

Last Stop at Imagination Station

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Contents

1. Stage Right and Stage Wrongs (Strabo)	1
2. The Life of Pie (Strabo)	10
3. Directionless Directors, Pies & Pints (Strabo)	16
4. Signs of the Time (Strabo)	34
5. A Bridge Too Fur (Brick)	38
6. Antsy (Strabo)	40
7. Bad Habits, Bad Hare & Bad Luck (Brick)	48
8. Bud & The Bums (Brick)	58

9. Partners (Brick)	70
10. Stabbo (Strabo)	77
11. Just A Tad Annoying (Brick)	79
12. Dressing Down in the Dressing Room (Iggy)	101
13. Phase Two (Strabo)	114
14. McFeely (Brick)	120
15. Improv and Invade (Brick)	132
16. Sniggles got Snuffed ('Tad)	141
17. The Show Must Go On (Brick)	145
18. Robby is Strung Out ('Tad)	151
19. Stabbo Part 2 (Strabo)	162
20. Blood of the Just ('Tad)	165
21. Who's the Dummy now? (Brick)	171
22. The Last Straw at Imagination Station (Brick)	187
23. Puppet Master of the Master Puppet Race ('Tad)	195

24. Fuzzy Fuzz	219
25. Second String	222

Stage Right and Stage Wrongs (Strabo)

A AaaaaaAAAaAahhhhaHHHHHHHH-
HHHH!!

The screams of one hundred and fifty happy children filled the air as the curtains parted and the large **APPLAUSE** sign lit up with a surge of electricity.

YaaaaAAahhhhaAAAHhhhhh!

The children continue to scream incomprehensibly as their excitement threatens to overwhelm

their young and stupid human minds. My smile spreads across my face until it's large enough to stretch my seams.

"Hello boys and girls! I'm Strabo Bellyhands!" My words set off another raucous wave of joyous screams and applause. Beside me, dressed as always in his crisp blue overalls, red kerchief, and conductor hat, was Jean. Ugh...*Jean*.

"And I'm the *Fun*-ductor around here, Conductor Jean! Welcome to Imagination Station!" The applause was deafening in the closed space of the GBS studio. It seemed like it gets louder every week, as if the volume rose in accordance with the ratings. I stepped forward, ready to continue my introduction of the show. "We've got an amazing show lined up for you today," I said, "as well as a *very* special guest." I felt a light breeze ruffle the felt on my face, the excitement in the room was palpable. Then, just when I had the entire room eating from the palm of my hand, Jean blurted

out, “It’s Santa! Can you believe it? We got Santa today!”

I froze, Jean’s unscripted outburst had caught me completely off-guard. I stared ahead a moment, the red light of the camera was as unblinking as my single eye, recording my hesitation for posterity. A throat was angrily and pointedly cleared. My eye met those of the director; the malice in them was enough to get me back on track.

“Err, yeah..that’s right. Santa is the *surprise* guest today, Jean.” If I had teeth I would have said his name through gritted ones. He gave me a sheepish look, but I knew that it was only a play for the cameras. He *knew* what he was doing, and that glory-hog was doing it more and more often these days. Beneath that sheepish look, I swear I saw the stirrings of a smirk.

“I’m sorry Strabo. It’s just, well, I’m just so gosh darned excited! It makes me want to dance!” The multitude of children laughed and cheered as Jean busted out a little jig while I resisted the urge to

roll my eye. I chose to power through instead, getting back to the scripted portion of the show.

“Yes indeed, Conductor Jean. It’s going to be a great Christmas in July special. Why, I don’t think that there’s a single person here who doesn’t like Christmas.” An awkward pause was punctuated by the expectant silence of the crowd. When nothing happened, I repeated my line, this time louder. “I said, I don’t think there’s a single person here who doesn’t like Christmas!” When nothing happened once more, I smiled and took a step back. I stuck my head behind the bundled curtain and I immediately peeped the problem. And, as usual, the problem was drugs.

Iggy Sniggles, as always, had finely granulated white flecks embedded in the white fur of his face. His buggy eyes were wider and more convex than usual, the sure sign of a bender. His plush fingers squeezed the bridge of an invisible nose as he acclimated to his head rush. Next to him, sniffing and wiping at own his nose while simultaneously

sipping from a crushed beer can, was one of our idiot human coworkers, Robert. He was known more popularly as ‘Robby the Robber’ and he was a thief both on and off of the screen. Right now though, the main thing he was robbing us of was usable airtime.

“*Psssst*. Hey! Moron! That was your cue!”

My words finally seemed to register as Robby’s bloodshot eyes cleared a little and he had the wherewithal to toss his empty can on the ground next to the others. “Son of a -” Robby stumbled out from stage right, his drunken stumble getting laughs from the children who assumed his wavy way of walking was for comedic purposes. Once he hit center stage, he threw his head back and let out a maniacal laugh.

“Mwah ha ha ha! AAAAAH haw ha haw!” His laugh ended with a cough and a sniff. Conductor Jean and I held each other close and let our mouths droop open with feigned surprise and horror.

“Oh no! It’s Robby the Robber,” we shouted in perfect practiced unison.

Another peal of drunken evil laughter filled the sound stage. “Oooh yeah, that’s right! It is I, Robby the Robber! The clown who hates Christmas! And I’ve come to steal all of your holiday cheer!” Robby let loose another barrage of laughter, this time punctuated by a coughing fit which ended with him spitting on the floor. Jean and I nervously eyed each other but we pressed on.

“Our cheer? Oh no, not our cheer!” Conductor Jean grabbed the sides of his head as if he couldn’t believe this most recent development. Taking his cue, I pinched my eye shut and looked down, downtrodden. “Why, Robby?” I asked him. “Why are you doing this to us?”

After another cough, sniff and spit, Robby cleared his throat and declared, “Because I think that Christmas is stupid!” Robby laughs again and turned his body slightly away from the audience, pulling out a small flask and taking a quick

pull from it. The cameraman did his best to alter his shot to hide this, but I could already tell this episode was going to be a nightmare with the department of standards and practices. Thank god for ten second delays at least.

I inwardly sighed and then turned my attention to Conductor Jean. "Well, maybe our special guest today can help with -"

"AND ANOTHER THING!" Robby interrupted, losing volume control in his inebriated state. "I think that elves are creepy. I mean..little people..*blargh!*" Scattered laughter in the audience did nothing to divert the dread that was forming in my stomach.

"Um...okay," I said, trying to keep my nerves from entering my voice. "Well Robby, I think that maybe our special guest today will be able to ch-"

"And flying reindeers? I mean, *come on*, how? Did a bunch of birds plow a herd of deer or something?" Murmurs from the adults in the audience began to shift the mood in the room.

Without meaning to, I let out a small nervous chuckle. "I don't think that's what happened, Robby, we probably would have heard about that on the traffic report." I made eye contact with Jean, who looked as apprehensive as I did. For once we were actually on the same page.

"Birds and deers? Phooey!" Robby started to waver on his feet, his long clown shoes no longer doing anything for his balance. "That's why I think that races don't mix!" As the parents in attendance began to shift uncomfortably in their seats, Jean ran over and grabbed Robby by the upper arm. "Alright Robby, I think that's enough." Robby shook free from his grasp and, in the process, dropped his flask, which clanged loudly on the floor.

"And another thing! If you think that Jesus Christ and a bunch of stinking shepherds -" The curtains began to whoosh closed as quickly as could be managed. A loud, shrill beep overpowered the sound in the room as we cut the cameras

and threw up a message on the overhead screens telling our audience that we were experiencing some technical difficulties.

The Life of Pie (Strabo)

Behind the curtains we quickly and quietly restrained Robby, forcing him into a custodial closet until he calmed down and sobered up. Stagehands spread across the set like ants at a picnic, wheeling away the first scene and replacing it with the next. I saw them wheel in a large, metallic desk that was covered in beakers and Bunsen burners and all sorts of nonsensical tubes full of colorful liquids. I asked the director if we were jumping ahead to the science segment. He glowered at me and sarcastically asked me what

I thought the beakers were for. I *hate* working for humans.

Quickly, the science lab was set up and the curtains began to part once more. I rushed to stand on my mark. A few seconds later, Jean joined me, a mischievous gleam in his eyes. Before I could question him on why, the **APPLAUSE** sign lit up and we were welcomed back by the live crowd. The kids were as enthusiastic as ever. The parents seemed a bit more, shall we say, *apprehensive* this time around.

I smiled my biggest smile, the foam at the edges of my mouth crinkled from the effort.

“Sorry about that kids. We had to take a quick break but we’re back now. Yay!” Jean accentuated his words with another goofy dance. Kids laughed. Their minds really are that simple.

“That’s right, Conductor Jean! While we wait for Santa to fly in, it’s time for Strabo’s Sixty Second Science! Today we’re going to make -”

“Science?” Jean’s short and simple question was not only unscripted, but so out of left field that I was legitimately taken aback.

“Umm, yes, science. Like I *just* said. This is an educational show after all, right?” I forced a light-hearted chuckle and winked at the audience before continuing, although they may have thought it was just a regular blink. “So today we’re going to ma-”

“Educational?” Another one word question parroted back to me. Another interruption. I was more than confused now; I was getting downright irritated.

“Yes, *educational*.” If there was any blood rushing through my foam, my cheeks would have turned from blue to vermillion.

“So, if we’re an educational show, does that mean that it’s time to teach somebody a lesson?”

“Yes Conductor Jean, it’s time to teach *all* of our viewers a lesson. If you would stop interrupting, we’re going to show them how to make

salt crystals. Isn't that cool? You can even hang them on your tree as icicle ornaments!" Since Jean had nothing useless to repeat back this time, I walked behind the hollow-backed desk and began to pull out the necessary supplies. "So all we need is some water, some ordinary table salt, a straw, some string and a glass ja-"

"Salt crystals, eh? That sounds hard. Is there any math involved?"

I fumbled the mason jar out of frustration but I caught it before it broke. I shot Jean a death glare. "No, there's no math. It's a simple experiment. What you do first is -"

"No math? None at all? Are you sure?"

I angrily slammed the jar down, making all the glassware and gizmos on the desktop jump. "No!" I shouted. "No math. This is Sixty Second *Science*, okay? *Science*, not freaking trigonometry! Alright? We good? Can I continue now?" I focused my eye straight ahead on the audience, while also avoid-

ing eye contact with Jean. I didn't think that I could hide my disgust with him at that moment.

"Just one more question," Jean said, his tone drawn out and sneaky. "If there's no math, does that mean that we won't be using...*pie*?" If I had peripheral vision, I would have seen Jean pull out a big cherry pie from behind his back, put a finger to his lips and wag his eyebrows at the camera.

I strummed my fabric fingers on the desktop, trying not to lose my temper. "No, we will not be using pi. We're using salt, water and string. It's so simple that even *you* could do it. Can we focus now?"

"And you are absolutely, positively, one hundred percent sure that we won't be using pie?"

Enraged, I spun towards Jean, shouting, "I am one *thousand* percent sure that -" The rest of my tirade was cut short by crust, cream and cherries splattering my face and obliterating my sight. I heard ear-splitting laughter and sensed more than saw Jean do another one of his stupid jigs.

I turned to where I assumed the camera was and, through clenched foam lips, spit out pie and the words, “This has been Strabo’s Sixty Second Science. We’ll be right back after these messages.”

Directionless Directors, Pies & Pints (Strabo)

The show had mercifully ended and the audience was sent back out into the real world. Backstage, as I wandered the halls hoping to catch our director for a minute, I passed a small changing room with the door cracked open. Inside, I saw Iggy sprawled out on the floor, using a rolled up show flyer to snort some crushed powder. After his eyes uncrossed, he noticed me

watching him from the hallway and he gave me a twitchy wave of his fluffy fingers.

“Great show today buddy!” Iggy said, wiping the spot where his nose would be.

“Did you even watch it? The whole thing was a hypnagogic hallucination.”

Iggy’s eyes crossed again, this time from trying to get his feeble brain to work. “A hypno what-now?”

I sighed. “A waking nightmare.” Iggy seemed to consider my words before sneezing into his hands like an animal. He inspected his hands for anything that may have come flying out before shrugging up at me and saying, “Geez, I didn’t think that it was *that* bad.”

“That’s because you’re a drug-addled boob,” I muttered under my breath, slamming the door closed on his shameful display. I wandered the halls a while longer before I was able to locate Steve, the director of our show. He was standing by catering, holding a styrofoam cup, and

yelling at some poor schmuck who was holding a clipboard. I knew from experience that there was more schnapps than coffee in that cup. When he was finally done yelling, I followed him at a distance as he sauntered back over to his directors chair and plopped himself down in a huff. He whipped out his phone and was already halfway through firing off a text message when I approached him. He glanced up at me, sighed, then went back to texting.

“Hey Steve, can we talk about the show for a minute?” He went on texting as if I hadn’t spoken. When he finished up his message, paused, then started writing another one, I repeated myself. “Steve, come on, can we talk about this?”

Steve sighed. It was long and deflating, like a balloon with a slow leak. “What’s there to say about it? It was a debacle, per usual.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk about. I know that there was a lot of nonsense today but -” He snorted, cutting me off.

“Nonsense? Yeah, you can say that again.” He went back to texting. I let him finish and then pressed forward.

“What irks me the most though, and this should concern you as a *director* as well,” I said, pausing to let my emphasis sink in, “is the way that Jean gets to hijack all of my segments for his hijinks.”

