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## Joe, Who Drives a Taxi Cab

Matthew J. Robinson-Wrobel  
*Bard College*, [mr2418@bard.edu](mailto:mr2418@bard.edu)

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Joe, Who Drives A Taxi Cab

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of [Languages and Literature]  
of Bard College

by

Matthew Jordan Robinson-Wrobel

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2020

[Author's Note - The following project has not reached technical completion. Though bounded by a beginning and an end, various sections in between have yet to be fully finished. In order to address this issue other brief author's notes will be included throughout the work in order to explain the general intention behind content which remains in-progress.]

Hey, Peter, come here for a second. Why is the door to the record-room locked? I have to get in there and submit my daily report for the day. No, no, don't give me that. It isn't too late for it. All we've got in there are a few computer terminals and desk chairs. It's hardly anything at risk of being stolen, so why is it all locked up when there's still work to be done? No, you're missing my point. The regular hours might be up, but that doesn't mean we aren't meant to finish up what needs finishing. You're still here, aren't you? I bet you had a long day out in the Production. Too many clients, or too much traffic, but whatever the reason you're still here. I know you of all people wouldn't be if you didn't have something left to do. Oh, and of course, I know for a fact that the boss always stays this late to take account of everything. If he isn't gone then there's no way anyone would've locked up the record-room before he was done.

Wait, repeat that please. You're telling me the boss had to head out early, so Ben just locked up and took their own early leave? Ugh, of all the inconsiderate... Well that is just dandy. For them, I'm sure. No, I am not just going to leave it for tomorrow morning. We file our reports the same night as what we're reporting on- that's the rules. Even if the human elements around here have become somewhat lackluster in their duties, the system itself takes note of shit like this. I need to get my reports filled out, Peter. Need. So don't hold back on me. You're hanging around the office "after hours" the same as I am and, come to think of it, you never actually

mentioned what it was you were doing here. Would you mind explaining? Yeah, yeah, great. I knew it. Alright, so how are you planning to get in there? If it's something like picking the lock I'm going to have to put a hard stop on that. It would not do to get caught tampering with office property. Look, whatever it is, I won't rat you out. I need this, remember, so get on it.

Well who'd have thought. I assume you've been through this sort of thing a few times if you've got one of the extra keys stashed up in the sanitation closet. That's great. Seriously, no sarcasm, this is helpful. I'd be the last person to claim the rules are perfect outside of a vacuum. Stuff like this helps keep things running in the face of unintended circumstances. Your secret is safe with me, so lead on.

So... I guess we've both been out for a while, but you did get here before me. Any news come by? I don't know, maybe anything I wouldn't have heard through the radio. Well, not even that, really. Didn't really end up being a "listen to the radio" kind of day. Still though, I'm talking about the serious sorts of announcements here, not idle chatter about the ranks or meaningless drama briefly interspersed between the same old songs. Remember that one day- the speakers just blared to life out of nowhere, spooked the hell out of us- and that announcement came through about the reorganization of the Government District. They were shifting positions around based on new ranks they'd taken. No names, of course, but even a vague glimpse into how they order themselves is fascinating. We hardly ever get news from that high up, but I'd guess they wanted to reassure us. Show us that a few slow quarters get their attention and personal action, even if it meant scratching the surface of a state secret. Now that made for a memory! Something like that is what I mean. An attention grabbing announcement, if not one so interesting as that.

Nothing, eh? Oh, wait, what? They bothered with that? Who cares about some new graduate taking the number one spot for data analysts. That's chatter, idle chatter, not something worth booting up the whole speaker system for. Why would they even- ugh. That's how you know they're really having a hard time coming up with anything for the news. Ah, jeez, I don't want to sound like a hypocrite, but hasn't it been a bit long since anything big came in. Juicy stuff is rare, I know, I just said it, but when was the last time we even got an announcement from the Business District? A corporate policy update for the other districts, a report on their progress positive or negative, anything. There can't just be nothing to know, can there? I guess it's not good or bad if there's nothing important to announce. Just means things are stable as they are. I'm just not sure I... What? Oh, this is it? Great. Yeah, sorry for the tangent, let's keep on track.

Nice pick for a hiding spot. Up on the second floor where it's mostly desk drivers doing our office work, and tucked away in an obscure little corner of the building on top of that. No one's likely to snoop around here, if they felt the need to be snooping around a closet in the first place. Well, let's just- and it's locked too. Fucking. Wonderful. You wouldn't happen to have the key locked behind another door somewhere, eh? Sorry, sorry, I know. I'm not helping. Hmm, well, if you've got the key on your person then start searching those pockets. I don't mind waiting. We've got a pretty good view from the window here.

[A.N. - Below is an incomplete section intended to bridge this initial introduction and the rant which will set Joe on telling his story to Peter. I intend to include more about their workplace and their perspectives in regard to it, as well as their relationship to each other as colleagues.]

You ever been to the --- just across the street there? ---. ---. Look at everything out there. We're living in a ---. ---. ---. It's --- and its ---. --- and ---. Have you ever imagined getting out of here?

Well, that's a fair question. I have no idea where I would go, personally. I doubt anyone does. ---. It isn't really so much an issue of being specifically elsewhere as it is about simple flight over fight. I've been ---

Oh, you've got the (key: card? Code? regular?)? Let's get on with it then. --- aren't going to file themselves. Hey, quit standing around. Come on, get moving. What, you're worried? I don't ---. ---. Well that's no reason at all to think ---. I'm a talkative guy. I like to chat. ---.

I think I've got plenty of reasons to feel a bit off. The real question is why you aren't ---. Don't you remember -(examples specific to workplace and shared individual experience)-. ---

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My contacts were a bitch to put in this morning and that really should have warned me. Bad shit always reverberates back. People who get blindsided aren't paying attention. Pick any other day in my life and I wouldn't have had a problem. I have no issues with contacts. I've been wearing them for years.

I'm telling you, something's been off lately. It's easy to miss. You head out into the city streets and everyone's buzzing about, got places to be, but look past that for a second. We're a big community, but the keyword there is community, isn't it? I guess no one else got the memo. People act like every district is a different goddamn city. Where's the discussion? Doesn't matter where you're from or what you do, we're all cut from the same cloth. We could figure out how

to deal with this, but hardly anyone will even accept something is wrong. Even when I do come across other like minded folks, it seems no one can even agree on what's wrong in the first place.

I've had clients out from the factories who go on about how their bosses are suddenly driving them into the ground with work hours. Most of them aren't all that open to a back and forth, but I remember this one guy- he had a crazy theory that the world was ending and factories were being shifted into full gear to make supplies. Then there are a few guys I've talked to who've skipped out on their shifts without even being noticed. Almost the whole opposite issue. Apparently there's been more trouble keeping the mass-schedules organized out there. Not exactly "apocalypse ready" huh? That guy made car parts for a living anyway, so who knows what he was thinking. This one retailer I took out to see a sick relative was devastated that half his contracts were cancelled out of the blue. Totally blindsided without a bit of warning. Some new commission down the road just got assigned all his producers. Now he can't finish the majority of his orders. He had his theories, but it was all a bunch of store-speak. I can't really comment. You're getting the idea though, right?

Everyone's got these stories all of a sudden about how things are not going right. Some people try to explain it as best they can with what they know. Others brush it off and move on for their own comfort. It might be confusing, but you can't just look at this all like it's just meaningless chaos and put it out of mind. Neither should we be tossing around baseless theories. Personally, I see a lot of people, I think I've got a pretty wide view of things, and I'm pretty sure the Upper Management is preparing for something.

No, not the "end of the world," alright? I ain't so blatant a hypocrite. The management has the say on what's what. Only people who could be shifting things around on a mass scale are

them. Why else would they be changing priorities all over the place so suddenly? Something is going to happen soon. Now, who am I to say what this mystery issue is? It ain't our place to act like we know everything. I'm sure whatever it is they're handling it as best they can, anyways. We oughta just acknowledge there's a problem here though and try to bear with it, shouldn't we? Getting tense over a bit of necessary stress to the system could end up making everything worse for ourselves. You can't just act like everything's fine while bad feelings are stewing up inside. You can't escape like that. We're all here together. If we all just faced this on equal terms, I'm sure we'd all start feeling better. We're getting stuck in our own heads though, casting blame out on whatever target we can manage. Everything comes around eventually. Ugh, should've took my own advice...

Earlier today I had these two clients. They went by Carl and Mikala Fischbach. Brother and sister, not married. Should still be in the registry if you want to check. I was supposed to take them out of the city. Story goes that they got transferred to the agricultural district on short notice. Used to live down in the Lower Infrastructure. Yeah, I know, it's damn strange. I can't claim to know how they run things down there but... that's sort of the point, isn't it? I've never heard of anybody here getting a client from Below. I guess I wasn't sure what was expected of me. Couldn't get hung up on the feeling though. The boss asked me to take this one since I was gonna have a pretty sparse workday otherwise. I think he was as unsure about it as I was, but he made a good choice asking- ah. Sorry, sorry. Tripped on my own tongue. I've got good credentials for this sort of thing, is all I mean. It put an extra route on my schedule and wasn't my usual fare, but I figured why not? I'm here to serve, after all, even if it's a customer I've



never come across before. Besides, I've got a reputation to live up to. Being picky isn't a good look for anybody.

Shouldn't have done it. I really shouldn't have done it. I mean, how could I have known, you know, but that's a trap. You can't think like that. It's an unconstructive mode of thought. There are always signs. Maybe they aren't the kind that let you avoid what's coming, but they're there. What I really shouldn't have done is listened to the guy. Shouldn't have gone into the Lower Infrastructure...

His sister wasn't there at pickup. Pure protocol would dictate I leave him there. I'm not above a move like that. You want to be recognized as a good cabbie then the rules have to be the priority. You worry about being a "cool" guy afterward. I just wasn't having the best day, see? I know I said the signs were there, but really, in the moment they just felt like a lot of little, bad moments. Like a bit of dust I might just be able to brush off all at once. I've got a changed perspective after all this, believe me. My respect has gone way up for people who've got luck like this on the regular. I myself am certainly looking out for shit like a hawk after this, but that doesn't change... the situation, I suppose. He seemed like a good guy. Had problems like everyone, but especially like what I was feeling at the time. His sister doesn't show up and what can he do? Cry about it? So I agreed to go a bit out of my way. No one was waiting for me afterward. I doubt you or anyone else here would have bothered to ask why I was a bit later than usual. He showed me the service road he used to come up topside and down we went. Of course, I guess it's a predictable result, they don't like people just gliding in down there who aren't supposed to be around. That's sensible, honestly. How else would you expect them to react? One

thing leads to another, as they say. Now the damn car is all scratched up from the fight and I don't know what I should- hey, hey!

I can't believe you'd just try to sell me out like that! Over a little property damage. I can man up to mistakes on my own. I'm sure you can relate. Look, I know you, don't I? You don't seem like a guy that always plays by the rules. Alright. Alright, sheesh, I get it. No more "insulting" comments, sure. I'd hardly want to come off as untoward. Do what you have to do. First though, please, listen to me for a second. How about, before you go and do anything rash, I just lay out all the details for you. I'll give you a run down of my day. I'll be quick about it. Promise.

Oh, seems "pretty open and shut" does it? Like I just blundered into a place I wasn't supposed to be and got in the way of the natural order of operations. Like I went and messed up the important work of some honest workers. Well, I'm not so sure about that. This indecisiveness I'm feeling has more to it than my being partially at fault here. That whole ride was riddled with suspicious circumstances. If you want to get it we have to start at the beginning.

I was neutral about the first pick up going in. She was this lady, Ashley something. I drove out into the Business District to pick her up. We were scheduled to meet up at 2:30 in the afternoon off the side of Arch Street. The city center's never busy then, so it made for a smooth drive. You don't get sent out much around the Business, right? Don't look at me like that. Maybe try cleaning yourself up a bit better if you want to get better assignments. The center is a lot more impressive up close than it is at a distance. Sure, you can always sort of see it; hard to miss the only skyscrapers around. You can't ever get a good look though. You're too far away to see any details and there all the other buildings out here that block your sight. You have to get up close to

really appreciate it. Take the opportunity, as soon as you get it, to just stare up at one from its front. It's an indescribable sort of presence. It's just... there. All there. Do you get it? There's nothing more to it. That's all there needs to be.

