris, and his balcony reflected a new day. The French door was half-closed, and the curtains opened; He was drooling on the table with an extended arm holding with a soft grip the wide empty glass still smelling of whiskey. His forehead was kissing the wooden-spaced planks of the tabletop while his other arm was bent on top of his head. It was an unusual position to sleep in, but alcohol makes miracles.

The city was slowly waking up, and the city clamour was getting louder in his ears. He had a reputation for being a deep sleeper when sober; he didn't flinch even after a trash truck honked the horn on the main street right under the balcony. Motorbikes and people were roaring while some music played from a mini-van. All of Paris was awake except him.

"Isaac? Are you ok?" Sophie said, opening the door window and shaking his shoulder.

"Isaac! Wake up! You are scaring me!" she said with a scared voice and shook harder.

*"Mmm- I like it- don't stop-"* he mumbled, talking in his sleep, but she thought he was slowly waking up.

*"What do you think about avocado on toast, lime and chilli flakes? Some coffee too?"* she asked, entering back into the apartment. She didn't wait for an answer. She thought it was a stupid question; everyone liked it.

*"Isaac, the telephone!"* she shouted, cutting the avocado and spinning the toast on the pan. The voicemail started.

*"It's a woman, I think, your publisher. She said they wanted to publish your new book, baby! I am so proud of you!"* she said, leaving the stoves and checking on the man while holding the knife.

*"You sleep like a baby! I bet the whiskey your dad brought did its job!"* she mumbled, removing the toasts from the pan.

*"I hope you had a constructive one-to-one talk with him. He is trying hard to fix things."* he squeezed the lime on the avocado and sprinkled some chilli flakes.

*"My dad never had the balls for that! He ran away and left us with problems to sort by ourselves-"*

Her smartphone rang, and she cleaned her hand quickly. It was Gabriel.

*"What? How is it possible? It can't be true!"* she shouted, jumping excitedly, almost hitting her head on the kitchen shelf. *"See you later then! We must celebrate,"* she concluded, hanging up the phone and onto the balcony. *"Here they are.*

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Isaac, wake up, or they will get cold!" she laid the plates and when out to get the drinks.

"I am so hungry! My head fucking hurts!" he mumbled with his face full of stripes marks on his skin. "What the fuck--"

"You were drunk ad passed out on the table," she said, laying the coffee before him and laughing softly at his face. "Did you fight with your dad yesterday? You are bleeding!" she pointed at his forehead and used her tissues to clean it up.

"That whiskey was delicious! I may have drunk too much, sorry!" he mumbled, touched her hand in thanksgiving, and held the tissue on the cut.

"Last time I got this drunk was when I left my dad and Izalco, but this is a different hangover! A better hangover!" he shouted, noticing one of his favourite breakfasts under his nose. "Thank you for making this! Fuuuuck yes! Spicy, like I love it!" he whispered in enjoyment while taking another bite and sipping his coffee. The spiciness of the toast was stinging his lips and was slowly waking him up.

"Your publisher liked your latest work and wants to give it a go!" she shouted, and he almost choked on his drink for the news. "Yes! You should contact her back and accept that offer! I know you will be a great writer." she said, putting a fist under her chin and blinking at him with esteem.

“Great news indeed! I can match my book signing for my previous book with the launch of this one!” he said after coughing the milk out. “If I only had a venue for this special event- an adequate venue-” he paused and looked at her in suspense, waiting for a response.

“Sure! Don’t even ask! I can manage it with the help of Gabriel!” she jumped on her feet and went inside to call his brother. “So many things to prepare! We need to hurry!” she said while dialling his number.

“You don’t even know when it is or how many people we should expect!” he said, laughing and putting a tired hand on his face. “I will call soon and notify you, ok? I will help you with the preparation!” he shouted at her, hoping she would hear him inside the apartment.

The woman left his apartment and went to open her shop, where she would spend all day working. Isaac was still eating that delicious breakfast while walking around the apartment and catching up on his voicemails and the countless phone messages from his dad. Despite the publisher's disapproval, he contacted his publisher and arranged the venue to be Sophie’s library. She said, “We are expecting a lot of readers, and that place is too small. Plus, don’t you know the bad reputation it has?” he replied, “That makes it an even better venue!”