Steve sighed again and raised his eyes to meet mine. “Hijacked for his hijinks? I know that you’re a puppet but come on, you don’t have to speak to me in alliteration.”

I balled my fists tightly, thankful I didn’t have nails or they’d be digging like hell into my palms. “I’m not *just* a puppet, you know. I’m also a Harvard graduate and, apparently, I’m the only one around here who is actually trying to make a good show.” Steve sighed again. He sighed so often when we spoke that I wondered if he was getting enough oxygen to his brain. Finally, he put his phone away and said:

“Okay Mr. College, you have my attention. So what the hell do you want?”

I tried to smooth out the tension from my body. I couldn’t sink to the level of those around me. This show was full of fools and I wouldn’t be made one of them. “I simply want this show to be what it is supposed to be: an *educational* show. One that human and puppet children can both enjoy.”

Steve’s eyes flicked back towards his phone. He obviously wasn’t interested in our in-person conversation. “It *is* educational,” he replied flatly.

“Singing songs about sandwiches isn’t educational. Pandering to the monetized version of Saint Nicholas isn’t educational. Racially insensitive robbers going on drunken rants isn’t educational. You know what *is* educational? *Science!* And when I try to teach something as simple as salt crystals, I get a stupid pie in my face!”

Steve simply shrugged. “Kids love the pie thing. It’s funny.”

“It is *not* funny,” I assure him. “It’s lowbrow. This isn’t the Three Stooges.” Steve’s jaw tightened and he pinched the space between his eyes with a few greasy fingers. He acted as if I were the one causing the headaches around here.

“You’re right, Strabo. You’re right. This isn’t the Three Stooges. You know why? Because that show only had *three* drug addicts on it.” I opened my mouth to protest but he reached out a hairy hand and pinched my lips shut like he was sealing an envelope. “This show isn’t what you wanted it to be? Guess what? It’s not what I wanted it to be either. You think I don’t know that this is all crap? I get reamed out by the studio execs every single day. I’ve gotten torn a new one so many times that my ass looks like Swiss cheese. I can’t control the cast; I get paid peanuts. I can barely even afford to send my asshole step-kid to a community college so he can take naps, smoke weed and study English. *ENGLISH!* The very language that we speak! And now, because of Robby’s little rant today, I

have the sponsors so far up my ass that they can work me like *I'm* the puppet around here. You don't want to get hit with pies? That's fine. Talk to Jean. I have nothing to do with that. I don't write the show, I only shoot it. And I would much rather shoot myself but hey, we don't always get what we want, now do we?" Steve finally took a breath and then picked up his phone again. "So we done here, Strabo?" Without waiting for my response, he lowered his eyes and began angrily clacking out his next text message. Eventually, I walked away, seething.

I paced the backstage area for a while. I was lost in thought, trying not to feel frustrated, which was a very tall order. I decided to head down to Jean's dressing room and have a talk with him. In the narrow hallway before the changing area, I saw Robby asleep on the floor. Apparently he had sobered up enough to free himself from the closet and was now positioned spread eagle on the cold tile floor. I stepped over him like he was a piece of

garbage which, well, he is. I curled my four fingers into a fist and knocked on Jean's door. The noise stirred Robby to consciousness and he blinked up at me with scratchy red vacant eyes.

"Way to keep it professional today," I said to him bitterly, literally talking down to him. Groggily, he blinked and silently worked his mouth open and closed like a suffocating fish out of water.

"Huh?"

I glowered at him. "That little stunt you pulled today? It could get us sued."

He burped, sniffed, then spat. He was more pig than person, and people weren't that great to begin with. "Relax, Strumpo," he slurred out. "Only stupid kids watch this show. They don't understand anything, they only look at motion and colors." He belched and sniffed again, then began to slump back to the ground like he had no bones. I didn't contradict his words or bother to correct him on my name. I just reached out, knocked on the door and waited. After quite some time,

Jean finally opened the door. He appeared to be out of breath and his clothing was disheveled. Behind him, I could make out at least three women, huddled together, giggling and smoking Virginia Slims.

“Jean, do you have a minute?”

He smiled and glanced over his shoulder. “I dunno Strabo, I’m kinda busy here. *Gettin’* busy, that is. Wink!”

For what felt like the millionth time that day, I inwardly groaned. “I’ll be quick. And also, saying wink out loud doesn’t count as one.”

Lascivious laughter from the recesses of the changing room tore Jean’s attention away from me. After whispering something to his guests, he turned back to me and said, “Tell you what. Meet me at that bar down the street, Wet Willy’s, in an hour. We can talk then.” Turning back to his visitors, Jean told me that he now had a different kind of train to conduct, said the word ‘wink’ aloud, then closed the door in my face.

I sighed and headed to the bar to wait.

Two and a half hours later, Jean arrived and joined me at a booth, smiling as if he wasn't late.

"You're late," I told him, in case he didn't know. I knew in the back of my mind, however, that he just didn't care.

"Sorry bud," he said with a self-satisfied smile. "I got tied up. Wink!"

I allowed my frustration to bubble over and I pushed myself to my feet. "You know what? I'm done. You can't show up on time and you don't even know how to wink. This was a huge waste of my time." I tried to leave but Jean put a hand on my shoulder, easily forcing me to take my seat. I hated not having any muscles sewn into my body.

"No need to be cranky, my bad! Look, I'm buying." Jean lifted his hand and extended two fingers into the air, signaling for two drinks. I grumbled but agreed to stay.

"Fine. I'll stay for one drink. I just really wanted to talk to you about the show."

Jean smiled. "Sure, man! What about it? It's so fun, isn't it?"

"Fun? Honestly, no. It's not, especially not lately."

The waitress brought two drinks over and set them down on our table with a warm smile and a nod. Without hesitation, Jean gulped them both down. He wiped the beer foam from his mouth and signaled for two more. Then, remembering his earlier offer, asked me if I wanted one as well. After signaling for three beers, he looked at me with a somber expression. He leaned forward and asked me; "Is this about the pie?"

I waited for the drinks to arrive before replying. "It's not *just* about the pie." To my surprise, Jean nodded and his face was the very picture of understanding. Maybe I was going to get through to him after all. He quickly gulped down his third and fourth drink before dashing my new hopes.

"I'm sorry. Was it the wrong flavor or something? If you don't like cherry, I can get apple

next time.” He laughed and raised his hand to get another drink. I reached out and grabbed his arm, forcing him to look me in the eye.

“It’s *not* about the pie. It’s about what the pie represents. It’s a matter of respect.”

Jean’s eyes went glassy as the drinks began to take effect. ”I respect you.”

I didn’t respect him, but I kept that information to myself. “It isn’t just you. It’s everything. The entire format of the show has changed. I’m getting less lines. The educational segments are getting nudged out for cheap laughs and juvenile theatrics. I wanted to use this show as more than a show, I wanted it to be a platform. I wanted to make a difference.”

Like all humans, Jean didn’t seem capable of understanding me. “Not to be rude, but it’s just a kids show.”

I sipped my drink and said, “Exactly.” After another sip, “It’s *just* a kids show. I work on a kids show because that is the only opportunity that

was allotted to me. I worked three lousy minimum wage jobs while putting myself through school. There were no scholarships for puppets. On top of the fact that we make almost sixty percent less than humans for the same jobs, you can only imagine how big of a struggle that was.” I took another sip. Jean was tipsy, but he appeared to be listening. “I worked hard. I graduated summa cum laude. After graduation, when I’m thrust back out into the real world, my degree wasn’t worth the paper it was printed on. Nobody wanted to hire me because I was a puppet.” I downed another portion of my drink. Although I had drank less than half of one beer, I was already starting to feel buzzed. My premium Poly-fil cotton insides absorbed the alcohol like a sponge. “People bully me. Women only want to pet my fur and tell me I’m cute. I get treated like a pet and not like an educated adult person.” I finished the rest of my drink as Jean signaled for another pair for himself.

“I’m sorry Strabo, I didn’t know it was that bad.”

I sat up a little straighter in my seat. “That’s why maybe to you it’s only a kids show, but to me it’s a platform. It’s a way for me to cast puppets like myself in a more positive light. Maybe I don’t stand a chance in this world because everyone is already so set in their ways. But the next world? The one that’s being heralded in by the children who watch our show? It can be great; it can be *more*. Lasting change can be achieved. Hell, one day we may even have a puppet in the Whitehouse.”

At this, Jean perked up. He playfully elbowed me in my stitches and told me that every president we’ve ever had has been a puppet. Maybe it was my beer battered innards talking, but in that moment I shared a fondness for my coworker that I had never felt before. It was a different kind of warmth. As if he sensed what I was feeling, Jean gripped my shoulder and patted me on my

back. He playfully punched at me until I laughed a mostly sincere laugh and then he let up.

“So are we cool? I get it now, I know that science crap is important to you. I won’t ruin your nerd stuff again. Deal?” He held his hand out across the booth, palm outstretched. I hesitated a moment, but grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze.

“That’s a good start Jean, thank you. Listen, while I have you here, I thought that maybe we could talk about - ” A giggling gaggle of gorgeous groupies approached our table. The leader of the pack seemed to be a big breasted ginger wearing bright lipgloss and had eyes that said ‘I’ve got Adderall and I’m down to clown on it’. She leaned over the side of our booth, squeezing her best features together and using them to lead the charge. “Hey,” she purred in a velvety voice, “aren’t you those guys from that kid show?” The foxy blonde next to her elbowed her way forward and said, “It’s called Imagination Station. My nephew *loves* that show. He laughs about the pie thing *every* time.”

This made Jean beam, the gleam in his eye shining through the glassy haze of drunkenness.

“Well, actually, we were just talking about that. Sadly, we are most likely going to start scaling back the pie hijinks and -” The girl pulled out a large cellphone covered in a case that was designed to look like a buttered piece of French Toast. She removed what looked like a magnetic poached egg to reveal the lens of the camera. “Would you mind talking to him?” She begged me, “Please, please, please, oh please, I would get so many Auntie brownie points if you do.” As Jean glanced down her blouse, I sighed and glanced at the lens and the little red light that I knew I could never escape. “Okay,” I relented, “but only for a minute. We’re right in the middle of something.”

The girl turned the flash on and the red eye blinked to life. For what felt like the millionth time that day, I was being recorded. “Thank you,” she said to me sweetly. “This will mean a lot to him, he has no real friends. His name is Jared.” On the

screen, the call was answered and a young chubby face filled the display. His eyes lit up when the fog of confusion gave way to seeing and believing.

“Hey there Jared! This is Strabo from Imagination Station. I just wanted to say hi -”

“I think you meant to say, *PIE!*” My message was cut short by a gunky rhubarb pie that suddenly slammed into my face. Amidst the giggles from the groupies, Jean stood, flexed and pointed directly at the phone camera. “Stay in school,” he said coolly while giving finger guns. The girls giggled and put their arms around Jean as soon as the camera was off. As they led him over to their table, he glanced back over his shoulder and called out to me, “Hey, you got the drinks covered, right bud? I got them next time.”

Jean was gone before I could get my face cleaned. As I fumbled with some napkins and water, the bill got placed on the table in front of me. It was for many more drinks than the single one that I had consumed. Of course, I had no

choice but to pay it, as Jean was officially nowhere in sight. Our conversation, much like my bank account once this bill cleared, was overdrawn and closed on my behalf.

When I had entered the bar, the night was rich with possibilities. As I now stumbled out of it, I was poor in more ways than one. I looked up at the starry night sky and sighed.

Where the hell did he even pull that pie from?

Signs of the Time (Strabo)

The wind was dreadfully chilly this night. The breeze easily rippled through my jacket and quickly got the liquor soaked linen lining of my stomach to freeze. I shivered and tied my jacket tighter around myself. I wandered aimlessly, although I wasn't lost. I allowed myself to drift along, alone and unloved in a world in which I didn't belong.

I passed the local hardware store. Taped up in the window next to a **Help Wanted** sign hung a handwritten note stating that 'Puppets need

not apply'. I walked past apartment buildings that wouldn't rent to puppets. I passed schools that would not admit any 'nonhuman students'. I looked both ways before using a water fountain in the park that was labeled 'humans only'.

It really seemed like there wasn't a single place in this harsh world that would be open to someone like me. Shame. However, as I learned back when I was uncovering secret societies at Harvard, sometimes you just have to make your own way. You have to find an uncontested spot and settle in and defend it to the death. Luckily, I had been making such a space.

Turning down a familiar alleyway, I glanced both ways twice, just to insure that I wasn't being followed. With a great effort I rolled the heavy dumpster a few inches to the left, revealing a tiny hidden doorway etched into the ancient stone exterior of the building. I fit a skeleton key into an almost invisible hole and then I disappeared inside.

The doorway opened up into a dark tunnel. It was pitch black, you couldn't see your fingers in front of your face. However, I knew this place well. I traveled quickly, my soft feet found sure footing as I traversed all the twists and turns of the dark labyrinthine maze. Soon enough I was in the heart of the maze, the oasis within the mad tunnel system. Here there was light.

Lining the room was a series of softly spitting torches enclosed in cloth fists. These fists belonged to a multitude of puppets whose identities were shrouded by large hooded cloaks. At the center of this circle of torchbearers was a naked and frightened human being. This sniveling, shivering waste of life was tied tightly hand and foot and lain on top of an ancient stone table. I was greeted by a few muffled sobs that fought their way past the ball-gag. A cloaked puppet with a red hood stepped forward and handed me a long curved blade that glinted in the glow of the torches.

The human screamed. The blade did its job.