Driving down Arch street was a treat all its own, though. Some parts of this town are just clogged to the brim with people driving this way and that. Sure, everybody else has their schedule, but what about us? We're stuck finding our own ways to navigate around mass-worker transit on an average day. Never on Arch street though. I'll admit you don't get much in the way of traffic out in District B anyways. You'll see plenty of people walking around in their free time. You might run into a company bus if you're out at the wrong time or even a personal car if an executive has somewhere to be that day. There's always the maintenance trucks, of course, but they know how to keep out of the way. We take clients on short notice when we have to, wherever they have to go across this city, so we could never really fit ourselves in easy to any of the other traffic schedules. It isn't feasible. All we can do in the end is bitch about it. These guys though, all they have to worry about is District B. They get a heads up about everything going on over there from some organizer types keeping everything on record. I had a client who worked in road management explain the whole process to me once. He worked under the head of the traffic regulation department at the Center for Public Safety, he knew his shit. Needed a ride down to C, but that's aside from the point. The maintenance crews are keyed in on all this so they can stay out of the way without hindering their own performance; they even get word when our cabs are coming through. No twig falls from a roadside tree that they don't glue back into place before a wayward eye can witness it as litter on the ground. They're out there working to maintain Districts B's image after all. They've got the whole art of staying out of sight refined down to a

science. Seeing heads or tails of them is a real rarity. It's worth it though. Believe me. District B is as pristine as a freshly folded batch of laundry.

Arch street is just dead. I don't mean anything untoward by that. It's impressive, really. I don't know shit about building roads, but Arch street must basically be superfluous. No one ever drives through it. I'm not even sure I ever saw anyone walk there before today. People must get in and out through connections with other buildings, or maybe those Arch street companies just have a hell of a live-in workforce. I don't know. I've never asked. The mystique of it isn't worth losing just to pry. There are these bushes lining the sidewalk in neat little fenced off cubby holes and it lines up perfectly with the Alexi Building. I mean, it's still off in the distance, but the street just... frames it well. And I get to take my time driving down this street. I get to soak it in and pay no attention to anything else roadwise when I'm passing through it. Even with all the subtle chaos that's suffusing everything nowadays there's this one oasis for me and ever so occasionally I get to enjoy it. Of course, I was meeting up with the client right there that day, so I didn't have too much time to myself.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, I felt pumped up. Just for a bit, just in a little way. Didn't have the best start to the day, but this was my style. Then we met up in front of her company HQ. She was an office worker for Wholesale, one of those companies that has a hand in regulating the sale of food. You know what I mean, right? She was a bit on the short side; couldn't give you an exact number. Maybe... five foot three? Had herself decked out in a nice suit; a black jacket buttoned up to the collar with matching pants and a blue bowtie. About as pale-faced as you'd expect a higher class gal to be. Office work doesn't get you much sun. She was fit enough though, so she must be getting some sort of exercise. Her face had this far off

expression cast between small brown eyes, framed by a dirty blonde head of hair cut short at her neck. She was clearly focused on something in her head, and it took her a second to notice when I pulled up. Her hair was a bit frazzled, with several frayed strands across her face becoming visible once I was close up, but I could understand that. Changing routine really knocks some people out of sorts.

“So,” I struck up a conversation as she closed the cab door behind herself. She settled herself in the left-side seat and turned her head towards mine, “what has you heading out to Production today?”

All I got was this look from her, you know? The eyebrows come together, but don't quite touch. Two little lines, parallel with the ground, above a set of eyes sinking into themselves. You can't tell if they're looking past you or through you. Well no, not like that. That look on your face is classic irritation. You just need to trust me on this man. Clients appreciate the chance to start talking about themselves. You can save yourself the risk of socializing, but you'll never improve your reputation if you don't go the extra mile. You'd be swimming in client recommendations if you knew how to get them to open up a little. Driving a cab is just what people expect you to do. Who doesn't savor a chance to vent? With this lady I could tell right away that our ride together wouldn't be heading toward the most favorable of circumstances. Press in on an issue like that and you'll just get silence, or a grunt, or any other meaningless form of dismissal. So I get that look and I know I've got to be subtle here.

I tried to loosen up a bit- visibly, but not ridiculously. Exaggeration is the easiest way to mock someone. You can't mesh that shit with a serious situation, not with a stranger. I broke eye contact with her and decided to finish off my initial prompting with a neutral statement.

“Well, it won’t be too long of a trip, miss,” I said.

If I got the tone right, I’d have implied a sort of subtle understanding while expressing polite disinterest. Safe behavior on the surface level; nothing to incite defensiveness. I had my eye on her in the rear-view mirror. She let out a sigh, losing her previous intensity, and stared out the window. That wasn’t the best response. I don’t think my words were too off point though. It would have been silly to panic in the moment, anyways. Not the best though. Not the best. Still, you can’t throw away a good effort for failing to reach perfection. It pays to remember that.

I drove off Arch Street back into the active streets of the Business District. Our destination was some factory management headquarters in the production district. I wasn’t scheduled to pick her up again, so I’ve got to assume whatever work she had there was planned to last for a while. We were headed left, weaving through the grid of roads without much resistance. Nothing passed by except for a single bus and a group of joggers. I took it as a good sign at the time, but I was grasping in retrospect. Why would a common yellow bus be headed through the edge of the Business if there wasn’t some kind of build up elsewhere? Despite having her eyes out the window, Ashley didn’t seem all too focused on any of this. As we passed out of the district into the intersecting space between districts, shorter highrises finding neighbors in taller management centers, I noticed she wasn’t even really looking out the window. She was looking down at the frame, like she was trying to turn away from me and the outside at the same time. Very worrying, I’m sure you can imagine. More so than I’d previously expected. Something was off and I was determined not to let it linger in the atmosphere, whatever it may be.

As we fully emerged into the Production District the presence of our city's center faded into the background. You know what I mean. Don't let this get around, but the sheer activity always sort of trips me up when I drive through Production. It is just so distracting. You can't build up any presence with so much going on, splitting your attention. Anyway, we hit a red light right about then. Production always has the busiest roads, but I'm sure you know it isn't supposed to be jam packed on the perimeter at [A.N. - I've yet to determine the specific time I wish to use here]. Or ever, honestly. That's what we were dealing with though; slow lights and endless traffic just as we cruised in. I don't know how anyone was expected to get anywhere.

Our destination didn't have the benefit of being one of the management centers we passed by on the district border. No, we were headed straight for the middle through all that mess. It felt more like being sealed inside a tuna can the further we got into there. The whole industrial aesthetic of the place didn't help with the claustrophobic feelings either. A factory here, a parking lot brimming with trucks there, warehouses peppered everywhere, all cast in rectangular shape and colored somewhere between a stark grey and bland beige. It's the sameness of it all that lets it loom over you. Only colors you could find that weren't painted across another vehicle were a few sparse company logos and roadside signposts. They sure didn't design the buildings of Production to engender any wonder, but I guess that's the point. It's all practical; the machine pumping the economic lifeblood of our fair society. Yeah, I'll stick to my usual jobs in the Commercial when I can manage it, thanks.

Ashley must have not gotten out much, though. She never complained about it being such a disaster out there, like she thought it wouldn't have been different on any other day. Still, she

seemed to get real impatient real quickly once we weren't moving. That's what finally got her to speak.

"How long again until we get there," she said. Her voice was soft enough that I couldn't tell where her tone fell between curt and polite.

"We don't seem to have gotten lucky," That was true, "You'll never see a day in Production where things aren't busy, but it looks like we've been caught in the mid-afternoon shuttle rush. It's a bit early today, but that isn't unusual. It's a pretty large operation keeping everything running around here. Hold everybody to a schedule that's too tight and the whole machine would just grind itself apart. So managers get a little leeway when it comes to shuffling around shuttle times."

I mean, I was blatantly lying. That's no secret between us. I'm not proud of it, but- what, no. No! I am not a hypocrite for "pretending things were fine." Sorry if you haven't noticed, but we aren't being paid to philosophize here. We're cabbies. We get people from A to B and we try to make the process smooth. You try complaining about every road issue you come across; tell me how it makes your passengers feel. Maybe you already know, bottom rung as you are? Jeez. I ain't apologizing. Maybe let me finish before you start bandying around accusations.

I noticed after saying all that- well, don't take this to mean I wasn't paying attention to the road. I'm not some kinda fool. Still, I caught a glimpse of her in my mirror. She was tapping a finger against the side of her leg. She had a steady rhythm going. Our light turned green and we passed through the intersection.

"At this rate we ought to be there in about... ten more minutes, I'd say," It was a generous estimate, but I knew my way around, "Not very familiar with the area, are you?"



That usually gets a polite yes or no. I was banking on her turning out to be a polite sort of woman. The kind that can't just let an awkward silence continue on when given the opportunity to finally fill it. However, it was at this point that my prodding largely became unnecessary.

"Not at all. I just can't imagine it," confusion had never been expressed in a more obvious tone. I didn't quite get what she meant, but in the moment it seemed obvious that the hustle and bustle of Production life was utterly bewildering.

"It's... certainly something out here," I said.

Yeah, just that. I might have easily called her whole shut-in deal, but blustering ahead after one victory is a rookie mistake. I could finally see words of her own rising up to the surface, so there was no better move than to leave an opening for them and listen.

"I assure you, we can get a good deal more specific than that," she was picking up a certain intensity in her voice. She hadn't raised her voice. Her words were just the sort that had an impact. They were backed by what I could only assume to be a rapidly emerging passion, "You've been all around, haven't you? You must've been. It's obvious isn't it? Perhaps so much so you can't properly put it into words?"

I was nodding along, unable to do much more than let this play out.

"I deal a lot with specifics in my line of work. I've got all the raw numbers in mind. It's indisputable stuff, but it isn't the most intuitive. I don't exactly get around. It's hard for me to map it to all of... perhaps you'd be willing to- to..." she cut herself off with something like a stutter or a double take. Her eyes turned away from my mirror vantage, backs towards (I assume) the frame of the car door. She wrung her hands together, slowly, like she was working out the kinks in each joint, "Well, how are you feeling lately? About... things?"

It was pretty apparent this lady had somehow managed to give herself the run around and rudely barge into her own personal issues without being expected. I've encountered the sort before. The kind of person who has a lot they want to say, but never thinks it's quite the appropriate time to say anything at all. It's a very professional attitude.

I wanted to hear what she had to say, naturally. She was pointing out just what I was thinking to my own face, you know? This gal was higher up than me, though. If anyone was gonna have an actual better idea of what was going on it was someone like her. Now, she is just a person like any other. I'll establish that for you this time, assuage your concerns as to my judgement. Her word wasn't truth itself or anything. She's closer to the important decisions than any of us though. It's common sense she'd know more than we do. Business-types so rarely discuss this kinda stuff with people out of their own sphere, so I couldn't miss this chance. I thought about my answer for a second.

"Well, I certainly don't want to come off as overly speculative, but I have noticed that everything seems a bit off lately. I'm always driving around this city, naturally, so I've got a good sense for whether or not things are operating smoothly. I'm thinking that maybe we've all hit a... a low point. Nothing can operate at its peak forever, you know? Our city's starting to struggle a bit, but I trust we'll get through whatever's coming. What else can a guy do but have some faith?" I was a bit more optimistic at the time than I was now. Wisdom is tempered by experience and all that. I made sure to keep my concerns a bit vague, anyways. Whatever it was she wanted, I doubt it was a rant even approaching this.

"Whatever's coming..." she hung on those two words for a moment, "Yes. It's such a shame, isn't it? Seeing it all head downhill. I mean, it seems like a pretty safe assumption. Like I

said, it's hard for me to imagine. Why don't we discuss it? You might be able to elucidate some things for me. If you'd like, I could give you something of a... a heads up. In regards to what's going on."

"Well, who am I to say no to that? Nothing like a bit of interesting conversation to pass the time," It was hard to downplay my satisfaction, but I've had a lot of practice over the years. One of the fastest ways to make someone uncomfortable is to let on that you're more invested in them than they'll ever be in you, "Where did you want to start?"

It really was the perfect time for a chat. We'd gotten back to moving on the road, but we honestly might as well have been parked. We hardly got out of the last green light without almost being forced to stop ourselves in the middle of the intersection. Thankfully, the line of vehicles pulled forward just enough for us to get in on the next road. Still, that left us right behind this huge truck. We'd only ever move forward in little increments, and on this road specifically it was almost twice the wait because of this thing. It'd start up slowly once it was time to move, then carefully maneuver itself forward to come to a safe stop, again and again... Ugh, without the conversation, I hardly could have stood it.

"To begin, let me ask you about your closer associates," Ashley had a rather serious expression saying this, "What's it like working out here for you and them? During more normal circumstances, I mean."

"Well, I've got more of a stable gig in the cab business than most of my peers. Haven't moved jobs in awhile," I said, "Gosh, last job I worked before this must have been a good four years back. Time sure flies. Back then I was working as a supplementary supervisor at a packaging plant. They had me in charge of employee morale, which basically meant it was my

job to handle all the little issues protocol can't account for. Humans will never spin as neatly as gears, but we had a tightly run ship. I can't speak from my own experience anymore, but I've been told it's gotten harder to keep things together as of late. Scheduling issues mostly, stuff like miscommunicated shifts and poor oversight, but I don't have the explicit details. It's not my space anymore."