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He called Ben and made sure he was ok after the night of drinking; he thanked him for the help on the date and went out to breathe the late morning air while walking with a takeaway coffee. The following days would be repetitive for Isaac as he had to focus all his energies on his writing and big-day preparation. He wouldn't miss his sweeping job at any cost and could find a healthy balance between the two.

His new girlfriend would cook for him in his place or bring him some food from her place. She would crush at his place and give him some great sex and release his daily stress. He was grateful to have weekly fish delivery from his dad, who would thank him for the business advice. Their relationship had never been better, and his life looked like it finally came to a settling point.

He sometimes asked to bring Clohé with her to strengthen their relationship and give her a male example from her childhood. She didn't mind and didn't need a male model; her life made her tough like a rock. Some can say she stopped being a kid and entered adulthood, but no psychologist would have helped her out of that phase. It wasn't a phase. It was she getting ready for the worse.

He planned to get engaged to Sophie, although he had known her for less than a year! He thought that time was relative and intensity was what kept them together. He thought she would understand if he popped the question so

early, and she probably would say yes. She didn't seem to bother being direct with him and got close quickly. Isaac was confident in his success and their happiness; they even talked about kids one day.

One day he bought the engagement ring at one of Paris's most famous jewellery shops. The ring had a ruby (her favourite colour) and was made of white gold. He had it made custom similar to the one the Queen Mary had for her marriage; he loved the sick contraposition and knew she would too. That 'contraposition' cost him 15,000 euros and a lot of stress.

Isaac made significant progress with the book and could have focused more on the big day. It was two weeks away, and he decided to use his annual leaves from his sweeping job to concentrate on marketing his book launch. He knew that was the publisher's responsibility, but he didn't have much faith in her lately.

"Who is here, the man of the month!" Gabriel said happily while welcoming Isaac into the shop and pointing at some tables and posters.

"You didn't have to do this, guys! That's my publisher job! I don't want you to--"

"You are too humble! I took a sneak peek of your work, and- oh man, you are good! I would never advertise you otherwise, not for free, I mean," Gabriel chuckled, pointing at

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a poster with Isaac's face and patting his right shoulder. "Having a visionary writer in such a small and controversial library is a pleasure! I want to be your first reader with a signed book," he whispered.

"Gabriel, hand off my talent! I will get his first signed book!" Sophie roared after appearing from the bookshelves. "Isaac will become an exceptional writer and will redeem the name of this place from his unfortunate fame--"

"What is with this place?" Isaac asked while blushing bright red. "My publisher was spooked out--"

"This used to be an old butcher shop; the owner was a serial killer who immigrated from a small city in El Salvador. He would sell his victim's flesh to his customers. Everyone loved his product, but fame brought unwanted attention to his *ways* of getting the supplies." Sophie said in a low dark voice while approaching the man. "The story narrates he fed more than 200 victims to Parisians before he got caught! He even won an award for the best meat in town! Isn't this ironically cruel? Some think this is a made-up story by vegans, but we saw them! We saw the bodies!!" she roared, jumped and raised her arms like a bear. The man didn't flinch a bit and looked at her with a smack of his mouth *Thze*. "This library has been the setting for countless murders and--"

"You seriously don't believe this load of--"



“Bullshit! It’s just an old story!” Clohé said, interrupting the man.

“I guess *she* does not fall for it!” he laughed and patted her head after she approached his side.

“Who cares who believes it! We don’t, and we got this place for half the price, although we have been cursed ever since,” she said, looking at her brother nodding in approval. “If it wasn’t for a guardian angel who helped us—”

“Thanks, Isaac, for the help, and welcome to our family!” Gabriel interrupted her while repositioning the poster.

*What are they talking about? Am I the guardian angel? Should I say something? I will talk about this with her later.*

“Well, we are here for you; let’s not get confused!” Sophie said and looked at Gabriel and pointed at her man.

“How do we move? How do you want to organise the layout? Should we move the bookshelves? Should we put the table right there? How many people are we expecting? What time is the venue opening? How long will this be?” she bombarded him with questions while moving a pen on a notebook and biting the cap.