Our time was close at hand.

A Bridge Too Fur (Brick)

Blue and red lights illuminated the dark night and bounced off the back of a crowd of onlookers. I quickened my pace and made a beeline for the semicircle of uniformed officers who, upon seeing my arrival, broke rank to make a space for me. As I stomped my way over, a crunch underfoot brought my attention to the ground. Beneath my foot there was a yellowed promotional flyer for some stupid children's show. I lifted my foot and removed the garbage, crushing it into a ball in my tight fist before shoving it into my right pocket.

“Brick?”

I scowled at the officer who called me. “That’s *Detective* Brick to you. What do you got?”

The young officer seemed a bit flustered by my clipped words but he stepped forward and handed me a small pair of tweezers. “Check out the rocks under the deceased’s head.”

I bent down low to inspect the scene. It was bloody, messy, disgusting. It was typical for my job. Amongst the garbage and leaves and stones that obscured the body lying against the wall of the overpass, there was blood. Blood and...something else.

The tweezers gingerly plucked something from the sticky mess. I held it up to the thin light. It was a small tuft of fur. No, not fur. It was *fuzz*. White fuzz.

A large and familiar sneer split my face like a scar. I growled a single word with distaste, more to myself than to the others gathered around.

“*Puppets.*”

Antsy (Strabo)

A snippet of our theme song played us back from commercial. The curtains parted and the crowd cheered as their young eyes fell on the fresh set. There was a seafoam green convection oven pushed up against a false wall. There were large cabinets and a walk-in cupboard all made of thin balsa wood, grain peel and stick contact paper.

Iggy Sniggles and I are standing behind a rolling kitchen island that squeaks when you lean on it. It's hard to tell, but I had a suspicion that Iggy

was more antsy than usual. More on edge. Perhaps more on drugs.

“Welcome back, kids. Wow! It’s nearly three o’clock. You know what that means, don’t you Iggy?” The mention of his name made Iggy visibly jerk. He crossed and uncrossed his eyes. When he spoke, it was in a voice that was higher and more accelerated than normal. “What? What, what, what? What does it mean?”

I smiled toward the audience. “It means that - ”

“What does any of it mean? Really, what?”

I looked toward Steve but he didn’t signal for a cut so I simply ignored Iggy and went on. “That means, of course, that it’s time for a Snack Attack!” On cue, a siren sounded and lights flashed. Iggy’s eyes went wide and crossed with fright.

“Oh my god! Holy crap! Do you hear that too?” Iggy cowered and covered his pointed and protruding ears. The sirens cut off quickly and Iggy continued to twitch and shudder beside me.

“Uhhh, clearly Iggy needs a snack. He looks...tired. Luckily for us, it’s a tasty *and* nutritious snack that we’re making today.” Iggy stared blankly forward with his mouth hanging agape. If he had salivary glands instead of silicone in his mouth, he’d be drooling. I started pulling out the ingredients.

“First you need peanut butter,” I said with fake enthusiasm as I placed a big jar of creamy Peter Pan peanut butter in view of the camera. “Next, you want some celery. Don’t forget to wash it!” I retrieved a few pre-washed stalks and placed them next to the jar of peanut butter. “Finally, we’re going to need some raisins.” I pulled out a box and shook a few into my palm. “Did you guess what we’re making yet, kids? I’ll give you a hint. Raisins look a little bit like *ants*.”

Iggy’s ears twitched and flattened against his thick foam skull. “Ants? What? Where? Where are the ants?” He shook his head quickly and unblinkingly.

“They’re not real ants, Iggy. We’re making ‘ants on a log’,” I calmly explained, trying to appease Iggy’s fried nerves. It didn’t work.

“Ants?! Where? Where, where, where? Are they on me?! They’re on me, aren’t they? *HELP!* Help! Get them off of me!”

I reached my hand out, trying to show Iggy the raisins in my padded palm. It didn’t have the desired effect. The sight of the shriveled grapes sent him into a tizzy; he began screaming and smacking frantically at his arms and face. He rolled and flopped around, wrecking the set and all the while screaming about the ants crawling all over him. The kids laughed, assuming it was all a bit. I looked over at Steve. He shrugged and signaled that we should throw it to commercial now.

“This has been Snack Attack. We’ll be right back after these messages.”

The rest of the show was a fiasco as always, but nothing else was as bad as Iggy’s first wig out. I

thought once filming was wrapped, that my day would get easier. I was wrong. Shortly after we finished the last shot and played our theme song over the credits, I noticed a visitor hanging out in the production control room. I nonchalantly asked a few grips who the visitor was and I didn't like the answer I got. He seemed to be some kind of a detective.

I grabbed some coffee and acted busy, pacing the halls in a zig-zag pattern until I had serpentiney woven my way over to the small guerrilla position outside of the PCR. By this time, Steve had joined our visitor. I closed my eye and concentrated, straining my ears to hear better. I caught them in the middle of their conversation.

"Yeah, Iggy...he's not normally like this. I mean, he's always an idiot but he's not always this bad. I think he has the flu or something. Maybe that swine flu, or West Nile; is that still a thing? Either way, he's sleeping it off in a backroom somewhere."

There was a pregnant pause, as if the detective didn't believe Steve's story and was making him sweat. Then, a gruff voice said, "Fine. I'll talk to him when he's feeling better. Before I leave though, I'd like to talk to the rest of the white puppets you have on staff. I need to know where they were last night. Can you gather them up for me?"

"Sure thing. I'll send them all over to the stage area. Why don't you head down there and get comfortable? Should still be some catering over there if you get hungry. Give me about fifteen minutes to grab some gophers and I'll have them round up all the puppets for you."

The mention of white puppets gave me an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach. Not butterflies exactly, more like somebody's hand was inside and wiggling about. Before one of the lowly PAs was recruited for Steve's task and corralled the white puppets to the stage, I swiftly snaked my

way back down the halls and sidled up to the dirty room Iggy was squirreled away in.

Iggy was curled up into a mangy ball, his fur was matted with sweat, dirt and raisins. His ears twitched and the sounds coming from his gaping mouth sounded like a lawnmower in a rock garden. I rushed into the room without making a sound. I was kneeling on his fluffy chest and wrapping my eight fingers around his throat before his eyes could flap all the way open. He tried to cry out but I choked his words off at their source and then squeezed his neck all the tighter. If we were anywhere else but at work with a detective nearby, I would have twisted his throat closed like I was wringing a wet sponge. I leaned in and whispered:

“Listen to me you stupid, degenerate *sock*. Your behavior is going to ruin us. It’s one thing to mess up my show. If you do anything to mess up my mission, well...” I released the pressure on his neck just a bit, just enough to allow his watering eyes to dry and see my face when I told him, smiling,

“I’ll kill you.” I released his neck but I kept my full weight on his chest a moment longer. “Get off the drugs. They’re making you sloppy and they’re making your fuzz fall out. Next slip up, and *you* may be the one on the table. Understand?”

I got up and left the room quickly. Iggy remained on the floor, shivering for all kinds of reasons.

Bad Habits, Bad Hare & Bad Luck (Brick)

I slammed the door to my cruiser and glanced at my watch. I gave it five minutes before the idiot made his move. Interviewing the other white puppets was a waste of time, as I knew it would be. There was only one of them that I wanted to talk to. And I had a feeling that it was miraculously recovering as I sat here. I flipped through radio stations until I found a tolerable song. Shortly after

the last verse faded away, I saw a rush of movement from the bottom half of the studio's rear door.

"Right on time," I muttered to myself, shifting the car into drive to follow my suspect.

Iggy stumbled a zig-zag path down the street. Whether it was because he was trying to avoid being followed, or it was because he was already messed up on drugs, I didn't know. I followed from a distance to avoid detection, but it didn't matter. The moron had no situational awareness at all.

The 'sick' puppet plodded a serpentine path past a few city blocks. It stopped and looked around a moment before ducking down an alleyway. I muttered curses under my breath, assuming I'd been spotted. A minute later, however, the idiotic puppet poked its head back out and released a small puff of acrid smoke from its felted mouth. It continued down the street, this time even slower. I rolled my eyes and followed.

Things went on in this manner until, finally, we approached a central park. I parked my cruiser along the curb and I killed the engine. Reaching under the seat, I pulled out a leather carrying case and unzipped it. Inside the case was a device we called 'The Bird Watcher', which I pulled out and pointed towards the spot where Iggy was approaching what seemed to be a filthy stuffed bunny. I switched on the power and pressed the record button. A small red light blinked to life like an angry alcoholic's eye. With a range of three hundred feet and over twenty hours of recording space, I easily amplified their secret conversation.

"Hey!" Iggy shouted at the rabbit, none too quietly. "Drugs Bunny, I'm so happy to see you. I need some new stuff man, I'm going crazy here!"

The stuffed rabbit fixed his visitor with a withering stare before holding up a dirty paw and shushing him. "Woah, slow down there champ. What, is this your first day or somethin'? Lower your

stinkin' voice and never use my name again. You wearin' a wire or something?"

In my headphones, I heard Iggy's audible gulp.

"A wire? No way!" Iggy shouted out a little too quickly. "Nuh uh, I'm cool, I'm cool. Come on man, you know me!" Drugs Bunny squinted his beady black eyes, turning them into suspicious slits. His long ragged ears twitched, the three gold hoop earrings in them rang like a miniature wind-chime.

"I *do* know you," Drugs Bunny said. "So hands up."

Iggy whimpered nervously but did as he was told. The bunny used his dirty paws to pat his visitor down. After satisfying himself that there was no wire, he tilted his head and bit his lower lip with two large yellow maxillary incisors. "Never can be too careful," he said. "Especially when you come to my place of business sweating and twitching like a narc." In response to this, Iggy wiped his wet

forehead with long twitchy fingers. The fur of his fingers were visibly matted afterward.

“I’m not a narc, come on man, cut me some slack. I’m just having a bad day, that’s all. That’s why I need some more stuff. Come on, I know that you have it. Please, I need it. I’m coming apart at the seams here.” The bunny continued to look at Iggy as if he were nothing more than a two foot pile of horse manure. Still, he rummaged around in his pockets until he pulled out a plastic baggy that was full of white powder.

“Cash?”

Iggy revealed a damp wad of bills that was concealed in his sweaty puppet palm. Drug Bunny’s nose twitched in disgust, but he still reached out a mangy paw and accepted the sopping money. “Alright, now get the hell out of here. You look like crap. You’re scaring away the little kids that might want to buy something too.” Drugs Bunny turned his back to hop away but Iggy reached out a shaky hand to halt him.

“Hey...um..so..I have a question.” Drugs Bunny’s back stiffened but he didn’t turn around.

“*Yes?*” He practically spat the word out through a square pair of teeth. I heard another gulp escape from Iggy’s furry throat before he answered.

“Well, you see...my h-hair is starting to fall out. It’s..it’s not from this stuff, is it?” My microphone picked up a sigh from the bad hare. He turned around and clucked his tongue, like he was talking to a dimwitted child.

“Nooo, no way. Of course not. Come on man, coke is good for you. Freud even wrote a whole paper about it.” Iggy looked perplexed a moment. Even more than usual, that is.

“Really?”

“Yes, really! Now, will you leave me the hell alone? It’s not my fault that you can’t look this stuff up yourself. You work in TV, your hair is falling out from stress. Look at you! You’re more high-strung than a marionette. Get out of here, you’re starting to tick me off now.” With that,

Drugs Bunny hopped away, whistling and waving down a couple of kids on bikes. I made a note to myself to come back here and kick this rabbits ass. For now, however, I continued to follow Iggy, who tucked the baggy into some hidden pocket and took off.

The chase went on like it had earlier, with myself lazily following from a short distance away. As we approached a familiar site, I had a feeling of unrest in my gut. Iggy tramped a path to the overpass I had been to last night. I immediately remembered the blood, the death, the smell. The *fuzz*. With a growl, I put the cruiser into park and intended to confront Iggy once he entered the overpass. He ducked inside it. I counted to ten and then I got out to follow him.

When I entered the overpass, he was gone.

I checked my watch and saw one, then two, then five minutes go by. Iggy never reemerged. Frustrated, I kicked at a pile of rubble and trash. When the dust settled, my scowl deepened. Hidden be-

hind the stack of debris was a miniature door. It was just the right height for a puppet to enter. Once again, I spat out my least favorite word with disdain.

“Puppets.”

I stuck around a while but it became apparent that Iggy was not going to reemerge. With a heavy sigh, I returned to my office.

I poured over some backlogged paperwork that was stacked in my intake box. I worked with an angry intensity. At least with this kind of work, I knew that I could make some progress. The puppet case was eating away at me, I needed to do something else for a bit. I was about a quarter of the way through it all when my assistant Eva returned from her lunch break. She noticed the expression on my red face and the way that I was

muttering to myself. She smiled wanly and asked, "Tough case, boss?"

Resisting the urge to sigh deeply and begin an angry rant, I instead straightened up my pile of papers and simply stated, "Yeah, you could say that." A tick of silence hung in the air. The sigh I was holding back slipped its way out. "It's that god damned body that was dumped in the overpass alley. I feel like I'm missing something. Something important. I don't know, maybe I'm just wasting my time. I spent half the damn day following around that junkie from Imagination Station."

Eva's face lit up at the mention of the show. "Imagination Station? My son *loves* that show! I mean, he really liked the old host more, but still, he -"

"Old host? What old host?" As if struck by lightning, my brain began to crackle and buzz to life with a renewed vigor.