I've refined this story during my time as a cabbie, though more on the part of deliberate effort than actual practice. It doesn't come up very often, but it isn't something you can afford to botch when it does. Sometimes people are interested in whether I know anything about the part of the city they're headed to, in which case I might offer up a variation of my past that focuses more on my time in the gig rotation. Other times they'd be questioning my position or my etiquette. You know, the snappy sort of passenger acting like they're a lot more important than they are. In that case, I'd probably limit the discussion to my history as a cabbie, if that's even something they'd want to hear. This case with Ashley was a bit out of the ordinary, but I figured I ought to start with some mention of my upward mobility and my experience with people.

"Nowadays you won't find me in such an interpersonal position, but I think those are the sorts of skills you need to be really successful in a job like this. From a certain perspective this job is all about interacting well with others. On the more technical side you of course have to have a solid driver's rating. They make sure you know the city streets like your own home on top of that; can't always rely on this little navigating gizmo we've got up here. I have colleagues who take up cabbie just as a part of their rotation, but that's a solid requirement even then. We haven't been all that affected by whatever's going on. Our staff is relatively small, all things considered, so there isn't much opportunity for issues to go unaddressed. The stable employees

have the needed passion to see all the little kinks get worked out. The temps are working the kinds of jobs that require a certain mental dedication, wherever they are in their cycle. So we're all generally on top of things," I didn't really have anything "juicy," so to speak, to bring up from my personal experiences. I might have been trying to put myself in a good light, but there was no sense in being dishonest.

"Hmmm. Really? You can enter the inter-class just through the rotation?" she asked, "I was under the impression that jobs reaching across districts in scope were all fixed assignments."

"It's a matter of necessity. Not enough people are willing to do it full time for there to be a stable workforce. The rotation is what keeps Production's workers at the top of their game, but it works primarily off the assumption that the jobs they're alternating between are relatively simple trades. Manual jobs with associated training that crosses over well between the various tasks they are expected to be proficient in. Most people don't want to tie themselves down to one thing, living in that environment. After all, going that route with a typical job would get you stuck doing the same old boring, menial task forever. It's not like being in the 'inter-class' will get you much recognition on the social side of things either. People don't see much reason to put in the extra effort reaching for it," I could see I had her attention, so I was willing to ramble on a bit more, "Seems a bit shortsighted from my perspective. This job has been good to me, but I can't hold a belief against anyone. That's just life out in the Production, for a lot of people."

"So we've only got enough workers in supply transport, for example, because we're cycling workers in and out of the available positions," she said, "It's troubling that this would have escaped me..."

“Not quite. The whole game is to try to apply for the positions with a higher rate of pay when the rotation resets. That means there’s also the fear that sticking to a job will get you stuck with lower pay rates in an unlucky quarter. Even with a job in the space of the inter-class, something with a theoretically guaranteed rate of pay, people don’t want to lose the chance to get less stable positions with a higher payout. Finding fairly reliable return work with those kinds of jobs is the dream. Meanwhile, other mid-district positions tend to just circumvent the whole issue by filling out their roster with Commercial folk in informal temp positions. Shop owners like to use it as a way to get their kids experience with other districts, before they’re expected to sell anything to people from them. It’s just the way things have worked for a while, so nobody treats it like the unofficial fix it is. Jobs like cabbage aren’t that attractive to the Commercial crowd, so we’re fit into the rotation to fill up the slots simple passion for the job can’t manage each quarter. The whole process of it all might not be so intuitive to someone on the outside,” I figured I ought to start wrapping up my explanation. Wasn’t my job to lecture, whatever the circumstance, “How they manage all that nowadays, with everything else that seems to be going on, is a bit baffling for me to consider, honestly.”

“Hmmm,” she made a lot of little noise like that as I was talking. They weren’t really pronounced enough to be demanding my attention. I assume she was just thinking hard on something, “That would make sense, considering... Alright. Tell me what you think of this. There have been some recent concerns regarding corporate sabotage.”

“E-excuse me?” I let my voice skip. Bad move, but I don’t exactly have to spell out that I was quite shocked, “well, wait, how exactly does this relate? With the previous question, I mean.”

“Nothing like that would get off the ground operating in just one district. Especially in Business. The Upper Management keeps our affairs close at hand to its own,” she said, “still, we have reason to believe that such interference may be being deliberately perpetrated. The early theory revolves around a kind of bottom up approach. Some sort of group effort within the lower districts to purposefully disorganize things, in order to affect negative policy change higher up.

“Should I really know about this?” I said, “I’m not exactly...”

“You can stop right there. I wouldn’t let slip actual secrets to my taxi cab driver on a whim. I- I’ve got some tact,” she said, “There’s no one of even relative importance in the Business District who doesn’t know the theory at least vaguely. It’s too big a fear to hide. An official announcement will have to be made soon, but I’m sure I’m not the only one who has brought it up outside of work. Understand, however, that’s no reason to shout it out to the rest of the world.”

It was quite the embarrassing gaffe to make in the moment, but Ashley’s tone felt practiced. You could tell this was something of a typical retort on her part; nothing she’d hold against me specifically. I held onto that thought and tried to recover.

“Well, jeez. It’s still a bit of a bomb to drop,” I said, “So you’re out here, what, looking around for this?”

“No, that’s not my department. I’m just an account manager. When would I ever even meet anyone outside my station, aside from odd circumstances like this? It’d be more accurate to say that my company as a whole is concerned with the potential consequences,” she said, “We’ve got dedicated investigators looking into things with the higher ups, in regards to how our

own affairs might be affected, but it's natural to be curious about something so concerning. You ought to understand as much."

Indeed, indeed. Smart lady.

"I'll try to keep this all in mind from now on. I appreciate the warning," I said, "So, is there anything else you'd like to hear about then? If you think that anything else will be of any help, of course."

"Perhaps something else along the lines of informal operations. That practice you mentioned, about how the Commercial management are co-opting mid-district jobs for their own unregulated benefit. Something unofficial like that lasting long enough to become a normative behavior... It's disconcerting to say the least," she said, "I have to trust that someone's been alerted to it at this point. I'm not the one passing judgement on any of this, but you could hardly try to argue it isn't suspect."

"Sure sounds like it," I said.

"In that case, what else do you know about the other districts? That is what has proved most revealing so far," she said, "I assume you have some necessary experience with clients above your class, if you've learned as much as you've said. I imagine they keep you in reserve for such cases."

"I'm not quite sure I'd know where to start," I said, "The majority of my office's clientele are actually from the Commercial District. They have the most need for our services, so the majority of what I hear on these rides comes from them. It's quite a bit to sift through."



“You’re mostly working in the Commercial District?” she leaned a bit forward when she said that. It was subtle. I remember just seeing her image in the mirror get a bit bigger. So, of course, I made sure to get a bit deeper into things again.

“That’s right. It’s a simple matter of demand. Well, it’s more along the lines of a lack of demand,” I said, “clients from Production aren’t all too uncommon, but it’s not like they have much reason to apply for a cab. People keep themselves busy out there; there isn’t much room for a break from routine. I’d say we get a few more jobs coming out of the Business District. You have plenty of reasons to need an official transported somewhere on short notice, but you’ve also got by far the most means of personal transportation to take advantage of in that regard. The more you’ve kept on top of things, the less you’ve had to call on us in recent years. After that there isn’t really much left to consider. It isn’t like we’re ever sitting in wait to get a call from the Agricultural District.”

Of course, that’s exactly where I’d be headed later that day, but I didn’t really see the relevance of bringing it up. It wouldn’t be until I was in the middle of that trip that I would think back on my own words and ponder at the incongruity between them and my actual situation.

“Well. Well,” she had this odd expression I could only half catch a glimpse of and was clearly searching around for the right words. I didn’t quite know what was up, but I had a lot to go on given how long this conversation of ours had lasted, “How about us, then? The Business District, I mean. It should be easier to recall something in that context. You get less of us, after all.”

This request was actually something of an issue. In retrospect I definitely made a mistake hanging too long on the subject of cabbings. I just gave that line about not knowing where to start

to buy myself time to choose from a few stories I'd already been considering. Letting myself get sidetracked ended up derailing me straight into territory I wasn't prepared for. Sure, I probably could have come up with some story or another about someone else from the Business that I gave a ride to, but let's analyse that possibility for a second. Ashley was an utterly astonishing gossip, comparatively, to any other client I've ever had from Business. That isn't to say I'd never managed to establish a rapport with the corporate elite of my past rides, but they were typically pretty one sided. So many of those conversations ended right at the silence Ashley initially held herself to. Whenever that wasn't the case I'd usually just be talked at about something. Let me tell you, never mistake being talked at for being talked with. So the conversation I had with Ashley wasn't a unique anomaly by any means, but it was fairly rare. That's all I'm trying to get at. So it was somewhat ironic that my continued success within that conversation depended upon my ability to draw from past successes I didn't really have.

At least not any particularly relevant successes. The only thing I could recall in that moment, while I was still a bit off balance and trying to come up with something quickly to hide it, was this one client I had who worked in an advertising firm. What was his name... Jim? Gill? Eh, doesn't matter. He got into this huge discussion with me about a logo for some clothing brand. He was part of this team of graphic artists who were in charge of designing the thing. They'd be told to aim for "maximum demographic visibility," or something. He was heading out to a last minute meeting with a focus group, but I guess it was weighing pretty heavy on his mind. He brought up the whole topic on his own and we bandied around a few of the possibilities they were considering. It was remarkably mundane, to be honest. Not that interesting an encounter to recall in full, either. Most obviously, it had nothing to do with a potential societal

break. There is no way I could have swung an interpretation like that, even if I had outright lied about a trip.

“Well, who am I to say? I doubt I’d have an accurate impression of anything shady going on,” That’s what I settled on. It was a pretty basic appeal to meritocratic difference; something halfway between my actual opinion and a bullshit excuse, “I think I’ve got a pretty good grasp of the Commercial District’s day to day workings, sure, but the inner workings of the Business District aren’t something I’m privy to in the slightest.”

She was quiet for a moment. Well, I don’t think it lasted that long, even if it felt like it back then. It was one of those moments where your perception of time decouples itself from any comprehensible reference point. Like you’re in a dark tunnel you can’t see the end of; you can’t tell how far you’ve come in or how soon you’ll be out. Yeah, look, I was nervous. Spot on assessment. Congratulations. I’m more used to getting conversations going than I am cutting them off.

“Alright,” she had a note of finality in her voice, “we’ll leave it at that.”

I’d hoped for a chance to redirect things after letting the flow of conversation get out of my grasp, but I had a feeling I shouldn’t push my luck.

“Alright,” I said.

After that rather abrupt halt in our talk I didn’t have much else to do but keep my eyes on the road. Take note of a truck getting a bit to close here and there. Feel the constricting aura of cramped production facilities, presence constant as ever. Consider what I’d just heard in the privacy of my own thoughts.

There it was in full. The conversation that set the rest of my day into being something of a subtle panic. It's terrifying to consider, isn't it? That there could be some whole unseen conspiracy undermining our society for reasons beyond our ken. Well, not unseen, I suppose. I'm proof enough against that, even if I didn't have the proper context. Just unnoticed, or even ignored in a certain sense. It's the kind of news that's personally impactful, but you can't actually do anything about. You just feel impotent in every regard toward it, all the while waiting and hoping the people in actual positions of power can take care of it. I can't just accept feeling like that. I'm in the perfect position to see and hear things all around this city. Couldn't I file a worthwhile report if I caught on to anything untoward, now that I know what to look out for? In the moment that question got me thinking a lot in regards to my own interpretation of events. I'd been very certain of the assumption that the government was behind a lot of the odd stresses and circumstances I was seeing, for whatever reason. It seemed like my faith might have been a bit much, in retrospect. I doubted for a second my ability to actively bear witness to whatever was happening, but I got a hold on that line of thinking before it could cripple me.

What reason did I even have, all of a sudden, to doubt I was experiencing the effects of Upper Management action? I'd heard Ashley, hadn't I? Higher ups were looking into things. Surely some of the strange changes going on out there were counter-efforts on the part of the Government District. I can't imagine they'd just be passive in response to any of this. We're called on as citizens to trust that those gifted enough to lead us. That's the trust she was talking about; the trust I brought up myself right at the start. Discarding it would just be ridiculous. I remain certain that the larger shifts are tied back to an official source. Not that I could just bring that up back then, out of nowhere. Ashley hadn't said anything specific about it and I'd just

made an ass of myself claiming I knew shit about the higher functions of the city. I was hardly in a position to try and make some grand claim about this apparent conspiracy I'd only just learned of. Nor was there much benefit to weigh against the risk inherent in bringing it up again.

I'd appreciate it if you didn't share this around, by the way. It's like she said, this probably isn't the kind of thing that should just be out there on the public's mind yet. It honestly feels like a bit of a betrayal to her just telling you, but I can trust you. Can't I? I can be a bit harsh toward you, sure, but I know you keep yourself on the up and up. I make it a point to keep myself abreast of the state of our work environment. It's too easy for any of the more subtle offenders to slip through the cracks if nobody happens to be paying attention.