Isaac explained everything to the owners and got into the details; he would fire ideas, and they would fire back with better ones. Three hours later, they had all planned out and organised; he called his publisher and shared the plan with her. She was still unhappy about his decisions, but he ignored her

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concerns. He said, "A longer queue that extends outside of the shop can bring more people who weren't interested in the first place. Queues are great marketing tools; you should know this *publisher*."

That day the couple spent a romantic time in Isaac's apartment; he prepared some cocktails while she ordered some Chinese. They waited on the balcony sipping the Bloody Maries and Mojitos, admiring the French setting sun.

"I was thinking about a thing for a while—" he said, reaching for her hand and asking for her attention. "I know we have been together for less than a year—"

"Do you think we are rushing too much? I knew I should have—"

"No, no, it is not that; I mean—"

"The food is here!" she shouted and jumped, running to the door, leaving the man hanging with his hand in the pocket, playing with the little velvety ring case.

"I missed Chinese food! I know you'd love this spicy dish!" she said, opening the brown paper bag on the table while catching her breath. "Sorry, were you saying something, Isy?" she asked while distributing the food on the table and prepping the drinks.

"I wondered what the 'guardian angel' thing at your place was. Was that related to me? Gabriel seemed rather thankful—"

“Ah, that? Yes, it was quite weird indeed. You know the debt our father left us? He managed to repay it in full, and we thought you may have had something to do about it-” she paused and bit her spicy stir-fried chicken. “I didn’t tell you because, at starters, it was a hypothesis, and on the other hand, I know that if you did help us (which I don’t know), you wouldn’t admit it.” she continued after cleaning her mouth from the red sauce. “Anyway, we thanked you because your presence in our life solved a big problem oppressing my brother and me. Thank you again!” she whispered, winked at him, implying something, and went for another big bite of chicken.

*Yes, I mean, I wouldn’t tell her if I did, but I didn’t talk to his dad, so I guess he did it of his own will. Not that bad of a dad, after all! Should I tell her it wasn’t me? Anyways she is not going to believe me.*

“Isy? The chicken is going to get cold. Trust me; it is delicious!” she said with her mouth full while pointing at his plate.

The Grand day came, and that morning, everyone could see the stress in Isaac’s eyes; he looked terrified to be publicly shamed. He wasn’t good with people, and that day was all about trying to look good and show his best side. He was a transparent wall for Stepie, who would massage him and reassure him people would come. That morning the first

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people to enter the shop were Gabriel and Ben; they approached the table where Isaac was sitting and acted like fans. That behaviour upset him even more; he was about to freak out, and he would if she wasn't there by his side.

The publisher was next to enter the shop; she shook everyone's hand and introduced herself. Everyone knew her because Isaac always complained about her unprofessionalism. Nonetheless, they knew she was the only one eager to publish Isaac's work, so they played the game and acted cool with her. The publisher researched the schedule that day, browsing a list on paper, "Meeting with the readers, book presentation, questions from the public, book signature—" she read the bullet point list. Still, Isaac was lost in his mental and emotional turmoil.

Clohé would stand outside near the posters at the shop entrance, acting like a cicero shouting, "Today, the great Isaac will present you the new edition of a fictional crime novel that will make history! You may be the first to get the book signed by one of Paris's fastest-growing authors!" she shouted with her cute and convincing voice. She had already hooked three pedestrians.

"It looks like we will have our first guest soon!" the Publisher said, pointing at the door.

"Quick, let's add a few more chairs to be extra sure!" she ordered Ben and Gabriel.

The three strangers entered and got welcomed by the publisher, who entertained her for a while, “so we are going to present this book- we will start in 10 minutes- have a seat, please.” she said, handing them over a brochure reading the plot of the book and the author description. Suddenly an unexpected crowd arrived all at once; the publisher gestured for them to enter, and the little girl let them all in. They were the 30 people the publisher managed to attract in the past two months.

There were 20 chairs empty when the publisher gave up on letting the readers wait and began her introduction, “Thanks, everyone, for making it today-” Clohé entered and called Sophie, “There are- well- probably another 50 people waiting in a long queue outside- we don’t have space for all of them!” Sophie let them all in, and all the seats were taken quickly. The rest stood up around the room; there was still space in the little library, but it was almost reaching its total capacity. People kept flooding in, and a queue was formed along the street. Ben and Gabriel had to go out and reassure the crowd that everyone would have the chance to talk to Isaac and get their book signed.