"Yeah, um..what was his name, what was his name." Eva scrunched up her face in thought,

tapping her chin as if the small impacts would dislodge the name from her memory. A moment later, she snapped her fingers, her deep blue eyes lighting up with remembrance. “Tad! Tad Winderpippits. A dumb name, I know, but he always cracked my kid up.”

I had that unmistakable feeling in my gut, the one that told me I was onto something. “Why isn’t he the host anymore?” I asked. Eva scrunched up her face again, but this time the answer eluded her.

“I’m sorry, I don’t really know, although I do know that it was quite sudden. He never even got a goodbye episode, he was just replaced out of nowhere. Last time I heard about him, there was some tabloid at the grocery store that ran a story about him living as a bum up on Queue Avenue.”

I stood quickly and threw on my coat. I gave Eva a quick one-armed side hug, which she clearly didn’t expect from me. “Thank you Eva, you’re the greatest.” I quickly headed out the door, renewed purpose invigorating my feet.

Bud & The Bums (Brick)

There was a foul stench in the air. It was like a mixture of feces, fuzz and fish. As far as I could see down Queue Avenue, there were trash heaps and trashed persons stumbling around. My approach was loud, as every step I took crunched broken glass or kicked crushed cans. I wove my way around hefty bag hills and swarms of flies until I found a row of makeshift shelters. A soft snoring sound wafted out of a fort made from a refrigerator box and what appeared to be a frayed and

faded flowery muumuu. A pair of purple plush feet stuck out from under the improvised curtain.

I spared no time for manners, as my normally sour mood was worsened by the foul funk and millions of flies. I approached the snoring puppet and roughly kicked its feet. The puppet jolted awake, a large snore was interrupted and turned into a short coughing fit. When it subsided, I asked, "Are you Thaddeus Q. Widderpippits?"

"Wha..huh? Who are you?" A sleepy and confused face peeked out from behind the flowery fabric.

"I'm Detective Robert Brick. I'm investigating a homicide that occurred this week and I'm here to ask you a few questions. This first of which I'm asking now for a second time, which angers me. Are you Thaddeus Q. Widderpippits?"

The round purple face seemed more alert now. The puppet slowly blinked two plastic eyes, the green lids of them closing atop a perfectly round blue nose. When the eyes opened again, the pup-

pet smiled up at me like a kid ordering from an ice cream truck. "Yeah, that's me. Nice to meet you Robert, but you can call me Tad."

"And you can call me Detective Robert Brick, *Tad*. So tell me, where were you on July eighth, between the hours of nine pm and midnight?"

Tad either seemed to ignore my attitude, or he was simply too stupid to realize I was talking down to him. He blinked again and then stroked his woolly chin in thought. "Umm, let's see...the eighth you said? I was probably right here, sleeping."

"And is there -"

"Oh! I just remembered! I *was* here sleeping, that's for sure! I had the craziest dream ever that day! So I was on a pirate ship and instead of a parrot on my shoulder I had a giant rat named Phillip and we -"

"I do not care about your dreams, Tad," I gruffly informed him.

“Neither did my mother,” Tad said playfully before leaning back and giggling. His purple feet fluttered in time with his tittering.

“Well I guess that explains why you’re here then, Tad. Now tell me, is there anyone around here who can corroborate your story?”

The giggles cut off and Tad straightened up. He blinked his eyes at me and replied, “No. I was all alone on the pirate ship. Except for Phillip, that is. And he can’t collaborate my story because he’s just a rat. And also, it was a dream.”

I growled with an intensity that made Tad lean back. “That’s not what I mean! And the word is corroborate, not collaborate. This isn’t an R&B album. Now, is there anyone around here that *can* confirm that you were asleep in your disgusting little box during that time? And by that, I mean anyone who is real and not a dream rat.”

Tad sighed and then straightened up his meager belongings before he answered. After folding a ratty blanket and righting a few cans, he shrugged.

“Not sure. I mean, maybe? There are some other folks living around here but we mostly just keep to ourselves.”

I managed to stifle another growl and instead pulled out my trusty pad and pen. “I’m going to need their names. So who else lives in your little cul-de-crap here?”

Tad scratched at a patch of fuzz on the side of his neck. “My cul-de-wha?”

“Your cul-de-*crap*. This junkyard of souls you call a home. The illegal little shanty town you’ve built on tax payer property. Who else is living here?”

If his eyes weren’t made of plastic, there probably would have been tears in them. “I’m sorry Robert, it’s not like we have a place to -”

“I told you before, the name is Detective Brick. And believe it or not, I don’t need to hear your life story, pal. I didn’t come here for a puppet show. I’m here for answers, damn it, and you’re going to

give them to me. So who are the other residents of this Muppet trap house?”

Thaddeus Q. Widderpippits reached underneath his pillow, which looked to be a fast food bag stuffed with leaves. He pulled out a small hand-drawn sketch of a smiling sun that was hugging a mountain. “It’s not a trap house, it’s a trap *home*. Hence the lovely decorations.” He pointed at the walls of his refrigerator box. All four were covered in sketches of people holding hands and dogs chasing cars and happy little trees. I knew at that moment that this was another big waste of my time. I was clearly dealing with a lunatic who had the artistic talents and mental prowess of a deranged kindergartener.

Tad pulled a crinkled can out of the corner and tilted it toward me as if he were proposing a toast. “The pictures make it kinda homey in here, right? The key to surviving is positivity. Hey! That’s today’s word of the day! I’ll drink to that!” Tad took a swig from his beer but I ferociously ripped it

from his grasp. I crushed the can in front of him, the sticky warm contents leaking onto my hand. I spun around and hurled it with all of my might. I turned back and gave the puppet my deadliest stare as, somewhere far behind me, a crinkled can clanked on concrete.

“Hey! What are you doing? That’s worth a whole nickel!”

I got so close to Tad’s face that I had to shove my entire torso into the cardboard box. I loomed largely over the small home and its smaller inhabitant like a scene straight out of **Alice in Wonderland**.

“Listen here, fur ball. I’ve got a dead man lying on a slab at the morgue and a bunch of filthy white fuzz all around his body. I don’t have time for fun and games. So either you give me those names or I’ll lock you up for hindering a police investigation. By the time I’m done with you, you’ll be rotting away in a cell and, trust me, your

cellmate will put more than just his hand inside of you.”

If possible, Tad’s ping-pong ball eyes bulged out a bit more. He shook his fuzzy head and blinked. “Wow! What horrifying imagery!”

I backed off, but only an inch or two. Just enough to get my pad and pen in front of his furry face. I barked out a single word, more a command now than a request. “Names.”

Tad sighed, shook his head and said, “Boy! I could have used that drink.” Before I could say anything snappy back to him, he finally began co-operating.

“Well, let’s see, there’s Bobo McQuaid.”

“Bobo McQuaid,” I repeated grumpily as I wrote the name down. “Who else?”

“There’s Shug Scuggins. Penelope Stickiwicketts. Swarley Dunkers. Oh, there’s Hooper Humperdink. Well, no, not him. He moved actually. Nice guy. Let’s see, there’s -”

“Alright, that’s enough!” I refused to write down any more of these ridiculous names. For all I knew, this little dirtmop was just messing with me. “No more of this John-Jacob-Jingleheimer-*shit*! Do any of you clowns around here have a normal name?”

Tad leaned back but, to my surprise, he didn’t seem insulted. “Well, I suppose there’s Bud,” he said slowly.

“Bud? That’s more like it. And where exactly does this Bud reside?” Tad leaned out of the shelter and squinted. “About thirty feet away,” he answered.

“And what does this Bud look like?”

A sly smile spread across Tad’s purple face. “I’d say he’s about nine inches tall. He weighs, I don’t know, about a dozen ounces. And, interestingly enough, he’s worth a NICKEL!”

My face flushed and I saw red. I wanted to reach out and grab this punk by the throat. I wanted to crumple him up and throw him just like that

Budweiser can. Instead, I snapped my notepad shut. "Alright pal, you've been a big help. Have fun living with all this trash, you Oscar piece of crap. I'm outta here." I pointed my pen right in Tad's face before I dealt my final blow. "I hope that living here on Sesame Street is comfortable for you. I can see why they gave your job to Strabo. When people ask him questions, at least he's sober."

At the mention of Strabo's name, Tad sprang to life, pounding his fist against the cold cardboard. "Strabo? Blegh! Don't you *ever* mention the name Strabo Bellyhands to me. He ruined me! He ruined my life!" Tad slammed his fist again, shaking the meager shelter and rustling the muumuu curtain. "He's responsible for what I've become. He made me into this. He acts so refined and educated but..but..he's just plain vicious!"

I snorted derisively. "Vicious? I spoke to him at the station and he didn't seem too vicious to me."

“That’s his *cover*, man! He acts all high and mighty, but that guy is a monster. He gets in your head. He makes people do things, like he’s bending them to his will. He’s a power hungry, blood thirsty, one eyed zealot who will stomp on anyone or anything that gets in his way.” Tad slumped back down, sagging into little more than a dirty pile of laundry in the corner. He looked defeated; deflated. I snorted again.

“What happened to *positivity*?”

Tad gave a weak thumbs up. “That’s the word of the day. Yay!” He rummaged around until he found a tiny amber bottle. “I’ll drink to that.”

I shook my head and scowled with disgust. “Nice meeting you Tad.”

“Back at you Robert.”

I resisted the urge to turn back around and throttle him. “That’s Detective Brick,” I said over my shoulder as I walked back to my cruiser.

“Bobby Brick everybody. Yay!” Tad giggled and imitated canned applause as I opened the door to my car and got behind the wheel.

As I stared off toward the setting sun, I got annoyed by how much stupid stuff can happen on such a nice night.

Partners (Brick)

I was back in my office, once again working on that same stack of papers. My body was moving but my mind wasn't keeping up with the task. I was distracted; I felt like I was missing something important. A crackle of static brought my walkie to life. It was a call for a possible 10-54 down at the lake. I sighed and pushed the talk button.

“Dispatch, this is Detective Brick. I'm on the way.”

As I got up from my chair, I heard soft footsteps coming down the hall. I turned and saw my worst nightmare walk through the door. “Where are

we headed, partner?” Thaddeus Q. Widderpippits was officially out of his box and stinking up my office.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded angrily. Tad seemed nonplussed.

“What do you mean? I’m here to help with our investigation. You said that we were taking down Strabo.”

I scowled so deeply that I felt it in my feet. “I said absolutely nothing of the sort! And let’s be very clear about something. This is *my* investigation. Not *ours*, mine! Now get out of my office and, while you’re at it, run a lint roller over all the places you stepped.” I turned my back to him and gathered up my things, shoving everything I needed into my go bag. When I finished, I was quite annoyed to see that Tad still standing there, smiling. “Why don’t you leave?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “I don’t have anywhere to go. Come on, let me help you. I’m a good helper.”

I wasn't sure whether I should laugh, cry or kill. Still deciding, I said, "Help me? Great. If I need to learn about shapes or the letter P, I'll give you a call. However, this is *real* people business, so get the hell out of my office before I kick the stuffing out of you."

I expected him to leave. To look hurt, or at least get scared or angry. Instead, he sat in a chair and started drumming his fingers patiently, as if he were expecting me to change my mind. He drummed his fingers. I cracked mine and smiled. "Okay then. The fun way it is."

Once I had properly removed the trash from my office, I started toward the location of the 10-54 call. I was about halfway there when I decided to make a left instead of a right. It was a little bit out of my way, sure, but I felt so good after tossing that puppet out into the street; why not put a little heat on another one? I decided to make a pitstop and drop in unannounced at the set of Imagination Station.

As I walked into the studio, a loud bell rang, signaling the end of a segment. I flashed my badge and pushed my way past a couple of pasty security guards. I waited for the curtain to drop. The moment it did, I saw Strabo's padded shoulders drop as well. It was the perfect time to attack, his guard was down.

"How you doin' Strabo?" His shoulders tensed up again the moment he heard his name called out. He turned and tried to hide a sneer, but I saw it before it fully dissolved. I knew a thing or two about sourpuss faces.

"Detective, how nice to see you again. What can I do for you?"

I let a few beats of silence pass before I answered him. I wanted to see if a puppet could sweat. Instead of looking like a damp sock, however, he stayed cool. His posture was straight, his single eye returned my gaze unblinkingly. He reminded me of someone I'd met once in an interrogation room. I didn't like it. Strabo was *too* calm, the

picture perfect image of someone with nothing to hide. It read as false. Everybody has something to hide. I didn't let my own sneer dissipate.

"I came by to see your buddy Iggy. You know, since he hasn't come down to the station yet like I asked him to. Is he still feeling...*sick*?"

Strabo stiffened up just a bit. Anyone else on earth but me would have missed it, but I didn't.

"Yes, he's still feeling a bit under the weather I'm afraid."

I let a few more beats of silence hang in the air between us. He looked calm and collected. I sensed in my gut, however, that he was just the slightest bit rattled now.

"I see," I said flatly. "That's a shame. Would you tell him that I still want to see him? And I expect to see him in the next twenty four hours. I don't care if he's sick. Death is the only excuse I accept. Are we clear on that?"

Strabo Bellyhands held my gaze with an unwavering eye. "Crystal," he said with a hint of superiority.

"Wonderful." I turned and walked a few steps, just far enough away to know that his shoulders would relax again. When I sensed it was far enough, I spun on my heels and inwardly smirked when I saw his eye go wide with surprise.