"Your feedback has been helpful. I'll allow that," she said this after a few minutes of dead silence and the steady drone of traffic. No idea what prompted her. I certainly didn't have any reason to expect it, "Here, take this. Just in case."

She handed me this little slip of paper over the shoulder of my seat. I was still focusing on the road, so I grabbed it pretty quickly using my mirror. Couldn't see what it was, but it wasn't that hard to figure out. The little rectangular shape and the stiff cardstock material were a definite giveaway that it was a business card.

"What's this?" I asked. I might have known, but I didn't know what I was supposed to do with it "just in case."

"My card. Usually I hand it out to people I need to get in touch with personally," she had her arms crossed over one another, with her chin in her hand, "The information won't work for you. Consider it something like a reminder. I hope you keep it close."

“I’ll... do that,” I think it was about there I started to lose track of what was really being communicated between us. Another little sign of things to come that I pushed to the side in the moment, more focused on figuring out what was happening. On the one hand her words seemed to indicate some level of fondness and familiarity; wholly unlikely to have been the case between a high society woman and her one time cab driver. On the other hand, her tone was much more in line with the subtle disappointment I’d imagined she was feeling in her most recent silence. Of course, what sense would that make in association with a gift? She didn’t continue, but I felt that trying to leave things be any longer might actually be more detrimental to the mood. I had to come up with a way to prompt further conversation and set things back on a predictable track.

We hit another red light around then, so I took the opportunity to actually look at this card she’d handed me. It had her name written across the top left, with her position as an account manager listed underneath it. It was in a tidy little serif font, I think. Their logo took up the entire right side of the card; a simple picture of a red apple with a green checkmark centered at its middle. What really drew my attention, though, were the four little lines of contact information in the bottom left:

I committed those lines to memory the second I saw them. I needed something to work with and there it was. Confused, are you? Do you know what that email address means? Well, I guess it makes sense that you wouldn’t. I only figured this out from an offhand comment another passenger of mine made. Her name... yeah, not even gonna try to dig that fact up. She was one of the silent types, for the most part, but she had this habit of muttering to herself. I took her out a few times, basically whenever she needed a quick ride from meeting to meeting across the city during a busier quarter. Tough few weeks, I guess, if she had to rely on me for it. So I spent these

rides listening to her grumble to herself about one topic or another and I noticed she kept mentioning an “administrator” in a less than kind tone. I was just too curious, so I asked something innocuous; something like “boss giving you trouble?” She didn’t exactly appreciate the gesture, but I did finally get a response from her. She said, and I do remember this clearly, “As if I’d even be able to talk with one. I don’t even have the right permissions to email one. Which is more than you’ll ever have the chance to be denied, anyways.” Clearly wasn’t very happy with that state of affairs, or with me for my interruption. Tried not to bother her anymore after that. That little urge I’d had to pester was a small, yet unfortunate, lapse in judgement. Still, it was worth it for the context it was giving me for this card.

Ashley had an administrator account for her email. She was an administrator for her company. What else would that email have meant? I’m not going to stand here and pretend I’ve got a full comprehension of how company hierarchies are laid out in the Business District, but that other lady wasn’t small potatoes in her own business. Whatever it was she did. Look, I don’t have a perfect memory, alright. I like to think I hold onto what’s important and I do recall she wasn’t just a paper pusher. So extrapolate with me here. An administrator is even higher up. The name is self explanatory. She’s in charge of people. She’s got the talent to direct the goings on of a G8 establishment and is humble enough to chat with myself in the meanwhile.

Hmmm? What’s a G8? Come on. Sorry, if you don’t know about that it’s your own fault. We’ve got a little reference guide right here in the office for when anyone needs it. The Business District has its own system for categorizing locations across the city. We know the streets, but they have to approach it from the angle of documentation and filing and all that jazz. Can’t operate the inner workings of an administration on inefficient colloquialisms. They’ve got it all

neat and streamlined, like its own little language. Sometimes it bleeds over into requests we get for transport, so we gotta have the means to interpret the basics of it. I guess you wouldn't have ever had reason to look into it, but still. Never got curious? Alright, nevermind. I'll tell you this, G8 is a seriously important designation. It refers to a designated zone for institutions of primary importance to Upper Management. It's the important places that get labeled with the low numbers.

I knew this about Wholesale and Arch Street already, fan as I am of the locale, but I had no idea Ashley was in such a high position there. I could see an average office worker getting saddled with me, but it's baffling that I'd end up giving a ride to someone like that. I couldn't just leave this uncommented upon. A person of such high esteem deserves more than just my usual bother. Especially when a bit of targeted flattery could be my ticket to getting out of whatever mess I had found myself in. I figured if I just went all the way, put myself out there as just a simple citizen happy to serve and get her in a comfortable mood, I might be able to get her to explain things a bit more comprehensively. Unfortunately, our time together didn't end on any such high note.

"You know," I'm sure the enthusiasm that bled into my voice was more off putting than it was anything else. Should have realized in the moment it was an issue when I didn't have a solid idea of what I was aiming for with it, "I'd like to thank you as well. You must have worked hard to get where you are. We all appreciate what you do to support the city."

"I understand," she didn't sound as sure as those two words implied, yet she did seem to have some response prepared and ready. Maybe she got that kind of thing too often for it to be endearing anymore and was just used to diverting? That didn't seem right, though. I felt I'd



pushed the conversation from territory I wasn't familiar with into somewhere we both were utterly lost, "would like to continue where we left off? There's more I could say that I'm sure you'd like to hear. I wouldn't want to leave any worry in the air."

"I don't think we need to. We're almost at your destination, after all. Why don't you just relax before you arrive," I had kind of given up at this point. Not that I was prepared to just let things fester. I mean this in the sense that I was trying to reestablish plain speech and avoid bullshit, even if I had to step back into a bluntly professional role. No, no, I don't mean it like that. Bullshit, you know? When two people are doing a bit more than talking past one another; taking each other's words and twisting them to fit a half understood idea of the other person's view. Most of the time that'll happen and the conversation will just collapse once and for all. Any further talking is an effort to rebuild a new understanding. Sometimes, though, people will just sit there in the wreckage of old misunderstandings, oblivious or pretending that anything meaningful can be communicated in such a state. There is nothing worse than bullshit people won't acknowledge is there, but seeing as I wasn't in any appropriate position to be directly calling this out I just tried to pull back. Understand me now?

"Don't back down now..." she looked down at my dashboard. It took me a second to realize she was reading the name tag hanging from my mirror, "Joe ---. This is a rather serious situation we find ourselves in. It wouldn't do to let your curiosity get the best of you. Couldn't you end up in some real trouble if you get caught up in any of this... stuff? The light is green again, by the way."

"Ah, yes. Well, I suppose we could return to our discussion. I don't think you have much to worry about in regard to getting caught up in this, though. I just drive my cab, really. Anything

else you'd like to hear about?" I set things back on their previous course while working the car back into the flow of traffic. I couldn't just step back from this if she was going to play things like that. What, why? I assure you the stakes had been raised here. Yeah, maybe it's mildly hypocritical to have turned back on the "blunt professional" strategy so soon, but I didn't really have a choice. Let me get some more into the nuance of this.

The focus on my name is what dragged this into suddenly consequential territory. Clients get past minor bits of disappointment all the time and most often it's their own fault for whatever's going on in their own lives, but when someone higher up than you is taking explicit note of your name you have good reason to get worried. The likelihood of us ever meeting again was next to none, but if she wanted my name that probably means she had something she wanted to do with it later. There's only one sort of something that would be. She'd have to want to file a complaint. Place the blame on the driver for what a bad experience they had. I've seen things roll out like that before and I certainly wasn't eager to see it again.

It probably would have been smart to just keep trying to pull back, but I couldn't just ignore the risk in doing that. I've worked my way out of bad impressions before and I'd become afraid of whatever it was I couldn't see in this conversation coming back to bite me in the ass. So I indulged this worry of hers, or gave into a coded request to keep talking, whatever the hell was going on there. Really, I was indulging my own weak will. For better or for worse I couldn't flip flop between strategies anymore. I had to commit, really commit, to figuring out was going on here and fixing it. No more time for doubt.

"So we'll be going ahead with this," she still didn't sound pleased. That was heart dropping. I still hadn't made the right move and I wasn't used to making this many flubs in a

row. I don't usually find myself so in the dark with this stuff. Something was off with me. Had been all day, the signs were there, and I still just kept going. Goddammit, "You know, I think you'd be surprised as to your own vulnerability in all this. You clearly hear a lot of things 'driving your cab.' That kind of literal mobility between districts is unusual, at least in any other context I'm aware of. Most of us never have an appropriate reason to see what happens elsewhere. I can hardly imagine that anyone higher up wouldn't be aware of your job's apparent advantage in that regard. It's the sort of thing saboteurs would find quite useful in their efforts. If you get what I'm i-implying here. Ah, please, keep an eye on that truck. I think I saw it swerve a bit towards us. It's becoming so chaotic out here. Should we really be driving this close to it? In fact, we've gone quite far into the Production District at this point; I think it's been more than ten minutes. Are we really going in the right direction if we're around... these sorts of people?"

That, in comparison to everything else, seemed like such an odd thing to worry about. Production was as much a bustling, shifting, and yet controlled place of chaos as ever, and of course I knew where we were headed in it all. It was a bit out of the way, sure, but knowing everywhere from "out of the way" to "barely ever tread upon" is what I'm paid for. I mean, I was the one driving her, afterall. Don't you laugh. People like her request a timely, efficient driver who can promise them a smooth ride and I'm what they get. So you bet I knew exactly where we were headed to. It was just a small office for overseeing operations in the surrounding factories, a sort of management center. It was called the Alexi Production Affairs Office. Perhaps you're familiar. Anyways, why is it this we're focusing on? Did I not just tell you about the dire warning I recieved? She goes and "implies" that I'm at risk of... something from these saboteur wackos. Nothing good. Yeah, real subtle lady. It was a shock for me, again. Today was just

shock on top of shock looking back. This time, however, I was prepared to hold back my paralyzing feelings and keep focus. Had to do it if I wanted to get anywhere. By then I was working on two levels. I was considering the content of what Ashley said on one level and I was wondering why she'd brought up that content in the first place.

Surface level answer is she just brought it up out of plain old concern for another human being, but in context that generous of an interpretation would have been blatantly ridiculous. I knew I was the subject of some negative advancement on her part here. This had to fit into that somehow. The first possibility I really considered was that she thought I was some kind of idiot. Think about it. We're stuck together longer than she'd like, start talking up each other about a topic she's quite invested in, and then she's disappointed when I apparently don't know as much as she would have hoped. So, being a bit surly about it, she takes it out on me. She drags me back into conversation, all put upon in her air of distress and displeasure. Tries to get me off my game by asking questions she thinks I'll flounder at and bringing up potential threats to my person after getting me all worried. Look, I don't think she was fibbing in regards to that danger. Whatever she is, she's a business-class professional on top of that. She sure didn't blunt the weight of the message for me, though. Then right after that she starts insinuating that I'm giving her a bad driving experience overall. Maybe she's picking out reasons she can use to justify a complaint while still in the moment, maybe she just wants to annoy me as another tactic to get in my head, maybe both. I can't get that specific. I'm no mind reader. It certainly seemed like I was in the beginning stages of a targeted attack on my character, though.

“No cause for concern there, ma'am. Traffic's unfortunately a bit more severe than anticipated, but we're definitely on the right path. I've got a lot of experience behind this wheel,” I addressed the worries about our location first off, “I'll get you where you need to be.”

“I'll continue to take your word on that, I suppose,” she said with another glance toward the aforementioned truck, now a bit further ahead than us and obscured by a following bus.

“I appreciate the trust,” I could read the sarcasm, but I wasn't back in this to sour things up faster than before by responding in kind. So I pushed past it and got started with actually trying to fix things. Assuming I was under the scrutiny of a proactive filer of complaints here than I'd just have to prove I wasn't so vulnerable to disparagement as she thought. In regard to my other vulnerability, as she put it, I would guide the discussion back to that after I patched things up. I wanted to hear more, but not from the perspective of someone just trying to spook me. I believed both issues could be tackled at once through clear demonstration of my own merit, “Why don't we get back to that discussion of ours? I think we got a bit off track for a moment. I don't believe you got around to asking me anything?”

“What else have you heard about the Commercial District then? If you're really so removed from anything higher up then that should prove relevant enough,” she jumped into a question, surprisingly foregoing any meandering chitchat or cold commentary.

[A.N. - I'll say this marks the beginning of the “gap” in Ashley's section of the story. Though I do have some portions written out below, it is not truly coherent on its own at this point. My intent is to complete this section by continuing the thread of tension, misunderstanding, and building hostility in the conversation between Joe and Ashley. This will build to a climax in which Joe, distracted, almost hit another vehicle. This puts a stop to the

conversation, ending it on a definitively negative note and leaving Joe's pride and curiosity unsatisfied as he reaches Ashley's destination and she takes back her card.]