Isaac thought his marketing trickery worked well. Still, he continued thinking that all those people were actual readers and fans of his work. He couldn’t believe his couple of books were so appreciated and that his writing could ever be of any

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good. The publisher turned from a sceptic to a proud woman as if she knew everyone would show up. She resumed her presentation again after everyone settled comfortably.

“And now I give the word to the author!” the publisher concluded, pointing at Isaac while moving from the table. Everyone clapped for a few seconds and quieted down.

“I Have been a street sweeper all my life. I suffered immense pain and lived like a homeless for almost ten years. I was born in the streets of Izalco in El Salvador and made my way to Paris.” he said, standing up, leaning against the table, folding his arms, and pausing. “I thought men should have no names. I thought men should be called for what they contribute to society, that their actions should speak louder than their words!” he said and saw someone yawning, so he yawned back instinctively. Everyone laughed.

“Now that I got your attention, I can cut the bullshit short! I never wanted to be a writer. I always thought that men should never wish for what they love to be; they rarely end up in the position to make that dream come true if they don't let life just be!” he laughed and hooked everyone. “Writing got in my life; I wanted to sweep streets! I thought that was the only thing I wanted; when I wrote my first word and met my Publisher, I realised I was wrong!” he said, looking at his publisher.

“I thought I didn’t want to have a name until I found someone worth sharing it with!” he said, looking at Sophie, Gabriel, and Clohé standing together. “I thought that parents were only the ones who gave you a life, but now I realise that it is whoever decides to raise you like a son!” he gulped, looking at Ben, who was putting a fist under his eye.

“Today, I thought no one would show up but look at you!” he chuckled, and everyone laughed fruity laughter. “My books may be fictional, but they come from real experience and are a part of me; they give you an open door to my heart and my ego. It has been my way to express myself with a public who would ignore me otherwise,” he said, looking all the audience. “Thank you all for your support and reading my books!” he concluded.

Isaac went on to answer questions about his current book and previous ones. Everyone was interested in knowing what was fictional and real; what he believed in and what was exaggerated; who was his favourite character, and why he didn’t write fantasy books or adventure books. The questions came from all directions, and the publisher had to cut some short for a matter of time.

The book signatures have been a fight between readers; the first two in line wanted the first signature so badly that they almost punched each other. Isaac said, “Sorry to disappoint you, Ma’ams, but I promised a long time ago to my beautiful

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girlfriend that she would have the first signature. I hope you understand.” they smiled and nodded as little kids would. There was a constant flow of people entering and exiting the library all day. The queue kept growing with the passing of the hours, and Isaac kept signing and signing and signing. His wrist was in pain, and he had finished two pens already; he felt like a factory worker and was pretty sure he would keep signing books in his dreams.

Some readers shook his hand had congrats him for his exceptional work; others kissed him on the cheek. Some young teens would hug him and spike some jealousy in Sophie, who would split them like a mussel from a rock. She was pissed to see a funny smirk on Isaac’s face. The queue shortened, and the sunset; everyone was tired, and the publisher, Ben and Gabriel, had already left after congratulating Isaac and getting their signed book.

“Go home, Stephanie! You are exhausted! I will lock the shop and reach you soon!” he said, exchanging keys and kissing her goodnight. Isaac was left alone in the shop with the last ten readers. He was so exhausted that they looked like they multiplied as his eyes plaid tricks on him. Five to go. Three to go. One to go.

*I can't wait to lay my tired bones on that soft bed with my sweetheart. This day was exceptional! I am a writer, after all! I still need to get used to this new lifestyle. What time is it-*



“I guess I am the last one!” the fan said while handing his book to Isaac.

“Last but not least!” Isaac chuckled while getting a new pen out. “What was your favourite part of the book?” he checked if the new pen worked by writing on a blank paper.

“I liked the part when the man killed the loanshark’s brother to save his girlfriend’s library. But I loved when the protagonist died in his book.” the stranger whispered with an evil voice while making a metallic sound.

“Are you sure you read the right-” Isaak looked up, and he lost himself in the darkness.

That night, the last book was signed with his blood.