"By the way, I'm off to see about a corpse they just pulled out of a lake. Neither of you would know anything about that, would you?" I enjoyed watching him finally blink. He regained his composure and smiled a cold smile. The smile didn't reach his eye.

"Of course not. You're joking, I'm sure. Anyway, both Iggy and I have been here all day. He's been sequestered in his room since he isn't feeling well." After a pause, he asked, "Will that be all, detective?" I returned his smile. Mine didn't reach my eyes either.

"For now. Have a good show, Strabo."

With those parting words, I was off to see about
a body in a lake.

Stabbo (Strabo)

I walked backstage, rage quietly simmering beneath my felted skin. With the detective showing up again today, I was starting to feel the heat, and I didn't mean from the bright overhead stage lights. I wasn't one hundred percent sure how, but I just *knew* that this was Iggy's fault. I knew in my gut that I was right, but I still knew I should confront him again, just to get a confirmation. It seemed that the drugs must have wiped out his memory of our previous backstage pep talk.

Navigating the labyrinthine hallways, I was just about to round the corner to the dressing rooms

when I heard a familiar footstep. It was the heavy dragging gait of a useless clown. I peered around the corner and saw Robby the Robber stumbling toward the very door that I was on my way to open. Robby lifted a chubby fist and pounded a secret knock on the door, three short, one hard, two short. A moment later, Iggy opened up the door. They shared a few whispered words before Robby reached into his back pocket and pulled out a baggy of powder and pills. The anger and hatred I felt for this pitiful human being was threatening to bubble over. It made me sick, watching some loser human peddling drugs to an impressionable puppet. When their interaction ended and the door shut once more, I made up a new plan right then and there.

Robby removed a hidden flask and took a short pull from it. I removed the curved ceremonial blade from my own hiding spot. This little problem of mine was going to end today.

Just A Tad Annoying (Brick)

At the lake there was a sea of familiar faces. They were all huddled around a body that was obscured beneath a black tarp. I had just parked my car and had been headed towards the group when I heard somebody call out my name. I looked around and my jaw clenched tighter than a nuns legs. Tad was sitting on a nearby bench and swinging his purple feet like a kid who had too much sugar.

“Hey Robert, do you want to compare notes from the other day?” I noticed then that he was

wearing a detective outfit. He had on a brown trench coat and belt, which had a large magnifying glass tucked into it. Atop his head he wore a tweed deerstalker hat. He wore no shoes but whipped out a large pen and paper from a deep pocket. It looked exactly like mine.

I rubbed my eyes, feeling surging waves of exhaustion and annoyance. "Are you following me?" I growled at him. His feet continued to dangle and kick excitedly.

"I'm not following you, I'm following *the case*. I'm tracking it the way that a mighty lion tracks a tasty gazelle. And hey, if you happen to be there too, then I guess I'm on the right track, huh? Pretty good for my first case, wouldn't you say?" Tad leaned back and giggled with glee, his feet fluttered faster as he snickered.

"You need to stop stalking me and sticking your stupid blue nose in my case."

"But Robert -"

“That’s *Detective* Brick. I’m sick of telling you that. Go back to your dirty little abode and leave the investigation to the real men, you got it?”

Unfortunately for me, as this exchange was happening, one of the uniformed officers broke away from the huddle and hustled over to where I was standing. The officer looked back and forth from Tad to me and smirked. “Friend of yours, sir?” I scoffed at the unfunny joke. Tad only beamed brighter.

“We’re partners, actually,” Tad told him before I had a chance to refute the claim of friendship.

“Oh, is that right?” The officer’s bright eyes lit up and he raised an inquisitive eyebrow in my direction. “About time you got a partner there, Brick. Have you known each other long?”

“Not too long,” Tad practically shouted out. “Just for a *Tad!*” The puppet reared back and positively howled with laughter before noticing the blank stare on the officer’s face. “Because, you see, my name is Tad and it also means -”

“Officer,” I said pointedly, getting the attention of my subordinate and also effectively shutting Tad up for a moment. “Are there no more bodies in the lake?”

The officer seemed surprised by my question for a moment but then I saw the glint of understanding in his eye. He gave me a subtle nod. “No sir, all clear.”

I turned towards Tad and gave him a large, malicious smile. “Good. Then there’s room for one more. Got me?”

The officer nodded and winked. “Got you.”

I turned and headed toward the huddled group. Behind me, I heard Tad yelling as he was grabbed by the scruff and dragged over to the lake. As the black tarp was pulled back for my inspection, I heard a satisfying splash somewhere behind me.

After I concluded my business down at the lake, I did some light office work and then headed

home. I had a lot on my mind and I couldn't seem to put all of the puzzle pieces together. I knew that somehow, some way, these bodies were connected, and they all had something to do with that stupid children's show. I mulled the case over, running through the facts of it forwards, backwards and sideways until I couldn't think about them any longer. At that point, I headed to my home and my big comfy bed. I knew that a night of rest would be the best medicine for my burnt out brain.

I slept like the dead until morning.

At seven o'clock on the dot, a shrill beeping sound cut through my sleep and the radio on my alarm clock clicked on.

'And that ended at around six pm last night. More details at the top of the hour.

In other news, beloved TV star and public drug abuser Robby "The Robber" Machesney went missing last night. His estranged wife reported that

he never came home after leaving for work that morning. More details as they emerge.

In an interesting turn of events from the White House - '

I rolled over and groggily shut off the radio. A faint sound from the hallway got my hackles up and my ears pricked. My training told me that someone was in my home and that I should be ready for anything. Still, despite all my training, I was surprised as hell to see Tad walking into my bedroom. He was carrying a large plate and a glass of orange juice. "Good morning sunshine! How about we start the day off with a smile?" Tad tilted the plate and I saw that he had made pancakes with rudimentary smiley face features cut into them.

"How the hell did you get into my house?" I demanded. He gave me a sly smile. "Oh, I have my ways," he answered. The first thing I did was sigh. The second thing I did was grab Tad by his

scrawny throat and repeat my question, this time with a couple well-placed squeezes for emphasis.

“The doggy door! I came in through the doggy door,” he choked out in a strangled voice. As much as I didn’t want to let go of his neck, I released my grip so that I could sit up and find some pants to pull on.

“I’m going to have you locked up, you purple piece of puppet trash. Breaking and entering. Trespassing on private property. Stalking. Theft.”

“Theft?” Tad interrupted, confusion apparent on his furry face.

“I notice that you didn’t deny the other charges but yes, theft. Those are *my* pancakes, are they not?” Before he could respond, I went on, feeling furious. “You scummy pile of living linen. You’ll need a story more fabricated than, than...than *YOU* to escape these charges. Insanity won’t cover it, no siree bob, not by the time I’m done. The evidence against you will be piled to the sky.”

Tad sighed. "I wish it didn't come to this," he said sadly. In the blink of an eye, he had tossed the full plate of smiling pancakes at me. I expertly swatted them away with one hand. My other hand, however, was suddenly wrapped up in two fuzzy hands. When I tried to pull away, I heard a loud clicking sound. It appeared that Tad had handcuffed me to my bedpost. What bothered me the most about this was that the handcuffs were as furry as he was, although the fur on the cuffs was a type of leopard print.

"What the hell do you think you're doing now? Besides adding charges to your case? Let's see, now we have assault, kidnapping, and impersonating an officer. And why the hell are these handcuffs furry?" I quieted down to catch my breath. Tad held my gaze with a look of pure determination in his plastic eyes.

"I'm going to get you to finally listen to me, that's what I'm doing. And as for the handcuffs, well, they were the cheapest ones I could find

at the police store and *somebody*, I won't name names, cost me a nickel the other day so I couldn't afford better ones."

I had to admit, I wasn't even angry anymore. Above all, I was simply flabbergasted. "Police store? What police store? These aren't exactly standard issue you know." I held up my cuffed wrist for emphasis. The cheap cuffs rattled and pulled tight.

"You know the store that I'm talking about, the one on Main Street. It's called **Cops & Throbbers**. They gave me a good deal on those because they were used, but I think it's because they could tell that I'm great detective material." Tad smiled proudly as I sneered with sincere disgust.

"*Used?* Of all the stupid things I've ever heard," I began loudly but allowed myself to trail off. I was getting heated again. I was losing control of the situation. I took three deep calming breaths and then continued. "That is *not* a police store," I informed him through clenched teeth. "And this

is *not* the proper way to get somebody's attention. Now get these cuffs off of me, you stupid rag, before I lose my temper and think of a few more charges to add to your ever-growing list of crimes.”

Tad shook his head calmly. “Not until you give me a chance to speak.”

I was about to start shouting again but then I remembered where he got the cuffs from. I took two seconds and easily located the release latch on the side of the cuffs. A short second later and I swiftly removed my wrist from its locked position.

“How did you do that? Some kind of secret detective trick?” Tad asked me, wide eyed with surprise and a hint of annoying adoration.

“There’s a safety latch on the side because this isn’t a real pair of handcuffs. Just like you could never be a real detective. You’re both furry and useless and don’t belong in my home.” I flung the cuffs at his purple face. Tad, in response, started to cry.

Now when I say cry, I'm not talking about a case of the sniffles and whimpers. I'm saying that this fur ball threw his head back and wailed like Snoopy in the Peanuts cartoons. He blubbered and howled and cried until he choked and gasped for air.

To say that I was uncomfortable would be the understatement of the year. This purple baby was having a full-blown meltdown and I couldn't help but think that it was maybe at least partially my fault. I begrudgingly reached out my previously cuffed hand and gave him two medium-sized pats on the shoulder. "Come on, don't do that." I shifted uncomfortably in the bed and then reached into the drawer of my nightstand. Before I could be tempted into using the Glock 43 I kept loaded in there, I pulled out a small box of tissue paper and handed the whole thing to Tad.

"Maybe I was a little harsh," I said. "Just calm down for Christ's sake. Dry your eyes and blow your blue nose, if that's even possible. And be

thankful that, unlike your disgusting cuffs, these tissues aren't *used*." Tad sniffled and thinly smiled. I sighed. I knew the quickest way to get him to shut up would be allowing him to speak. "Say your piece and then leave my house. If you do this I will *think* about not pressing charges. Deal?" Tad nodded and did his best to compose himself.

"Why do you hate me?"

I clenched my jaw and lied. "I don't hate you. Now is that really the question that you broke into my house to ask?"

"It seems like you hate me," he said, ignoring half of what I said.

"It's not you in particular that I hate," I said, trying the truth on for size. "Let's just say that I have a history of sorts with puppets." Before I could stop it, a sneer crossed my face when I uttered the P-word. Years of doing so had apparently made it a reflex. Tad looked at me with sympathetic synthetic eyes.

"Geez-a-loo! What happened to you?"

“It’s personal,” was all I offered.

Tad was done crying; now he was just prying. “Come on, please? I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“Really, you won’t tell anyone? Not even Gloop Glorp or Boom Shakalaka or whatever the hell names your hobo friends have?” Tad crossed his heart with a fuzzy finger. “I promise. I won’t even tell Bud!” He giggled at his own joke and I was almost disappointed to see that he was returning to his normal self. I sighed for what felt like the hundredth time this morning and decided to just give him the abridged version.

“Seven years ago I had first made detective. The new job came with longer hours and bigger stressors. Every night when I came home, I was exhausted. I was tired and feeling haunted by the things I saw. My wife, she used to make it all better. That is, until the day I came home early for a change and I found her in bed making somebody else feel all better. As if this wasn’t bad enough, it wasn’t even another man. It was some puppet

she met at the gym.” The memory of that betrayal and the use of my least favorite word made my lip curl downward like ship dropping anchor. “So after that, I couldn’t stand the sight of puppets anymore. Hell, if even my own wife thought I was less of a man than some soft fabrication of one...I mean, what am I supposed to do with that?”

I let a silence fall over the room. Tad, hating silence, said, “I’m sorry about your wife, Bobby.”

“That’s Detective Brick,” I corrected him for the millionth time.

“Okay, *Detective* Bobby, I’m sorry. But the point is, you shouldn’t hate a whole group of people based on the actions of one of them. I mean, look at me. I’m not prejudiced against the police, even though they are the ones that come around and demand I leave my home, even if I have nowhere else to go.” Tad let his words sink in a moment. Then he asked me, “Did you know I wanted to be a detective, too?”

I snorted. “Really? *You?*”

“Yes, really. I used to run all over the neighborhood and patrol it for danger. I would write tickets on cars for bad parking jobs. I even gave my neighbors cat a ticket for littering. Get it? *Litter*-ing?” Tad giggled. I groaned. He went on; “When I got older and saw how the world really was, I was crushed. Turns out, puppets aren’t allowed to be police. They aren’t even allowed to *try*. We can’t enter into the academy because they think we’re too soft.” Tad sighed and hung his head. “I’m sorry if I got in your way, Detective Bobby. I just wanted to help. I just wanted to get my old life back.”

Tad walked with a deflated droop as he got up to leave, upholding his end of the bargain. To my surprise, it was me who prolonged this. “Tad?” I called out.

“Yes, Bobby? I mean Robert, err, I mean Brick, Detective Bob Brick?”

I sighed, disgusted with what I was going to say next. “Since you apparently know where my

kitchen is, put on the coffee and get two mugs. There's a lot of work to do."

"*Two* mugs?" Tad reiterated with a surprised smile. I nodded yes and he took off like a shot, giggling and rushing off to the kitchen as fast as he could. I knew I'd regret this, but I didn't think I'd regret it as immediately as I did. The sound of shattering porcelain drifted from the other side of my house.