"I imagine you mean something suspicious. Alright, let me think for a moment. Hmm... I recall a client I had who worked as a florist. He got a lot of business from, well, the Business. Apparently he was a favored source for decorative flower arrangements. Keeps the office lively, I assume. He needed to get to a meeting with some --- representative. They were ironing out a deal ---, but if I'm not mistaken ---. ---," I said, "---. That definitely sounds like it could be ---. Does that sound accurate?"

"That isn't anything you would get," she shut that down immediately, "I would like to hear about your ---."

"Well, I suppose you're right. I guess I ---," I ---, but it seemed like she ---. ---.

"---. If you'd like to explain my own ---'s weaknesses to me, go ahead. I'm listening," she said.

Maybe I was the idiot here. I could tell by then that there seemed to be some specific something I was being --- for here. ---. Threw off. Thinking back on it now, however, Ashley had become steadily more --- in her words as this new exchange of ours continued. It was sort of like our roles had been flipped and now I was the one getting poked out. That's just wishful thinking though, isn't it? If she wanted something like that out of me I feel like I would have been able to pick up on it and give it to her. There was no reason she'd have had any such interest in me.

I think, having had time now to consider her actions, that some of my initial assumptions were closest to the mark. I'd disappointed her; definitely by cutting off our first conversation and most likely in other ways I was oblivious to. Now she was (raking me over the coals) ---. ---. So

it was a thankful --- that the next approach I took reflected this. I thought for a moment on her latest words and considered the possibility that ---. ---.

“---,” I said.

“I’ve seen the ---. I know just what’s going on with ---,” she ---. (the data comes back up.

Accusation not understood by J.)

--- administrator.

“I guess you would know, being a-” I’d been about to bring up her --- when I was cut off.

“Being a what? I’m an Account Manager. I can’t see why you’d feel the need to insinuate otherwise,” she said this with a strained look on her face, like she was ---. I could make out a thin slick of sweat across her brow.

Clearly I’d made her uncomfortable ---.

---

“Do you know why it is we could be dealing with ---,” she said.

“You explained before, right?” I said.

“No. Not why we have reason to suspect anything,” she ---, “Why would anyone ---?

Think carefully on it, please.”

---. (thinks)

“---,” I said.

“---,” she said, “A-are you sure about (car comment again).

---

“---,” Her voice ---, “actually, I’m sure you had a point about not talking so openly about this. Who knows who it might get back to?

My attempts at --- had clearly backfired. The last thing I wanted to do was convince her she ought to paranoidly seal her lips. --- (goal). --- (next action).

---

“You know, what I’m doing out here really isn’t your business,” she ---.

---

“---,” she said, “---. ---. No, no, please just look-”

“Lady, alright, I know how to drive,” I ---, “I am-”

I caught myself at the last second, all thanks to a lucky flash of color I noticed from the corner of my eye. There was a shiny little --- hanging off the back of the truck in front of me. It had quickly shifted into its position in front of me from a connecting lane and I had failed to take notice of its presence with my head briefly angled back toward Ashley. A few more seconds and I’d have rammed into its bumper, though thankfully at a relatively sedate pace due to the traffic. Relatively. I have to admit here that any such crash wouldn’t have been pleasant to go through, lucky as we were there was little chance of something more serious occurring. It is an important distinction. I caught myself though. It was fine in the end.

“-in control,” I finished off my words with --- out of a --- momentum carried through the shock of the moment.

Wait, wait, remember. I can own up to my own shit. You’re getting a sneak preview, essentially. So stay where you are and listen to the rest of this before you go mouthing off anything to the boss. And no, this wasn’t how the car got scratched up, we aren’t there yet. I didn’t actually hit anything. Get that through your head.

Naturally, Ashley was ---.



---

---. She turned back to me for a moment and quickly rapped her knuckles across my window a few times. I lowered the

“I would appreciate it if you could give my card back,” she said.

I picked it off my dashboard and handed it over without a word. She tucked it away in a --- pocket and resumed a brisk walk toward the --- management center.

I just sat there in the parking lot for a while, or I would have if they’d let me. A --- --- me along pretty quickly. So really I was caught up half between my own thoughts on what had happened and half on paying attention to the rules of the road. Made it all the harder to process what had just happened.

[A.N. - This marks the ending of the gap in Ashley’s section.]

Now sure, alright, it wasn’t the worst conclusion. Not by my own experience at least. Everybody has a few times in their life they leave somebody else utterly disappointed in them, and this didn’t compare to the worst of those I’d been through. No, I’d rather not say what those incidents were. I’m not here to embarrass myself for your enjoyment. Perhaps, I’ll admit, that this particular incident is up there with the worst I’d actually consider partly my fault. The point is I was telling myself in the moment: don’t get caught on this. Consequences had failed to appear for worse. It wasn’t that bad. Not bad for the most part at all. “Most part” being the key phrase. Things might have only turned sour near the end, but I could have done better. Really. In the moment I didn’t even fully understand what had gone wrong. I mean, of course I recognize the near crash as being severe, but our issues began before that. Hell, I’m still trying to puzzle out where exactly it all began. I had watched her walk off toward the front door of Production

Affairs, coldly marching forward with an air of pronounced indifference and anger, and I couldn't wrap my head around it. She suspected me of something. Something to do with the vague sabotage conspiracy she'd only begun to elaborate on before things went south. Why? Could she have seen through my attempts to match my conversational approach to her own and taken it as something far more deceitful and sinister than it was? Or did she hear some implication in my words I hadn't intended? I could hold our whole trip in my head, but I couldn't parse out whatever details I needed and had failed to take notice of. Then I'm just out there thinking to myself about what's going to come of this. Who am I kidding imagining there won't be consequences? Am I going to get an official complaint filed against me? That could hurt my chances of getting sent out for more Business clients. It ain't exactly rare for me, understand, but I'm far from out there every other day.

I was thinking on and on about it all and I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My eyes were red and watering slightly. Not like I was leaking blood, but damn, maybe I might as well have been. I'd been regulating my expression that whole ride trying to establish a bit of open communication, and I looked like this?! I... I got hostile, defensive, and nearly got a passenger hurt, and I certainly looked the fucking part of a raving, irresponsible maniac! How long had my eyes been so clearly irritated; such an ugly, leaky red? How many off putting twitches of these eyes did I miss while I was looking at her? Did I drip anywhere on me; anywhere visible in the car? Disgusting, just disgusting.

It was my contacts, man. My fucking contacts! This shit doesn't happen to me. God, I must have looked gross. Just imagine it. Puffy red eyes, fully bared to an opposing gaze, like nothing is wrong and that ugly tint were simply part of a natural reaction. Like I meant to inflict

that shit on someone with sour intent. I couldn't even feel it. I mean, I hadn't noticed it, I think, on account of my heightened emotional state, but that's a doubtful excuse. What if my frustration and physical irritation amounted to the same thing in the end, as if I were just some possessed avatar of ugly, shameless pain. I'm sure all that was helped along ever so much by sickening lapses of concentration. Agh! I bet she thought I knew. I bet she saw the weakness I was blind too and wrote out all the rest of my sad little story from it. I must have come off as a fucking joke of a threat. A persistent annoyance.

How did this happen? Were my eyes just watering enough to dislodge my contacts? I don't think that's how it works though... Maybe I had some unnoticed issue in the morning with them and I didn't get them fixed quite right. I could have scratched myself if that were the case, or set myself up to be scratched later. No, no, I swear, this stuff doesn't happen to me! Those aren't the kinds of mistakes I make. Too little too late for a plea like that, though, but I couldn't just let this happen again with the rides I still had to take care of. I vowed to be truly sure I'd eliminated the possibility in that moment. That's why I've got my glasses on again; I've been wearing them all day since this happened.

Okay, don't even start. I'm anticipating it. I see it on your face Peter. I know just what your next clever little accusation is going to be. I'm not an idiot. An off putting incident with the state of my eyes isn't the cause of all my problems, or the core culprit to blame. Obviously. That's not the issue. That's not what a sign is. Maybe it's that you've got something stewing away inside you and it's expressing itself through you in all these little ways, like you're silently begging yourself to notice something wrong. Maybe it's the natural responses we all have to things going wrong around us, like we're picking up signals on a subconscious level and reacting

without input. Hell, I don't know, maybe fate is the realest fucking thing out there. It's not the function of it all that needs to be questioned.

It's just one of those things that is apparent. Just like gravity pulls everything down, problems beget more problems. Who cares how it works? If out of the blue my contacts start ruining themselves then it's got to be indicative of a lot more going on. It's the slip of the tongue that makes you fuck up the mood of a respectable client. It's the unbearable anxiety of hearing all this bad news day after day. It's the fact that I have barely anybody I can actually talk to about this stuff, and the only people who ever instigate anything with me on their own are all like that asshole who couldn't just read the mood and shut up. It's all the same in the end, all connected to each other one way or another.

Hmmm, who? Ah, yeah, I suppose I haven't mentioned that prick yet. He was my next pick-up after Ashley. Needed to get straight from his factory job out into Residential C. I know the whole story behind this one. Common scenario. The guy didn't have what it takes to help manage his family's shop; couldn't justify sticking around on his own merit. The Upper Management reduced his citizenship class and he had to move out into Production. The bonds of family, however, managed to persist through the whole ordeal. Now the guy's father is sick and he was granted an allowance to head back over to see daddy. The system we all live by ain't heartless, despite some people's insistence otherwise.

This guy was a real piece of work. Not in the way where it's obvious. How would someone like that be taking a cab for a sick visit? That's the sort of privilege the unsociable can't work their way into. He was a jerk though, there's no question. He worked out in a canning factory, "specialized" in electronics maintenance, and just couldn't stop bragging about it. I'm

getting ahead of myself, though. I take pride in being able to say I managed to get a hold of myself pretty quick after Ashley. I felt strongly, sure, but there was a schedule to keep and all. I'd already be pushing it with all the traffic, not that I could do anything about that. So I slogged my way through another slow Production drive until I got to the meet-up point. It was right outside his place of work, a little auto-plant with a bland black on white sign labeling it G.R. Automobiles. We were supposed to meet at [A.N. - Another instance of an undecided specific time], but I ended up getting there at [A.N. - Yet another time] because of all the traffic. He was waiting on the curb, arms crossed. I rolled down the window as I pulled up so I could introduce myself. You should have heard the way he said his name.

“I'm Daniel Spokes,” He caught me in a handshake straight through the open window and dragged out the first syllable of his last name. It was a truly odd amount of emphasis to place on it. Something like Spo-o-o-okes, and finished off with a sharp hiss of the “S.” I didn't know what to make of it, “We ought to be off quickly.”

He swung the door open and settled himself in the back seat. It was only then that I was able to get a good look at the guy. He was relatively tall, but I couldn't quite make a guess at a number with him sitting down. The guy was also remarkably thin, like he hadn't bothered to eat more than one meal a day for the past few months, yet had somehow managed a successful enough exercise routine to keep the slight bit of meat on him in something resembling muscle definition. His stickish limbs at once seemed perfectly suited to and utterly odd to be moving with as much shaky energy as Mr. Spokes gave off. He was wearing this orange t-shirt and a pair of worn jeans; both looking like they were hanging off a cheap wire hanger. You'd have

expected someone like that to barely muster up a hobble, but Mr. Spokes was, if nothing else, a remarkably more forceful man than one would judge at first glance.

Once he was sat down he started combing through his short, brown hair at a halfway frantic pace with his hands. His eyes were constantly narrowed, like he was somehow glaring with specific intent at whatever his eyes happened to run across. He next addressed me while still in this highly anxious state, but somehow managed to deliver his words with as much direct resolve as he did his initial handshake.

“We’re certainly running late, aren’t we? Quite unfortunate, really. It’s been such an awful day. Just awful,” he was rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand, “Nothing has been on time today. You wouldn’t think it’s much to ask that a supervisor meet up with you at the time they set, or that your family call you during the actual small amount of break time you have, or a cab be on time at the end of your day, but sure. Let’s just throw all propriety to the wind and do things whenever.”

I thought he was the snappy sort of passenger, like I mentioned before. Wasn’t much to go off of yet, but I was pretty confident I’d just be in for a bit of an annoying ride. I wasn’t doing the best attitude wise, but I didn’t see something like this pushing me back over the edge. Yeah, that assumption didn’t exactly pan out.

“My apologies. The traffic today is absurd,” I said.

“Well, isn’t that just wonderful? I’m sure dad will be nothing but understanding,” he said, “I’ll try to look on the bright side of things. Occasionally, waiting around gave me the opportunity to actually get my job done. I can at least take pride in the knowledge that nobody

can rightly accuse me of not having done what I'm paid to do every day. Why yes indeed, wonderful indeed..."