"How does one mug sound? We can share. Sharing is caring!"

I scowled but didn't respond. Instead, I got dressed and thought about how it might not be too late to use the Glock after all. I could say it was a home invasion, that it was self-defense. Tad came back into the room before I could decide and he handed me a mug of something that looked like coffee that was prepared very incorrectly. I set the mug down without taking a sip.

"I heard something on the radio this morning before I was so rudely assaulted by an intrud-

er. It was something about Robby the Robber from Imagination Station. Tell me everything you know about him. I'm going to skip the coffee and grab a brandy. I can tell it'll be one of those days."

Tad told me that he had officially quit drinking to work on the case. "That's great," I told him. "Especially since I didn't offer you any. Now spill it. And I mean the details, not that sorry excuse for coffee."

After I got the rundown on Robby, I ate some of the smiley face pancakes and was surprised to find that they were halfway decent. I called dispatch to inquire after the story I'd heard on the radio. Soon enough, Tad and I were piled into my cruiser and we were on the way to a crime scene.

A short drive across town brought us to the Abraxas G. Wilder forest preserve. I pulled in and parked when I spotted a familiar huddle of offi-

cers. I stifled an automatic groan. I hated dead bodies. As we approached, Tad asked me, "Do you think it's Robby?"

"I guess we'll find out in a minute," I said absently, my eyes already sharpening and trying to take in every detail of the scene around us. A few steps later and we hit the edge of the officer huddle and I pulled out my trusty notepad and began to take notes.

"The victim is male, caucasian. Appears to be around five foot eight." Behind me, Tad pulled out a matching notepad and parroted back, "Yeah, I'd say about five foot eight. Male."

I glowered at him and went on. "Medium build. Sandy colored hair." Now standing next to me, Tad peeked over at the body and said, "Medium-ish build. Wavy hair. Sandy? I'd say it's sandy colored."

The other gathered officers began to snicker. I tried not to let my anger show on my face. To avoid Tad's nonsense, I wrote the rest of my ob-

servations down in silence. When I had finished, I began to examine the victim's face. I now knew for sure that it was not Robby, as I would have recognized him from my brief time on set. As I studied the mystery man's final frozen expression, Tad tugged at my pants leg.

"Pssst! Hey, Bobby!"

I kicked him away. A second later he was tugging on my pants leg again. "B-B-Bobby! L-L-look at this!" I kicked him away again, this time harder.

"That's d-d-detective Brick. And I'm busy, can't you see that I'm working here?" I only got about another three seconds of quiet before he was back, pestering me and pulling at my pleated pant leg.

"Please!" Tad whined. "It's important!"

I loudly groaned and clapped my notepad shut. I fixed Tad with my most menacing stare and asked him, "What? What the hell is so important that you need to keep interrupting me?" With genuine concern in his plastic pupils, he pointed at the victims' foot. "Look," he said in an awed

whisper. I bent low and, with a pair of tweezers, I removed a small scrap of paper from the bottom of his shoe. It was stuck there by some errant gum.

“What is that?” I muttered, more to myself than to Tad. Tad, of course, didn’t know this and he answered, “Check out the symbol on it.”

I extracted the paper from its gummy resting place. At the same moment, I noticed a little bit of gum stuck to Tad’s furry index finger. “You didn’t touch this, did you? That’s Investigating 101, we never taint the evidence.”

Tad shook his head and clearly lied when he said, “Nuh uh! No way, pal. Will you give me some credit please?” As he spoke, he stuck his hand behind his back and tried to wipe off the sticky evidence. I sighed and studied the strange insignia that was scratched into the scrap of paper.

“Does this symbol mean anything to you?” I asked. Tad gulped and nodded his head vigorously. “Well, what is it?” I demanded, my patience wearing thin already. Rather than answer

my question, Tad asked one of his own. "Do you know who Professor McFeely is?"

I couldn't help but think that I hadn't drank enough brandy yet. "No, but judging from that stupid name, I assume that he's a friend of yours?" Tad nodded again but there was a far off look in his eyes now. There was something he wasn't telling me yet.

"He used to teach puppet history and lore at my community college. We need to talk to him about this, he'll know more than I do." I gave Tad my cellphone so he could call the professor and set up a meeting. I finished my preliminary examination of the body and okayed it to be picked up by the coroner and the meat wagon. When that was done, I met Tad back at the car.

"He says that his classes are done at four o'clock and we can go see him then."

"Excellent," I said.

“I also programmed my number into your phone and downloaded Digital Boggle so we can play together when we’re not working!”

“Excellent,” I said again, this time not meaning it.

“So where are we off to now, partner?” Tad asked me.

“We’re not partners, you’re a probationary assistant. But to answer your question, we’re headed down to the TV station. I think it’s time to turn up the heat on our jittery friend. I’ve got a job for you.”

Tad tittered with excitement while I gave him the rundown of my plan.

Dressing Down in the Dressing Room (Iggy)

*S*ssssnnnnnniiiiii fffffffffffff!

My eyes crossed and my head buzzed. I almost felt ready for my segment. *Almost.*

Schnifffttttt!

I snorted another thin line and the room spun. I couldn't feel my face now but I think that I was smiling. I closed my eyes and allowed the stimulation and pleasure to wash over me. Now that I got my head right again, my hands finally stopped

shaking. The stress of the show, of Strabo's secret plan, of everything, it all got on top of me. With this stuff, though?

Schhssshhshh!

I felt invincible.

The door to my dressing room violently shuddered and flew open. That detective who had been sniffing around the other day, detective Rock or Stone or something like that, was standing in my doorway and smiling like the cat who caught the rat.

"Huh, wha-..what can I do for you detective?"

He walked in without an invitation. I know I'm high but I was pretty sure that his eyes contained actual fire. I couldn't remember if I had already spoken or not so I asked him, "What can I d-do for you, detective? I'm b-busy, I'm getting ready for a scene." I felt hot, like I was talking beneath the illuminating overhead stage lights. I felt bare, naked, exposed.

Detective Brick allowed his smile to droop into a low hanging frown, almost a detestable scowl. “A scene? Interesting,” he said in a tone that I didn’t like. “I’m here because you *still* haven’t come down to the station. So I guess you’ve just been real busy, huh?”

As my vibrating eyes began to refocus, I noticed that the detective had a large canvas backpack slung over his shoulder. It was as lumpy as a water bed full of mud.

“Yeah, yeah. Reecealll busy,” I assured him. When he didn’t answer, I added, “You know. With...show stuff?”

Brick made a face like he had just taken a sip of curdled milk. “Show stuff, huh?” I resisted the urge to blurt out anything else. I fidgeted as I watched him stroke his chin, his fingers scratching roughly against the beginnings of beard stubble growing there. “Good to hear that you’re feeling better then. Strabo told me that you haven’t been by the station because you were...*under the weath-*

er.” The detective’s eyes were cold and calculating, like a calculator left in a refrigerator.

“Oh! Yeah..*right!*” I sniffed again, this time to sound like I was fighting off a cold. My nostrils sent a burning sensation up to my brain as my sniff sent the straggling remnants of my last bump up into my head. I tried to follow it up with a fake cough to hide my discomfort but it quickly turned into a real one. “Yeah yeah..I’ve been fighting off a cold. A real nasty one too! It’s been keeping me from doing anything.” I sniffed and coughed again and I fought against the need to let my eyes cross as the burning sensation warmed my fuzzy insides.

“It’s kept you from doing anything...except work on national television?” The detective’s voice was ice cold. When he spoke, the lumps in his backpack seemed to shift like two cats fighting beneath a bedsheet.

“Uhhh..well..you see. I mean...contractually I..”

Detective Brick held up a hand to silence my explanation. "I think that if you're well enough to act in front of a live audience, you could probably survive the twenty minute drive to the station to make an official report." My head buzzed like a beehive kicked by Mia Hamm. I wished more than anything that the man would leave. I was getting flustered. I needed another hit, just a small one, to clear my head.

"Haha..yeah, for sure! In fact, I was going to go and see you later on today, I swear!" This made the detective's smile return. He flipped open a pad he removed from his breast pocket.

"Lucky for you, I'm here now. That'll save us both some time." The man unclipped a pen from the pad and asked, "Where were you last night between the hours of five and two?"

My head swum. My knees knocked. "I.. I was here. Right here. We were...we were doing reshoots! Yeah, reshoots. Television, you know?"

I coughed and sniffed. He wrote nothing down in his notepad.

“I see,” he said in a frigid voice. “And how about the first day I came by? What did you do after I left?” His eyes were hypnotically cold. His backpack rustled and moaned lightly. I blinked my eyes rapidly, wondering if I was just imagining things.

“Uhhh that day..well that day I wasn’t feeling well so I napped right here in my dressing room until Strabo was able to bring me home. That’s all I did, honest!” Again, the man wrote nothing in his pad. He fixed me with a hard stare as his backpack rippled like the water glass in Jurassic Park.

“Alrighty then,” he said in a robotic way. “So you didn’t leave the station until Strabo brought you home?” I nodded vigorously. I nodded so quickly that the threads in my neck felt like they could unravel. However, his next question stopped my movements cold. “So you didn’t leave here and visit a park, then?”

I felt frozen in place. I tried in vain to keep myself from shaking but the force of the drugs and my fears were overwhelming. “A p-park?” I tried to make my question sound incredulous, confused. “No, no park. I wasn’t feeling good, I stayed right here.”

The detective returned the pad to his pocket. He never wrote down a single word. “Alrighty then. So you didn’t in fact go and visit one Mr. Drugs Bunny?” I couldn’t help myself. I wobbled on my feet and temporarily allowed my vibrating eyes to cross.

“Who?” I managed to squeak out. “Did you say *Drugs* Bunny? No way man, he sounds shady. I was just here in my dressing room, waiting until Jean could take me home.” The detective arched an eyebrow at my response. It would have been a comical moment if I wasn’t so terrified.

“Jean? I thought that you said Strabo took you home.” I swallowed back the lump I felt forming in my felted throat.

“Yeah! Yeah, Strabo, that’s what I said. Jean? Who said Jean? Was..did..was it you who said Jean?” I tried to chuckle casually but it came out like the strangled giggle of a hyena who had gotten into a mountain of meth. The detective’s eyebrow lowered.

“I see.”

The detective said nothing more, just stood in the doorway of my dressing room like a judgmental statue. I squirmed and writhed and sniffed and snorted. I waited for him to leave, but he didn’t. The canvas backpack shuddered like a coin operated motel bed. Finally, detective Brick broke the silence again.

“So, where is Robby?”

“Robby?” I parroted back numbly. My head was swimming. I was sure that the backpack really was moving but Brick never seemed to acknowledge the movement at his back.

“Yes, *Robby*. You know, your little butt buddy that you work with? Where is he?”

“I haven’t seen him today,” I began but he cut me off so quickly that my spindly arms shook and my ears twitched.

“Oh, you haven’t seen him today?” The detective’s voice was all vitriol and accusations. “Well then how about last night? You know, the day that he went *missing*?”

“I..I..I,” I stammered out.

“You..you..you are *lying* to me,” Brick shot back with increasing volume. “I think that you *do* know where Robby is. I think that you know a whole lot more than you’re telling me.”

I opened my mouth to protest but the human detective reached out with a calloused grubby hand and pinched my mouth shut with a sarcastic shushing sound. My eyes bulged. The backpack began to cry.

“Now now, I won’t be listening to anymore lies from puppets today. I think that you know what’s going on. While I’m sure that you are just about as stupid as you look, that doesn’t mean that you

can't wise up real quickly. Now tell me, and tell me straight, where is Robby?" Without waiting for a response, Brick snatched up a cold cup of coffee from my dressing room table and threw it into my face. The suddenness of the action made me cry out, even though the coffee was far from hot. "Where is he?" Brick repeated his question and knocked all of the clutter from my table to the floor. With intentional malice he stepped on my framed autographed photo of Cuddly Dudley. It crunched beneath his boot like an extra crispy cockroach, grinding shards of glass into the rug on the floor. I lost my balance and fell over, becoming a part of the disorganized mess on the floor. Brick was on top of me in a flash.

"Listen to me and listen good, you sniveling lying sack. I have dead bodies piling up and a stupid TV clown missing. And for some reason I've got a feeling that you and your little buddies may be connected. So if you don't start talking right now I'll - " Sudden sharp cries of pure pain and panic

escaped from the buckled canvas flap of his backpack. Brick whirled the bag around and threw it over his shoulder. It hit the floor heavily next to me. Brick turned his attention to the bag, walloping on it with two meaty practiced fists until it fell silent and limp once more. Brick spat and then heaved the bag back over his shoulder, turning his attention back to me.

“Who..who do you have in there?” I asked, not really wanting to hear the answer. Detective Brick smiled evilly.

“Somebody else who wasn’t quite ready to talk,” he informed me in a chilly voice that was ripe with implications. “I wouldn’t worry about it if I were you, you have enough trouble on your plate.” I gulped so loudly that I was sure it could have been heard from space. Brick leaned in, so close to my face that the fur of my forehead brushed up against his bristly eyebrows. “Now,” he said in a voice that smelled faintly of breakfast and brandy, “I’ve found a piece of hair that looks

quite similar to yours. It was beneath a dead body. Then, you went off to see a sketchy rabbit in a park and lied to me about it. So that's a *second* hare that's working against you, you understand me?" The question was rhetorical, which worked out as I wasn't sure that I would be able to answer even if I wanted to. His knee was crushing my empty chest, pressing it all the way down to the floor like I had no tangible body at all. "I know that these are connected. I know that there's a murder case there. And I also know that you've got cotton balls for brains so there's no way in hell that you're the mastermind in all of this. So I'll tell you what." He paused, letting his threats sink in. He released the pressure on my chest and got to his feet, towering over me. Brick felt around in his back pocket and pulled something out. I shut my eyes tight, expecting a heavy blow from a nightstick to smash my fuzzy face in. I opened them back up when I felt something thin and light land upon my face like a gentle butterfly. I crossed my eyes again, this

time to see what had landed above my lips. It was a business card.

“I’ll give you until a little bit after four o’clock to think about your situation. If you decide then that you’d like to save your hairy hide and play ball, you give me a call.” He leaned down once more, his angry face looming above my quivering sniffling one. “But I highly recommend that you do it soon, before somebody else decides to talk first. After that, no one, not even puppet Jesus himself, can save you.” As if on cue, the backpack began to whimper and moan again. Brick turned to leave, expertly smashing the struggling canvas bag against the wall as he did so. Without another word, Brick left my dressing room and left me to stew in my mess.

Shuddering, I rummaged through the mess on the floor until I located a little baggy tucked away in the hollowed out handle of my hairbrush.

For multiple reasons, I sniffed.

Phase Two (Strabo)

I watched from behind a pile of props as Brick exited Iggy's dressing room. Thinking himself alone and unobserved, the detective removed an overstuffed backpack from his shoulder. Once he unbuckled the plastic clips that held it shut, a familiar face popped out like a weasel from a hole.

"*ITOLD* you I was a great actor, didn't I? Do you think that he bought it?" Seeing the sickeningly sweet smile of Thaddeus Q. Widderpip-pits filled me with a flood of fury. The detective shushed his idiot companion in the bag and together they disappeared down the hall and around

a corner, presumably heading to the studio exit. After waiting a few beats just in case, I stepped out of my place of concealment and slipped silently into Strabo's dressing room.

Inside the small room I saw a pathetic Iggy sniffing and clutching a crumpled photograph of a dog to his fuzzy chest. When my shadow fell across him he jolted like he was physically shocked. His ears flapped and his eyes uncrossed slowly as he looked up at me.

"What's the matter Iggy? Something bothering you?"

Iggy fixed his big dumb eyes on me. "Strabo! Wh-what are you..wh..what's that? Is something bothering me? N-n-no, of course not. Just the backstage jitters, you know? I must have skipped lunch again." I could tell that he was struggling to keep his eyes focused and his furry fingers from shaking. I narrowed my one eye at him and asked point blank:

“You had a little something to take the edge off, didn’t you Iggy?”

Iggy’s eyes bugged out, crossed, and then they gave him away. His eyes darted to the right for just an instant, looking straight at the thing he was most concerned about me noticing. It was a tightly rubber banded baggie containing a white powder that I could only assume was not granulated sugar. It was peeking out from the end of a hairbrush, one that seemed to have been hollowed out for this very purpose. No matter how low I set the bar for my fellow puppet, Iggy Sniggles always found a new way to limbo under it. He had officially run out of chances.

Reaching out for the baggie with my left hand, I used my right one to grab this reprehensible representation of puppets by the cheap stitching of his throat. “You are a stain on the fabric of society and an embarrassment to my show.” I watched his ears twitch with terror as I tore open his precious baggie and began to squeeze his throat. “You have an

almost *human*-like ability to destroy everything that you touch. In the tapestry of life you are the humidity, the moths and the unraveling weave. I should have seen the truth of it long ago.” I dumped the entire contents of the bag into my hand and then I began to smother Iggy with it. He seized and whimpered and bucked but in the end, he sniffed and sniffed again. He sniffed until his eyes crossed. He sniffed until his eyes threatened to bulge out of his foam skull. I leaned in with all of my weight, lowering my face until it was level with his. His ears were twitching so rapidly that they looked like a pair of hummingbirds with Tourettes. “Sometimes bad things must be done for the greater good.” I pressed down with all of my might. Iggy’s flailed around in one last frantic attempt to live. His furry limbs convulsed erratically like an electrocuted spider. Finally, he shuddered and moved no more.

I released a heavy sigh while simultaneously releasing his limp throat. After taking a moment to

regain my composure, I pulled a portable phone from my pocket and hit redial. When I heard the other line pick up I simply told them, "The heat is turned up. Grab the next one, we're too close to stop now. Tonight we have to finish what we started."

After taking care of the scene in the dressing room, my mind was on other tasks as I quietly clicked Iggy's door shut behind me. I heard frantic footfalls echoing down the hallway and a moment later Steve appeared. He was wearing a director's beret on his head in walrus grey. I did my professional best to swallow down my disgust for the man.

"Strabo! There you are. You've gotta get into wardrobe. Like *now*. Come on, you're killing me. Tonight's live episode is going to be huge; we've got a lot riding on this. No more mishaps, alright? Now, where's Jean?"

I couldn't help it. I smiled slyly and hoped that it came across as reassuring. "Oh, you know Jean.

He's probably off having some fun right now. I'm sure he'll be cleaned up by showtime." Whether he was convinced by my words or not, Steve left either way. I continued to smile and then took a deliberately slow walk over to wardrobe.

Deep in the back of the studio, in a pitch black and seldom used space, Jean was screaming. He kicked and twisted and fought with everything he had against the flood of tiny grasping hands but, in the end, he was overwhelmed; subsumed in a tsunami of stitched fists and felted fingers.

McFeely (Brick)

The community college looked like it hadn't received a single update or repair since the late nineteen eighties but that may have worked out in our favor. Tad seemed to remember every detail of the place from the moment we parked the cruiser in front of the weathered brick administration building. Tad babbled incoherently about the architecture, the types of trees on campus and a bunch of other crap I wasn't paying attention to. After a few excruciating minutes of Tad's tour we arrived at the faculty wing.

The office we were looking for was on the third floor. I pushed the button for the elevator and then noticed a faded sign saying that it was out of order. *Of course*. We took the stairs and found suite 322. The name Professor Fred McFeely was engraved on an acrylic name plate. Beneath it the name plate read: Department of History, Lore and Social Justice. Tad, huffing and puffing from the trek up three flights of stairs, knocked softly on the door with a tiny fist. From within the office, an ancient voice called out for us to come in.

The interior of the office was clean but cluttered. Books were stacked on nearly every surface and the walls were scarcely decorated, save for some prehistoric certificates and two personal framed photographs of what appeared to be the man with his wife. Professor McFeely stood on creaking knees as we entered and gestured with a smile to the two hard plastic chairs sitting in front of his desk. "Please, have a seat," he implored us.

“Thaddeus, it’s so nice to see you again. I only wish that it were under better circumstances.”

Tad climbed and stood on top of his chair in order to shake the man’s hand. “Nice to see you again too, professor! It’s been fun to see the old campus again.” After shaking hands with me next we all took our seats. Professor McFeely’s knees crackled loudly as he lowered himself into his chair.

“So,” I said, cutting right to the chase. “Tad sent you a photo of that symbol we found. Have you had any luck identifying it?” The question brought a dark cloud over the man’s naturally sunny disposition. He nodded somberly. “Yes, unfortunately, I did.”

McFeely reached behind him to retrieve a thick red volume from its place on a populated shelf. He set it down gently on his desk but the weight of it still made a heavy thump as it hit the surface. “I was able to hunt down this old text. It’s a book from back when I was still a student myself.”

He began to flip through its pages carefully, as if the paper would crumble into dust if he flipped them too hard. “Have you ever heard of the Puppa Maries?” The name had an instant effect on Tad who shuddered as if a ghost had passed through him.

“Puppa Maries? Are...are you *sure*, professor?” Tad’s voice was high and pinched, as if even uttering the name aloud caused a frosty inner struggle. Professor McFeely nodded and tried his hand at a small but sad smile. “Yes, I’m afraid so.” After that short exchange a silence hung heavily in the air until I looked back and forth between the two of them questioningly.

“Either of you two want to fill me in here?” I asked, doing my best to hide my annoyance as I didn’t want to rub the professor the wrong way too quickly. After finding the appropriate page, McFeely turned the book around and slid it across the desk to me. I picked it up and glanced at the illustrations littering the page. They looked like

primeval marionettes being lowered by what appeared to be spacecrafts of some kind.

“Puppets can be traced back as far as the year 422 BC in ancient Egypt,” he said, settling comfortably into lecture mode. “Some people from those times seemed to have believed that puppets were a gift from beyond the stars, like many believed the pyramids to be.”

I snorted automatically but stopped just short of rolling my eyes. “Right,” I said sarcastically. “Aliens. So alien puppets then?”

McFeely looked at me with an expression that I’m sure a lot of his students had received over the decades. It was a look of practiced patience. “I’m simply telling you the story as it was recorded. I’m not asking you to believe it, only to hear it. May I continue?” Feeling just the slightest bit embarrassed, I waved a hand for him to continue.

“Thank you. Now, at first the puppets were simply used for novel entertainments for the masses and also served as toys and playmates for

the children of royal families. But as time went on, strange incidents began to occur. If you would, detective, please take a look at the bottom of page one hundred and six.”

I flipped to the page he was referring to. A lot of the text was in a language I didn’t come even close to grasping, but the pictures, as they say, were worth a thousand words. The illustration that stood out most heavily was in the dead center of the page. It was an open sarcophagus with something small inside of it.

“During a routine maintenance of the tomb of Khufu, it was discovered that his human remains were missing. Instead of his mummified body being interred in his sarcophagus, they discovered a wooden puppet. This sparked a series of investigations and soon Plutarch and Herodotus found similar figurines in many other Egyptian tombs. When they tried to present their findings, however, they were branded as heretics and buried alive.”

I scanned the pages as patiently as I could but I soon found myself doubting it's relevance to the case. "Look, professor, I love story time as much as the next guy. But do you think we could jump ahead and talk about what this has to do with us today? I mean, come on. Ancient Egypt doesn't exactly have it's fingerprints all over these murders." In response to my outburst I received another one of the professor's practiced looks of patience.

"I'm getting to that. Believe me, this is all relevant." I was going to protest again but Tad elbowed me in my leg and shook his head. Tad then returned his full attention to the professor, who cleared his throat and continued. "Although those two men were initially silenced, their findings lived on. Shortly after their deaths, it was uncovered that the oracle Zues-Amon himself was not a human being at all but a hollow dummy, one that was being manipulated by nearly invisible strings. It seemed that the puppets were uprising,

no longer contented to be mere entertainment devices for spoiled royal children. And fighting at the forefront of the insurrection was the most cunning and cruel of them all: Mary Annette.” Tad flinched at the mere mention of the name as if it were a slap across his stuffed face. “Mary Annette used the dark arts to transform her human masters into mindless drones, whom she then controlled to gain power over the people. She used her human puppets to abuse the powers of the pharaohs and led Egypt into a time of civil war and death unlike any that had come before it. Egypt was finally rid of her once and for all when the humans were able to destroy her palace, burning it to the ground with her inside of it.”

The professor paused. It may have been for dramatic effect but the only effect it had was to annoy me. “Okay, so she’s dead. So what does that have to do with our case? I mean *COME ON* man, speed it up a little bit here.” I glanced impatiently

at my wristwatch, wondering if I was wasting my own time here.

“As you wish. Mary Annette may have been destroyed, but her followers were many. They went underground and kept both her teachings and her hatred for mankind burning brightly in their hearts. It was their belief that, if they were able to sacrifice enough human souls to her name, that they would be able to raise her from the dead.”

“And that’s what you believe is going on here?” I asked, still undecided on whether this was helpful or not.

“I do. That mark that you found on the dead body, it’s the mark of her people, of her followers. It says in the ancient book of her teachings that if they can sacrifice enough souls before the next blue moon, as well as to ‘spill the blood of the just’, then they will have generated enough power to bring her back to life. And when she returns, she will bring with her the next dark age for all of mankind. Masters and slaves will change places, it

will be us who will become the disposable play-things. The texts refer to her as the ‘Puppet Master of the Master Race of Puppets’, she is the chosen one to bring their kind to rule once and for all.”

I had heard enough. I closed the book suddenly and, from the look of horror on McFeely’s face, apparently not gently enough. The protective way he reached out to retrieve the book and clutch it closely to him, it was as if I had slam-dunked his baby or something. “Sorry,” I said, feeling slightly sheepish. I then turned to Tad and said, “I don’t believe any of that.”

“You don’t?” Tad asked me, looking like he was on the verge of tears. I wasn’t entirely sure that puppets could cry but, if they could, they would look like this right beforehand.

“No, I don’t. BUT,” I added quickly before I could be interrupted, “it doesn’t really matter if I believe it or not. It only matters if *they* believe it. This mumbo-jumbo may not be real but those bodies in the morgue sure are. And if your boy

Strabo is behind all of this, then we need to shut him down. Let's go down the station and see if Iggy cracks this time. If he does, we can haul him in and put the squeeze on him before the show starts tonight."

I stood to leave. "Thank you for your time professor," I said, actually meaning it. He nodded politely but didn't extend his hand for a shake. He was still guarding the ancient book against my oafishness. "Good luck to you both," McFeely said.

When we were out of the office and halfway to the car, Tad suddenly stopped in his tracks and looked me up and down.

"What now?" I asked him in an annoyed huff.

"Well," Tad said, his right foot shyly tracing circles onto the ground below, "We can't show up looking like this. You already spooked them, so we should be more covert. We need to take them by surprise." Then, with a sheepish look, he glanced up at me like an expectant child. "Right, partner?"