I'm sure it's obvious that traffic wasn't the only absurd thing about this situation. This guy was thinking aloud to himself, I guess; just belting out this stream of consciousness diatribe against his own life. Ah, yes, and there was his peculiar urge to draw me into his complaining with barely any actual context and ever increasing vitriol.

"Inconsiderate pieces of shit, the lot of them. Think they can just push around anyone in their path. Do whatever they want and complain that we aren't reliable when they interfere with our goddamn jobs. Like I could actually get my job done if I just waited around all day for other people to get their shit together. Not today. I took back the time they tried to have me waste. I'm officially immune to this bullshit," he said, "It is such bullshit. Right? You can't just sit there like none of this affects you. It's rampant out there. The sidelining and the meddling and the distrust. You get what I mean."

I had already pulled out and gotten back on the road by this point. I was focused on shifting a vehicle back into heavy traffic and hadn't fully processed what he'd said in the moment, but I could tell he was going off on his employers. Not the most uncommon state of affairs. It's always a bit of an annoyance to deal with, but it's not usually worth raising a fuss over. I just gave him a sort of casual over the shoulder nod in response. I'd let him use me as a pseudo-sounding board, but only because I wasn't in the mood to get into an argument with the guy and actually try to figure him out. I was kind of "done for the day," so to speak, with being lost in the words of others.

[A.N. - This marks the beginning of the gap with Daniel's section of the story. There's been quite a bit of consideration as to whether or not Daniel ought to be included at all as a part of this project. My intent was to use him as someone with a worldview more directly antagonistic to Joe's own perspective, who hates and doubts aspects of the city Joe likes and has faith in. The complete section would serve as a means to explore more of what life is like in the city, what people other than Joe think about it, and to give Joe a few moments of doubt/certainty in his worldview to look back on in his later ponderings.]

"Right," he said, "Ugh. I don't know ---. . ."

"Hey now," I was justified in taking a harsher tone than usual here, "that's hardly any way to talk about the fine folks up top. It takes a lot of hard work and discipline."

"---," he said.

He ---. I'd already been tempted out of my commitment to silence once so far and I'd be damned if I let myself get sucked in again so soon. All it had brought and all it would continue to bring was frustration, not ---.

"---," he said.

I ---.

"It's all such a farce. I don't know why everybody seems to have to take that out on me," he said, "I'm not even abusing it, really. All I want is to go about my own business, but no. I'm not even allowed to be competent in the one job I'm good at. Goes against the narrative. I should be able to rely on my supervisors for some bare minimum of effort, but when their petty meddling fucks me over I have to take things into my own hands. And they see that and just can't comprehend ---."



“What exactly did these people do?” It was a more blunt question than I should’ve asked. Really, I shouldn’t have asked any sort of question. Holding firmly to city pride is one thing, but provoking an argument with a passenger is against protocol. Something like that could escalate and get the book thrown at me real quick. I’ve said it enough already, but I wasn’t at my best. Not that this guy even seemed to notice. My question actually seemed to ---.

“Oh, you have no idea how many ways I could answer that question. ---. (merit system complaint),” he said.

---

---. I could tell he was making fun of my glasses. He was just the sort of shallow ---.

“(complaints about the rotation/Production. Opposing opinions and view to narrator.),” he said.

--- cut off-

[A.N. - This marks the ending of the gap in Daniel’s section. A complete version would ideally go on for longer than what is already here implies.]

Huh, what? You’re telling me to get on with it, are you? You don’t think this adds anything to my recollection of events? You know, I had planned to start there, but then you had to go and make this a work issue. You had to put my reputation on the line. So now I need to explain things fully. Haven’t we been over this?

Ah, I see. You’re unconvinced that Daniel has anything to do with anything. Well, I can see where you’re coming from. Everybody’s met that one asshole that just gets under their skin. I’ll give you the abbreviated version of trip number two. I met up with Daniel and we argued on and on and on. You got that? Yeah, I’m sure you get it. Spokes, well, he’s just awful. “Awful” is

just such common knowledge, right? It's just so clear, beyond question, outright fucking self-evident, eh? Fuck off. It's that kind of attitude that has everybody's heads in the sand. You don't know shit about me, let me make that clear. We pass each other in the halls. We go to the same meetings. We chat about inane bullshit when we need to pass the time. That's all you know. Nothing. Bupkis. We are acquaintances by sheer momentum of our continued existence around one another. You hear that I have a problem with a client and what even is it you think? Oh, there goes old Joe, such a complainer. That guy oughta learn to take it better instead of bitching to all the rest of us. What's one rude customer? I pay my rent off of jerks like that who need a ride. Blah blah blah.

Nothing is actually as simple as that. Maybe it's news to you, but there's a certain nuance to all this. Life in general, I guess. There's so much detail to the experience and history behind every little thing. It's not the kind of thing that comes up often, and normally I wouldn't have any damn reason to care whether you were privy to all that or not. No one has any reason to care about all that. We've got a bit of a different situation here though, don't we? I'm going out of my way, trying my very best, to wrap up my experience in a neat little package that you can grasp. Really dig your way into and understand. I'm explaining this all, remember, to try and set the record straight on my actions here. You can't just jump in and say this or that isn't important, like it's your own life I'm laying out here. Like what's meaningful to you counts for anything at all in this context.

Does Mr. Spokes have some important connection to anyone up top? Not at all that I'm aware of. Didn't get any commentary from him on the state of the lurking conspiracy we may or may not be under threat from. Did he get himself involved with anything that happened after my

ride with him? Well, of course not. Of course not! He's just some random loser, not a part of anything bigger. Nevertheless, he's someone who had an effect on me; something I would like to stress was a rather severe and negative effect. Someone who pushed his way into my head and prodded at my thoughts and beliefs in a way that stuck with me. That affected the way I thought and believed later on. I'm at the center of this whole tale, aren't I? So doesn't that make all these shitty circumstances of mine important?

No, no, I get it. Seriously, I get it this time. I'm not being sarcastic. Honestly, I'd rather be home too. There isn't any point in recalling all this if you leave half-way through on me. So I'll cut to the chase. I got upset over a client's behavior and didn't deal well with it. There, fine, that's enough.

We got through the traffic eventually. Still late, but faster than expected, really; it was starting to peter out for whatever reason about then. I couldn't tell you why that was, just the same as I couldn't tell you how it got to that point in the first place. Not that I was worried about needing to explain myself to anyone. I'd sooner eat my own glasses than believe Daniel Spo-o-o-okes would file an official complaint. No, I'll tell you who I am concerned for. Whoever's managing the traffic schedule these days. You have to wonder if all the reliable managers are going through it nowadays trying to get this shit under control, or if all the garbage managers are about to get their asses handed to them for their misconduct. I'm sure either party could use some luck. Can't be easy watching this mess spiral further out of control.

Anyways, Mr. Spokes gave me one last classic glare before stepping out of my car and into the Spokes & Harrison Textile Commission. Yeah, certainly a real house of luxury in that place. Run by a real family of kings, sure, sure. I hope that guy chokes on his 'luxury.'

It just felt so petty, comparatively, you know? Here I was just coming off this nutty revelation that casts so much light on my concerns for this city, opening up new concerns I apparently ought to have for myself, and then I have to go and deal with a guy who can't treat any issue with concern that doesn't affect his life. How could a guy just go and act like that?

After that, all I had left to do was head over to the infamous final trip of the day. This is the moment I've had you waiting so laboriously for. Well, only technically. The trip was scheduled for a bit later in the day than my other two rides. I was lucky that was the case, otherwise who knows how late I might have been. Then again, maybe being too late to go through with any of it would have been better for me in the long run. Getting a bit ahead of myself though. I had about a solid hour before I'd need to head over for the pick up, so I decided to find myself something to do in the Commercial district. Ended up grabbing a bite to eat at a nearby deli; mainly it was just an excuse to get into their bathroom. Wanted to see if I could clear up the redness that was left in my eyes. This isn't the first time my eyes have ever gotten irritated, of course, so I try to keep myself prepared. I keep a little piece of cloth in my glove compartment I can use for a cold compress. That helps sometimes, but I need cold water for it. It didn't totally fix the issue this time around, but I figured whatever little bit of red was left would go away on its own.

The time on my own, just going mechanically through a simple task, helped me a lot to calm down. Resettle myself, you know? A small meal and a bathroom trip didn't take enough time to pass the whole hour by, so I just took a bit of a longer roadright to the meet-up point. Commercial can get busy, especially nowadays, but it'll never be as bad as even a normal day for Production. [A.N. - My intent is to include a brief description of the Commercial District's

general appearance and way of life here]. Soon enough I was pulling up to the stretch of warehouses I was set to meet my last two clients at.

So, yeah, like I said before, only one of the clients was waiting for me there. He was one Carl Fischbach- That's important. I made sure to note that down when I had the chance. There's the registry, sure, but no. Can't trust it. I remember when David thought he was just saving himself a bit of time and wiped all the logs to replace 'em with the next day's appointments. Nothing got properly filed, and something like that in this case could've left me seriously out to dry. Not that I'd forget this client's name in the first place, but I can't just go and risk it. Cause this guy, you see, this guy was the beginning of some serious shit. Really, don't go spreading this around. Please. I'm keeping things low key while I work on a report for management. Everyone who needs to be informed will get what they need, eventually.

It had been arranged that we would meet on an out of the way corner street. I've been playing this all back in my head, looking for oddities, but I'm pretty sure this was just a matter of convenience. It's not that no one goes under, of course. You usually think of it as something that takes a permit and involves some specific line of work to be done down there, like hauling supplies or whatever. Far as I know I could've been handed a pass and told to head down through a gate, wait in the loading zone and then get going. Why bother with the bureaucracy, though, when the clients can just head up to me. Less of a headache for everybody, probably. So it was set up that he'd be standing under this huge purple neon sign. It was an icon of a dove in a circle or something. Minimalistic sort of design, more of a recognizable silhouette than a detailed depiction. I can't recall the company's name, but their sign was a pretty obvious landmark. It was easy to pick out, especially now that it was getting to be later in the day. I assume Carl had

an easy enough walk to get there, just as well. He didn't look at all tired when I pulled up. The organizers for this stuff are still keeping a careful eye on the efficiency of our operations, I suppose. Nice to finally see some portion of our city's management out there holding strong.

"Hey there," I was the first to speak this time around. It was nice to actually have a free moment, instead of having my car just barged into. I wanted to use that time to set a positive precedent for the upcoming ride. I really needed it. So I started off with that classic exchange between driver and passenger, "Are you Carl?"

"Yeah, that's me," he was dressed up in this grey jumpsuit. Didn't actually stand out as much as you might think. It fit the moderately well-muscled frame of his body pretty well, though he'd taken the liberty of rolling up his sleeves. There was a tool belt sown directly around his waist, only decoratively giving off the impression it could be removed. Definitely included for his maintenance work, but what else would you expect someone from the Lower Infrastructure to do? No, what really caught my eye was his ridiculous little backpack. Like what they make for little kids, you know. Well, it wasn't like he had something the size of a box of tissues strapped to his back, but it was clearly straining to fit over his shoulders and hold whatever he had in it at the same time. That's what drew my eye more than anything, "I really appreciate this. My sister and I hardly expected we'd get a helping hand in this."

"Where is she by the way?" I hadn't addressed it at first, sticking to pleasantries for my introduction, but Mikala wasn't there. I figured she was a bit behind, and though she hadn't shown up in the time we were talking she could still very well be on her way. That or she had yet to reveal herself for whatever reason. Either way, I couldn't be driving off with just one of my

passengers, “I’d have thought she’d be with you. Running late, perhaps? You’re my last trip for the day, so it shouldn’t be much trouble if we need to wait.”

He sat down delicately in the passenger’s seat, taking the time to carefully remove his pack and place it next himself. He was wearing this strained smile and for a few silent moments that all that was communicated between us.

“...eh,” he let out this little noise, like you’d make if you started talking without a clear idea of what to actually say. A sound that might have been the start of a word if he’d ever managed to reach the end of it, “this is embarrassing, but I guess there’s nothing else to be done at this point.”

He crossed one leg over the other. Well, I could leave it at that, but there was a bit more nuance to his body language as a whole. He was the very image of tension, in the sense that you could tell what might otherwise have been a shift into a relatively average seating position was his attempt at tightly restraining whatever nervous reaction my question had stirred up in him.

“My sister doesn’t always deal well with change,” he said, “She’s always had issues adjusting to the unfamiliar. She’s got her own personal baggage like the rest of us. I didn’t want to pressure her too much about this, but it isn’t like we really have a choice. Uh, getting to the point, I guess, I figured she’d be here anyways. Work it out on her own, or something. I guess that was my mistake.”

The poor sap had a visible bit of sweat across his brow. Now the rest of my day up to that point might have been stressful, and I think that’s putting it mildly, but I think this was my most uncomfortable moment. I had no stake in this guy. Even if he’d given me reason enough to take an interest in him in the first five seconds of our meeting I don’t think I’d have been in the mood

for another “in-depth” conversation after the last two clients. Yet there I was with this man who was virtually on the brink of collapse in my cab. The first sign of trouble comes and he’s nearly down and out right there. I’m sure even you’re picking up on how unusual that sounds. So naturally I had to assume this wasn’t actually the first straw. I wasn’t the only one out there having a bad day.

“Don’t stress yourself too much,” I tried to be reassuring, “All we’ve really got left to do here is decide how we’re going forward. I can wait a bit if you think she’ll have a change of heart, but it might be prudent just to get going.”

No one takes a cab out to the Agricultural District for a day trip. I said it before, didn’t I? This was an official transfer, odd as it was who was being transferred and how a cab was being used to carry the transfer out, and you don’t want to skip out on a transfer. Nothing good comes from flouting that kinda decree, whatever leads to it. I left it at that, though. You don’t need a guy’s life story to try and be comforting. Beyond my own feelings, it just would have been rude to pry at that point.

“Gosh, I couldn’t, I just couldn’t though,” He was surprisingly resolute in that instant, if still somewhat faint voiced, “I’d have to be trash to just leave her behind like that.”

“If she’s choosing not to show up there isn’t really much we can do about it,” I said, “It’s unfortunate, for sure, but I can’t give a ride to someone who isn’t here.”

“Well... let’s wait for a while, at least,” he said.

We sat there in silence for, I’d say, about twenty minutes. I wasn’t keeping much track of the time to be honest. Wasn’t really keeping track of much of anything aside from the sidewalk. We were stuck in a bit of an uncomfortable position between each other. I didn’t really know



when it would be appropriate to end this vacuum of a moment and Carl was off to the side of his seat with his chin in his palm, thinking who knows what. Until, that is, he finally chose to make his thoughts known.

“I have an idea,” his voice was, in retrospect, distinctly less wavering than it had been previously, “I understand this might be a bit unorthodox on your part, but it really shouldn’t prove much of an issue.”

“Alright, what do you mean pal,” I probably came across as somewhat irritated. It wasn’t my intent. All these extended back and forth discussions had become a bit tiring, “Just come out with it.”

“Of course,” He said, “I think we should take a short detour. The access point isn’t that far away. We could go down and get her.”

“What?” I said.

“She can’t just hide herself if we’re right there in front of her,” he said, “It’s easier to deal with her using direct confrontation.”

“No, no, hold your horses buddy,” I said, “Underground is off limits for all taxi services. I don’t have any business driving off the main roads. I’m either leaving with you or without you at this point.”

“Please,” there didn’t seem to be a hint of hesitation in his voice, despite my own words, “I know I have no right to ask this, but I can’t leave her behind. It’s not possible for either of us to stay here anymore.”

I wasn’t about to be swayed by any platitude regarding family or belonging, but it was still hard to try and shut the guy down. I think it was something about the quality of his voice. I

don't want to just say it was something like his tone or whatever, but there was a definite air of purpose to his pleading. No words seemed to make themselves apparent for me to express on the matter and so I kept silent until he continued to speak.

“It's not actually even that hard to get a vehicle down into the infrastructure,” He kept a steady pace, same as before, but a subtle increase in the rate of his speech could be detected. It was the kind of gradual change that only becomes apparent in retrospect, “Maybe not any vehicle, but we're only really excluding the biggest trucks if we want to get that technical. The access point has to be wide for the trucks they have to bring us supplies, so a cab would fit easy. It'd be absolutely nothing.”

Obviously, I was still listening at this point. I don't exactly have to point that detail out, but I have to imagine you're wondering why this was the case. It's not like there was anything I was waiting to hear that should actually convince me. The extra details shouldn't have meant anything.

“No one would mind. I can assure you no one would mind. What do any of us care if an extra car stops by the supply drop off on a day it's not even in use. No one will even be there to care, if you want to imagine they'd be so inclined. It would take a lot more than this to catch the attention of anyone with any authority. It's the cold truth. We manage ourselves for the most part down there,” His words had less of a polish to them as he went on. Hmm, how to explain it... I mean that his words were sort of- well, not rougher. He hadn't gone back to wavering either. He had that same, oh so suddenly tight control of his speech, but it felt more and more brittle as he went on. Like a metal pipe, let's say, refusing to bend but near to rupturing open at the flowing force of its own hidden inner contents. His words were controlled, but felt similarly weak in

regard to what that control was barely holding back. It was with a sudden feeling of clarity that I became sure I was looking into a deep and persistent well of stress behind Carl's eyes; at someone whose day must have felt much like my own, "Please."

It's important I clarify something before going any farther. You aren't stupid; you haven't forgotten the start of this little tale like some half-formed, senseless dream. We both know I took this guy down there. Furthermore, we both know it went wrong and now finally we're plenty able to see there was no good reason to bother taking the risk in the first place. I'm sure you've got your crosshairs aimed to place the blame for all this squarely on the shoulders of my emotional vulnerability. Oh look, you'll say, here's a fellow who's let a bit of sentimental thinking get in the way of his good judgement. He broke the rules for a simple stranger he perceived as a kindred soul. How unfortunate for him. Well, you can keep that shitty slander to yourself.

I can't deny I made a mistake here, but I can defend my ability as a cab driver- no, as a servant of the public! It is ridiculous, utterly ridiculous, to imply that my actions here were some sort of indirect means to my own selfish comfort. I think it ought to be quite obvious I could never take comfort in a crime, however "minor." There's something out there that's just as important to our society as adherence to law. You can't make anything of yourself without a passion for the system itself. A drive to work to the best of your ability as it is so determined, to improve yourself and realize that potential. To know that just as you fulfill your role in service to the functioning of the great machine that is this city, so too do those systems support you. Authority maintains strict structure for all our benefit, except apparently that hasn't quite been the case lately. The structure of our lives is not being maintained to the fullest extent.

I saw a recognition of this in Carl's pitiful begging. I saw a citizen being hurt by the abandonment of authority, living in a place where no one would be "so inclined" to care for the rules or their wellbeing. I didn't know why he was leaving, what trouble he may have caused or people he upset, but the fact of his departure seemed righteous in spite of any such possibility the more I considered it. A good citizen in a good environment would surely prove to be better than any past circumstances might imply, and taking that chance away from someone would be antithetical to any proper sense of moral action. Letting some lady, relative or not drag someone back down into impropriety would be the same as contributing to the degradation we're seeing around us myself. I've got reason to be better than that, don't I apparently? My actions were motivated only by this desire to be of definite benefit to the public good, and I deserve to have that fact be understood. I had reason to believe I could make things better.

You can stop, please. I said I don't need the commentary. Just listen.

"Alright. We'll make a quick trip down then and see what's going on your sister," I said it, and that was that.

"Really- great! That's great," there was an immediate change in his demeanor as he said that. Aside from the expected relief he also seemed to maintain an odd focus on my own expression. You'd expect such from somebody working at getting something out of someone else, but not from someone who's already gotten it. I couldn't find a ready reason for that look he kept fixed on me, "Just follow my lead then and I'm sure we'll be fine."

It was exactly at that moment I caught a hint of something fishy going on. Well, alright, I won't overstate things. It's probably the moment I would've caught onto something if there'd been any way for me to know I should be trying to catch onto anything. Sure, I was thinking

about suspicious goings-ons, but that's macro-scale. Do you get me? The only way I was thinking about myself was still in terms of the bigger picture. Something like, "If I'm at risk then what is it about my position in this city that puts me at risk," or "If I'm suspicious then what does that imply about the systems I interact with." My own identity was just an abstract generalization in the equation at that point. Could've slotted anyone else into my considerations if they had a similar enough job or personality. I was looking at myself as a part of some not yet fully determined "kind," rather than as an individual, and I'm not even saying I was wrong in that regard. I couldn't very well have predicted my own future circumstances, even if I could have stood to rein myself in in that present moment. Well, then again, and really I don't mean to harp on this, I think I've made my point- alright, alright, no, starting again from the beginning. Got a bit tangled up there. Like I've said, I could've taken in the signs and expected worse to come, but- well, I digress. I've made this point already. I can take a hint. You get my feelings at this point, right?

So I'm going off the set schedule at a client's behest and I'd only just started forming this vague and undefined suspicion in regard to him. I had all this new context for my last job of the night brewing in the back of my head, heavily felt, yet unprocessed. Rather than just pause my life for a moment to take stock of things, I'd turned my mind aside from the anxiety of rule breaking and shifted into a purely professional mindset. My goal may have changed somewhat from parameters of the official assignment, but I'd approach it with as much dedication as any other job while I remained committed to seeing it through. Really, I think that was the only option that would have seemed reasonable to anyone at the time.

We proceeded toward the access point Carl had earlier emerged from. It only took us a few odd turns through an alley or two onto an older, out of the way road before we approached the opening to the Lower Infrastructure. Well worn pavement gave way sharply to a steep descending ramp into a raised square hatch, as one might see on a smaller scale serving as the entrance to a basement or cellar. The grey metal doors, marked by lines of interlocking panels and a history of scuffs and scratches inherent only to something truly old, appeared to open and close by means of motorized industrial mechanisms. The considerable width of the entrance Carl had impressed upon me was not much of an exaggeration. The confining walls of the access gate were only barely bounded by the size of the road and the surrounding buildings. A smaller, person-sized doorway was built off to the side of those walls, narrowly shoved into what little sidewalk space remained, though oddly enough it appeared to be padlocked shut while the vehicle entrance was left wide open. With no time or inclination to ponder that oddity, we passed through the gate and into the underground.

We were enclosed entirely by concrete on our every side as we descended, until eventually the road leveled out beneath us and we entered into a larger room. This new open space seemed to be a kind of circular hub; the road continued further through an opening in front of us, but many other paths accessible by foot were lined up across the wall on a raised platform which hugged the contours of the room. Actually thinking about it now, I imagine those platforms served to assist anyone unloading supplies from the raised bed of a truck. The space was rather untidy, with a variety of odd stains and random detritus marking the floor. Panels hung open on the walls, revealing messes of wires some of which were extending out from their

exposed ports and into a few of the available tunnels. Embedded bulbs in the walls provided us with dull fluorescent light.

“Stop here,” Carl said, “Can’t get any closer to her driving at this point.”

He opened his car door and began moving with a clear purpose toward an open passage on our left side. Rather than divert his path slightly to take the small stairway leading up to the platform, he simply lifted himself upward onto it from the ground in a practiced motion. Before stopping to consider anything I found myself trailing behind him. Though I took the stairs, of course.

“Oh- alright. Yes, I suppose you should come. If I can’t get her at least to out here, your presence would essentially be moot, wouldn’t it?” he said, also apparently surprised by my sudden initiative in our endeavor.

The material which made up the passageway we’d started traversing was fairly mismatched. At a base level the structure was supported by yet more concrete, as well as the occasional transition into metal walls and struts or even plain compacted earth. On top of that were openings of all sorts; the occasional split in the tunnel’s path, an actual door now and again, an open panel exposing buttons or wires or whatever, dark vents gushing out air, etcetera. Half the time it felt more like we were walking through the inside of a junk pile rather than a coherent underground structure. The path would twist at odd intervals, staying straight only for momentary stretches of time, and was littered with the likes of old rusting electrical cabinets, trolley carts filled with discarded tools and trash, and sprawling networks of pipes both functional and discarded in the occasional corner. Our first drastic change of direction came when we stopped in front of an open section of a metallic. Rather than opening by any intended

means, this section of wall seemed to have almost been peeled back. It was bent up against its own side, folded in two much like one might fold a piece of paper, and possessed an obvious melted edge to where it would have once connected soundly with the rest of itself. I could only assume that at one time in the past someone had seen fit to take a blowtorch to the erstwhile partition and not to repair it afterward. Beyond the uncovered opening was a huge tangle of thick electric cords, tied up together in bundles about the size of an average bucket's circumference. From within that drooping forest of plastic one could see the occasional glint of a metal pole acting as structural support for the monstrous amount of cable.

“Alright, watch your step,” Carl said as he gripped a low hanging pole and began to lower himself into the gaping, hazardous opening.

Much as I hadn't really commented in the moment on what I was seeing around me, this too elicited not much more than a shocked expression running across my face. Internally, however, I was holding off a total paralysis of myself only by sheer dint of the amount of things to take in and process around me.

“Don't get left too far behind. You wouldn't want to get caught in this stuff without me around,” His climbing pace was slower, but he didn't stop to deliver that piece of advice. Propelled by whatever force it was keeping me in his wake, the prompt successfully managed to start me on my own descent. With shaky hands I took hold of the same pole Carl had first clung to, “just don't tug too hard against the cables and you'll be fine. This shit is the definition of sturdy.”

Our descent was distinctly unpleasant. I can still remember the feeling of all those cables pressing in around me, swaying to the sound of real or imagined sparking. Rather than focus on



it I finally set myself to considering my situation. The Lower infrastructure did not meet up to even the worst of my expectations. I can't say I ever dedicated any large portion of my imagination to guessing at its appearance, but I think I at least expected the place to be clean and well maintained. That was the very purpose of the district's population, was it not? To maintain the infrastructure supporting the city above. It took me a moment to convince myself that this was indeed the state of the system responsible for much of the surface's technological necessities and conveniences, rather than the product of some freak accident which had somehow destroyed the facilities and rendered the system's above dead and inoperable as Carl and I first descended by car. And that such desolated conditions could be paired with nary a sign of any other living human was equally incomprehensible to me. Was this just the way things were left to be around here? My assumption as to the district's lack of adequate oversight by a proper authority seemed rapidly all the more plausible.

Of course, it should just so happen that as we exited our downward climb we came face to face with the first other resident of the Lower Infrastructure I'd seen. As I emerged from an open vent in the ceiling of a new hall, my feet finding purchase on a raised stepladder, I became audibly aware of the tones of a heated argument occurring below me and some way forward. As I finally set foot on the ground again, I saw Carl and an unknown man of similar dress now glaring holes into one another in tense silence. I jogged forward, back into the presence of Carl and into some new confrontation.

"Didn't you say nobody would care about us being down here?" I quite justifiably asked in a hushed tone, fearful of reigniting a debate I had no current understanding of. The potential

inaccuracy of Carl's assurances was my first thought as to why someone might be upset at our presence.

"I'm fairly sure I said 'for the most part,'" he returned with a harsh whisper.

[A.N. - This is the beginning of the Gap in Carl and Mikala's section. It's probably the biggest gap and is in one of the more important sections of the story, so multiple author's notes may appear to explain things here. My intent for this section was to have there be obvious tension between Carl and other residents of the underground, for reasons Joe is only vaguely able to pick up on. This uncertainty begins to turn Joe's suspicions towards Carl and Mikala as potential participants in the conspiracy he still knows so little of. While Carl retrieves Mikala, Joe tries and fails to send a message to Ashley through an underground computer terminal. As they exit the underground they are approached with hostile intent by a group of residents who attempt to close the access gate on them, only for Joe to speed up, knocking one assailant to the side, and burst through the almost shut gateway. This damages the gate, the car, and fuels Joe's guilt at potentially assisting traitors.]

The man ---.

"---," (man)

...

She --- with an aggressive --- which had totally blindsided me. Her ---. ---.

...

---. So as it turned out, I'd been temporarily left to my own devices in the middle of that dripping, ---, almost a corridor. ---. Not much to focus on, that is, but the --- screen ---.

...

“What the fuck are you doing!” I could hear the --- of the ---’s rant continue on, but any further words escaped my comprehension as we sped ---.

---

I didn’t though. I just kept driving forward as ---.

...

I don’t know. I didn’t ask. (endline)

}---{

(Carl and Mikala Journey Out.)

[A.N. - Here I intend to detail the actual drive in which Joe takes Carl and Mikala to the Agricultural District. This section would be built around dialogue wherein Joe tries to subtly probe Carl and Mikala for answers and interpret the conversations between the two siblings to a similar end. Perhaps Joe would also take note of the scenery outside the city, giving us a chance to explore implications about the greater world outside.]

We ---.

...

I might not be out there very often, but I knew a thing or two more about the Agricultural District than I did at all about the Lower Infrastructure. It was it’s own sort of --- world, alien to our --- way of life. ---.

}---{

(Return to Arch Street.)

[A.N. - Here I intend to detail Joe’s drive aone back to the city. It would be mainly focused on an internal dialogue wherein Joe tries to work out a conclusion for himself in regard

to his suspicion of Carl and Mikala.. He will also attempt to self-examine his own motivations in regard to what he has done today.]

---

I spent the drive back alone, of course. I only point it out because it was a pronounced sort of loneliness. I'd spent the day ferrying around people I'm certain I'd have been happier to never have met in the end, yet their final absence left me ---.

---

So I still had this thought, see? Or maybe that's a bit reductive. I wanted to tell someone about my suspicions. If ---, then ---. Sure. That's fine. All that would take was a little trip back here; finish off my route and file a report like usual. Even if this time it'd be a different sort of report. I've said it already, I'm still planning on doing that, but of course I didn't. Did you pick up on that? I got back here too late to have immediately gone with that. You see, I wanted Ashley to know about my suspicions. That's stupid, isn't it? Yeah, cool your jets, I agree. It was a rhetorical question. That's exactly the issue at hand here. I'm asking you a dumb question with an obvious answer and back then I was still asking myself the same thing. Sitting around in my car letting that question stir itself up without giving it any answer. Keeping it hung over my head. Thinking about it over and over.

It wasn't because I thought she was any authority. She said she wasn't and I didn't have a reason to think otherwise. Wouldn't be much need to single her out if I thought the proper channels would get word to her eventually. Not that I had much chance of reaching her anyways. Let's not pretend we haven't already gone over why that isn't happening. It's not even her as a person that's the issue. Maybe as a relevant individual. An involved voice? Fuck, I don't care,

she's whatever, whatever you want to call it, it doesn't matter. She's stuck in my life, in that moment of it. Her words, her judgement, her foretelling of danger. A sign, a sign, the biggest sign I'd gotten all day. Wasted. Failed. I'm not living up to the standards I set for myself. Do you get me? I know my place and I work to the best of my ability in that capacity. I don't just keep up, I improve. Cause you see, what I wanted, it was to prove myself. It is to prove myself. I am a man of worth. I am fit to work, to --, to

. I am not a problem, knowingly or otherwise. I am the farthest thing from a negative contributor. Any insinuation otherwise should not be left hanging in the air.

I ---.

---

I think it was about then that I remembered something Daniel said to me on our ride. So sorry if I didn't get to mentioning it before. It was something like: ---.

"---," he ---.

---

[A.N. - This marks the ending of the gap in Carl and Mikala's section of the story.]

I pulled back into Arch Street at a slow glide. It was already late by then. The sun was setting, or maybe it was just past setting. There wasn't any clear view of the horizon at the base of those tall, city center buildings, naturally, but you could just about see that last remnants of the sunset's orange aura peaking over the rooftops and reflected in the clouds. Have you ever been out at that time of night? Ah, what am I talking about, of course you have. You're always up working this late, after all. My bad. I hope you take every chance you get to appreciate it. Everythings got such a different -cast- to it in those last moments of the day. There's this all

encompassing shade, like a shadow the world's casting over itself. Nothing save for the tucked away corners of curbsides and alleys are yet caught within the pitch black of night. Things are dark, but that ever present shade is tinted with that faint bit of remaining light. It's a strange canvas for every other artificial glow to be set; the thin luminescent blue pouring out from the windows, the gradually brightening lamplight coming off the sidewalks, and for a brief moment the suddenly overpowering flash of my own headlights. I had to turn those off pretty quickly. Taking in all those contrasting beams of light, each distinct hue overlapping one another as they cross, forming even more shades, was something of a trying effort for the eyes. I might even say it was a bit painful, actually. Hard to even focus the eyes in those conditions. That's fair though, isn't it? You're supposed to pay a price for the good things in life. When you step off the beaten path, outside the regular system of life, isn't it comforting to still be able to feel it? That pain. It was a breathtaking sight.

My slow pace came down to a crawl and finally a dead stop underneath the single unlit streetlamp. I hadn't noticed it at first, or maybe I'd have just rather continued to ignore it. Looking up from out my car side window I couldn't quite make out anything wrong with it. It didn't seem cracked or burnt out, but at the same time there was little light actually hitting the overhanging bulb itself. I might as well have been staring up at a dark patch of sky. So who knows what was going on with that. It's one of those little things I don't think I'd have been able to stand earlier in the day, but I'd kind of hit my limit in that regard. Not much more room for annoyance or confusion up top, you get me? So I came to a stop right under that big patch of nothing, no sign of anything, no explanation, painted over with all the other lights washing

across the ground, washing out any sign that something is actually missing, and somehow it felt very fitting in the moment.

I was right next to her building, by the way. Ashley's workplace, I mean. What else is there to say about it. It doesn't stand out much on its own, naturally, cause it's just a little piece of the Arch Street big picture. I stepped outside my car to get a better look. Well, I would have, but I sorta nicked myself on that gouge the cab got underground. That monopolized my attention for the moment, first in tending to my little injury. It was a small scratch, but enough to draw some blood. I wiped at it with a spare cloth from my glove compartment. Well, spare for mishaps with my eyes, but circumstances are what they are. That's kind of the point of having extrain the first place. Anyways, I was looking to be stuck with a sharp red line across my palm until it took a few days to heal. Look, I still got it. I mean, of course I do. This was like an [A.N. - the last instance of a specific time I didn't decide on] ago. It's not like it had the courtesy to go away. Then, of course, I was drawn to the damage to the car itself. It wasn't good. Far from it in fact. I think I was lucky the thing still ran. There was a huge gouge across its front and running from there down its left side. Somehow I'd failed to notice it, but the left headlight had been smashed to unusable bits. The shifting of external mechanisms could be spotted through the sheared exterior and the whole front of the car seemed to have subtly wrinkled as if in preparation to be totally smashed flat. You know, in retrospect, isn't it quite odd that I hadn't really stopped to take that in until then? It doesn't seem like something I'd have disregarded for so long. I don't mean in this sense I didn't pay any attention at all to it. That doesn't really make much sense in light of it already being a part of this whole tale, does it Peter? What I'm wondering is why the significant moment of my taking in this damage was happening underneath that god awful

broken street lamp, out where there was nothing to even be done about it. In the sense of proper conduct, on a personal level if not a professional one. Wouldn't I have addressed fully, really taken stock of it, when I next stopped out in Agriculture? No, honestly, it would have made sense to park the cab and check it out after driving far enough away from the access... or I suppose it would have at least been normal to assess things once I returned here. In a professional setting. That sounds better. No? I dunno. I don't think I'm feeling what you're getting at here. Yeah, I've just lost something entirely here. Track of something. Forget it. I'll make a better effort to figure out what happened later.

So, moving on, I suppose, there wasn't much left to do but knock on the door. No, I haven't skipped anything. It was there, wasn't it? And I was standing right there in front of it. That was enough. We're talking about a clear goal. A straightforward path. It was right in front of me and I was there. Come on. Do you ever just get overcome by certainty? I see no reason to deny the obvious. Every light was off in the windows of her building. I knew she wasn't even there. What am I getting at? Think Peter. Just think. I don't know, could you just, for one moment! Please! Stop with that, just stop. I bothered nobody. There was no possibility of me bothering anyone. No. No, what did you think I meant? I meant the door. The car door. That's what I was knocking on. It hurt. Me. The cut, I mean. Just a muted coping mechanism for some frustration, that's all. Look, I... I... Jeez. Quiet for a second. I worked myself up to much or something. I'm kinda woozy all of a sudden. I need to make sense of this. I need to make sense of this but I can't focus. Ugh, I need to figure out what happened... No. No. That doesn't really make much sense, does it Joe?



God, what am I even talking about anymore. Sorry, my articulation of events has clearly taken something of a dip in quality. Hmmm? What the hell was I even doing there? Very fair point? I suppose I haven't said anything straight about that yet. Well, I suppose I... shouldn't have been. No assignments, after all. I'm not dodging the question. Look, maybe your own answers are better here. I can see it in your eyes. You've already made a few decisions in regard to me. Stick with those, what do I care at this point. Clearly I've got some thoughts that need untangling before I get into it with anyone else over them. Really, it's a fine question. Why the hell was I back there?

You're rather fond of hostile speculation aren't you? I thought we'd work out something here between us. A bit of an understanding, despite everything. We've had a few quarrels during this little discussion of ours, but really, you're just going to go and label me a hypocrite right here at the end. That's right, I'm basically done. I don't really have anything left to say, but I'd have hoped what I have said would be enough to prove I'm no intruder. I flaunt no disregard for the system or my place in it. I care about the rules. There's nuance to these circumstances. Perhaps I haven't done enough to explain my part in that nuance. Perhaps, in fact, I've failed utterly in that, given your reaction. I'll concede that. So I guess, with that said, I'm not entirely sure how to proceed. Hey, don't you leave just yet! Now look, if there's anything I'm a hypocrite for it's this. All this. This whole fucking story. The only place it needs to be told is in my report, but here I am spending all this time giving it to you. Trying to justify myself. Do you understand? I would really appreciate some courtesy here. A little understanding and some courtesy.

I'm not prepared to lose what I've got.

You get me, right? You understand?

[A.N. - This is the current end, though I'd originally intended a series of reports regarding the events of the story to follow this. The first of these would have been Joe's own aforementioned report, given in a far briefer format with a distinctly different voice. However, I judged these sections not complete enough for inclusion here, even in this incomplete draft.]