I blew out a sigh and groaned. Unfortunately, he was right for a change. “Fine. What do you suggest?” I asked him. Tad’s smile was a mile wide. I hated it.

“A little studio magic. It’s wardrobe time!”

Improv and Invade (Brick)

After spending a horrifying half hour in a costume shop with Tad, we were able to find a compromise. I outright refused any wig that was longer than shoulder length, which was apparently a tall order here. To make up for the shorter hair, I agreed to wear a ridiculously thick mustache which hung heavily from a plastic pincher on the space between my nostrils.

I felt foolish in the disguise but I was able to forget about it as we drove. The closer we got to the station and our mission, the more laser focused I

became. Tad, on the other hand, was a constant ball of nerves. He fidgeted in the passenger seat constantly, wringing his hands or tapping his fingers on the polyester of his seatbelt.

“Things are gonna be fine,” I assured him. He looked up at me with that pathetic expectant look again. “Remember, this is all just conjecture right now. We can’t just storm in and start throwing accusations left and right. We need to be stealthy. We’re going to simply sneak in, gather our intelligence, reconnoiter the place, and then get the hell out so we can write up some warrants and get us some backup. Got it? In and out, nice and easy, quiet as a church mouse.” My words seemed to have worked, as the puppet sitting in the passenger seat grew still and his breathing more regular.

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Quiet as a church mouse.” He paused and frowned for a moment. “Although that doesn’t sound too exciting, now that I think about it.”

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. “I know you’ve always wanted to be a cop but we have protocols to follow. This isn’t some movie where we get to go in, guns blazing and shouting out cool one liners. That’s not reality.”

“I knooowww,” Tad said in a whiny voice. “Sheesh, relax partner. I am firmly planted in reality.” I glanced over and thought about how little those words seemed true coming from him. He was wearing a brightly colored rainbow wig pulled tightly onto his round purple head. He’d added a unicorn horn in the middle of the wig and used velcro to secure an extra eye onto his forehead. The extra eye was little more than a googly eye you could purchase at any craft store. Its plastic pupil rolled around wildly as Tad leaned forward and removed something from the cupholder in front of him.

“Oh neat-o! Real cop sunglasses! Can I have these?” The excitement in his voice was like a kid on Christmas.

“You can *borrow* them,” I told him as the sunglasses were already halfway to his face.

“Awesome!” He put them on and pulled down the passenger visor to admire his new look. The third eye rolled stupidly above the frames, killing the whole authoritative vibe that the aviators may have given him. “How do they look?” Tad asked me, beaming.

“They look fine,” I told him, wondering if the truth would make him more or less annoying for the rest of the ride. I decided to play it safe and try to change the subject back to the task at hand. “Let’s focus up here. We don’t know for sure what we’re walking into. If it’s even half as bad as it seems, we need to put a permanent stop to it.”

“So,” Tad said, swiveling in his seat to face me. “Some might say that it’s -” Tad paused and removed the sunglasses from his face with a dramatic flourish, “The last stop at Imagination Station.”

I sighed. “Sure thing,” I said flatly. Tad let out a frustrated screech.

“You *ruined* it!” Tad put the sunglasses back on his face, cleared his throat and removed them again, this time with an even bigger flourish. “The last stop at Imagination Station. Time to kick some caboose!”

I sighed again, beginning to feel like an air mattress that had sprung a leak. “Are you done playing around now?”

With another howl of displeasure, Tad punched me in the arm. I could barely feel a thing but it still pissed me off. “Stop it!” Tad whined. “You get to be Mister Cool Cop all the time. For me, this might be my only chance. So let me say my cool line and let it be the last thing we say until we get there. Okay? *OKAY?!*”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes I’m serious! Come on!” Tad cleared his throat, put the sunglasses on for a third time, and whipped them off again. “The last stop at Imagination Station.” With a satisfied smirk, Tad melted back down into his seat. I scowled.

“You know that it’s, like, another twenty minutes to get there, right?”

Tad’s shriek of frustration sounded like a hawk in a blender. He put the sunglasses on and ripped them off again, this time harder. His googly eye went flying off with the motion, flicking off of the dashboard and disappearing out the open passenger window. “THE LAST STOP AT IMAGINATION STATION!”

He sat huffing in the passenger seat. With a shrug, I said nothing. A moment later, I pressed the button to turn the radio on.

“Oh come on!” Tad complained as the vocals of Frankie Valli killed his vibe again.

What felt like an eternity later, we parked in a visitor space on the studio lot. As we approached the entrance, I took one last opportunity to keep Tad on task. “Now remember, we’re not here to draw any attention to ourselves. So, the plan is -”

“Hey, who the hell are you?” I was cut off by a question from Steve, the director of the show. I

was completely taken off guard, not expecting to be immediately confronted once inside.

“Me?” I asked dumbly. “Uhh, I’m..”

“Wait a minute,” Steve said, mercifully cutting in. “Are you guys from the agency?”

I sputtered out a forced laugh. I went for casual but it read closer to unhinged. “The agency? Who, *us*? What, like the CIA or something? Ha! Like *I* could be cop, can you imagine?” Steve shut his eyes for a moment, looking more annoyed than anyone I’d ever met. This must be how I looked to Tad all the time. I used this short break to reel myself back in. I thought the stupid fake mustache must have been pinching off the circulation to my brain.

“God, you actors are irritating,” Steve said.

“Actor? What makes you think I’m *acting* here?” I was beginning to sweat bullets. Thankfully, Tad stepped in front of me.

“Yes, we’re actors from the *talent* agency,” he said, giving me a ‘keep it together’ look. It looked

ridiculous coming from someone wearing a rainbow unicorn wig, but it worked regardless.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Thanks for making that interaction extra difficult. The hell was that, anyway? Some kind of improv? I HATE improv, alright guys?” Steve looked more wound up than an antique alarm clock. “The show is live tonight, do you understand the significance of that? I’ll be having ZERO improv tonight, understand?” He gave me a withering look. I would have diminished under it had I not gotten the same look five times a week from our police captain.

“Got it,” I said, unsure what to do next. That was decided for me, however, as Steve pointed to me and said, “I don’t have time to hold your hand here. The show starts in fifteen minutes and Jean is still missing. You, get into makeup right now.” Steve turned on his heels and rapidly walked away. In turn I spun and glared at Tad.

“Are you crazy? I can’t act! And we’re supposed to be invisible here, remember? How can I do that while being on national friggin’ TV?”

Tad patted my knee with a tiny hand. “Hey! Relax partner. So this is a slight change of plans, so what? I took improv classes at the community college, it’ll be fine. Besides, I’m a puppet. I’ll blend in better here. You keep them all busy and I’ll have a looksie backstage and see what I can find out. I’ll talk to Iggy too, don’t worry. It’ll be fine buddy!”

I was about to protest further but from far down the hallway, Steve had turned around to shout, “Hey, dumbass! Makeup is waiting. Let’s move it.”

Feeling trapped, I sighed and looked down at Tad. He was positively beaming at this change of fortune. “Don’t worry, I got this,” he said. I blew out a helpless breath and then resigned myself to fate. I gave Tad a tiny salute, which I could tell bolstered his spirits, and we went our separate ways.

Sniggles got Snuffed (Tad)

Much like the earlier trip to the community college, being backstage at Imagination Station caused all kinds of memories to flood back. I had spent so much time drinking since leaving the show that I had become unable to remember anything positive about my time here. I was so focused on the bad things that I forgot about how much fun it could be at times.

I heard the excited buzz of a crowd and the enchanted chittering of children. I felt the familiar warmth emanating from the brightly burn-

ing overhead lights. I sniffed whiffs of pastries in catering, heard the shuffling of props and saw the wide-eyed optimism of the paid extras. It was all so familiar. It was all so...*distracting*.

I shook my head to clear it and refocus. I was no longer a kid's show host, I was a sleuth, a super spy, a detective with a partner who needed me. I couldn't wander aimlessly or let my guard down. I was here for a reason: I had to find Iggy.

I called upon every minute of training I had...which was zero, I guess. *Official* training, anyway. I watched countless episodes of **Cops** and **Law & Order** back when I had a TV and I was now trying to call all the pertinent information to mind. I slunk through the halls of the studio like a thief in the night, like a Grinch on Christmas Eve. I darted, dipped, dashed and rolled. I flattened myself up against the wall whenever someone threatened to come near me. I was good. I was *darn* good.

I made my way down to the dressing room area. After a short pause to make sure I wasn't being followed, I somersaulted my way to Iggy's door. The door was locked from the inside but these knobs were old and the dressing rooms were sometimes shared, so they weren't hard to open. I easily found a popsicle stick glued to one of the extra props and I jammed it into the knob. With little resistance it turned and the lock clicked open. I cartwheeled inside and quietly shut the door behind me.

"Iggy? *Psssst!* Iggy!"

The room was dark. I got no response. I wasn't sure that Iggy was in here but I hadn't seen him anywhere else backstage.

"Hey! Iggy! If you're here, we need to talk."

Silence was my only answer. I decided to turn on the lights to assess the situation. If anything, maybe there were some clues strewn about, Iggy wasn't the most organized person even on a good day. I went to flip the switch and I stumbled into

a solid stack of something, which clanged noisily to the floor. *Dang it!*

I felt around until I found the lights and, the moment they were turned on, I wished that they weren't.

In the darkness I had knocked over a stack of prop boxes, which were now spilled out across the floor. The first box was full of pots and pans from the cooking segments, which explained the commotion as it all clattered. The second box was full of silly hats and various pieces of flair to dress up the extras as needed. From the bottom box, a limp white arm unfurled and dangled lazily over a cast-iron pan. The arm was fuzzy and matted and looked like it was coated in some kind of white dust. It was Iggy!

I used both of my hands to stifle a scream as I ran full speed out the door.

The Show Must Go On (Brick)

The makeup artist caked so much crap on my face that I felt like a paper mâché preschool project. I tried to act like I belonged there but it was apparent to a lot of people backstage that I didn't. More than once I had heard someone remark, "This your first gig?" All the while they were trying to not let on that they thought I was going to do terrible out there.

Before I could even wrap my head all the way around the fact that I was about to star on the show I had come here to investigate, a loud and

wacky theme song began to play to a uproar of cheers and whistles. When I hesitated a moment too long, Steve snuck up behind me and shoved me onto my mark with a boot. He quickly took his spot in his director's chair as the lights came up and I found myself standing face to face and eyes to eye with Strabo.

"Hey kids! It's me, Strabo Bellyhands! Are you all excited to be here?"

A deafening chorus of kids confirmed that they were.

"I can't heeeaaarrrrrrr yooouuuu! I said, are you all excited to be here?!"

The children roared even louder this time. I gulped down a bit of nausea. I was pretty sure I was the only one in the entire building who wasn't excited to be here.

"That's great to hear, kids! We have a *very* exciting live show lined up for you. Unfortunately, Fun-ductor Jean seems to have gotten off at the wrong stop again and isn't here. However, today

we have a brand new friend here to hang out with us at Imagination Station.”

The crowd cheered. I gulped and smiled. I felt sweat trickle down my caked face.

“Why don’t you introduce yourself, friend?” Strabo looked at me, expecting an answer. The only answer I could muster up was the sound of my knees knocking. Strabo looked over at Steve, who whispered, “*Pssst*. Hey! Moron!” Steve indicated to a large teleprompter set up beneath the main camera. I blinked rapidly to clear the sweat from my eyes and read:

“Hi there kiddos. I’m, uh, Mustache Magurk?”

Strabo squinted. “Are you telling us or asking us?”

“I have no idea,” I answered honestly. Steve groaned and covered his face with his clipboard but the kids all laughed and seemed to enjoy their back and forth. Strabo, too, was smiling..but his smile was of a different sort.

“Alrighty then. Since knowing our own names can be hard sometimes, how about we move on to our first segment?”

“An excellent idea,” I read robotically as the teleprompter was updated and scrolling along. Strabo turned to face the main camera and put on his goofiest smile.

“Okay folks! We’ll be back shortly after these messages. Don’t go changing that channel! We have a very big surprise at the end of the show. See you soon!” Strabo held his goofy smile until Steve yelled cut from the sidelines and the lights dimmed. Strabo’s smile dimmed just as quickly.

The set came alive with frantic movement as both human and puppet stagehands rushed this way and that, tearing down props and setting up new ones for the next segment. As the crew whirled around us in a sea of motion, Strabo stood perfectly still. He stared at me with a cool, singular unblinking eye.

“I feel like I know you from somewhere,” he said slowly, a tinge of suspicion in his tone.

I shrugged, which I hoped came off as casual. “Yeah, you know. I just have one of those faces, you know? Maybe we worked together sometime.”

“I see. Yes, perhaps,” Strabo said, his round eye searching me, unblinking. It reminded me faintly of Tad’s discarded googly eye, only instead of rolling around, it seemed as if it had a laser focus aimed only at me. I peeked over at the teleprompter to avoid his gaze. It was powered down at the moment, being loaded with the next bits of dialogue from the operator.

“So what is the next segment?” I asked. I didn’t need any acting skills to make my question sound worried. I was completely out of my element here. Strabo smiled when I turned back to him. It wasn’t a reassuring smile given from a professional to an amateur. It wasn’t a smile of pity for a fool who was lost. It was painted onto his face without

emotion, not a touch of joy reached his eye. It was the smile of a psychopath. It was the empty smile of a killer, I had seen enough of them to know.

“Just follow my lead. You’ll be fine. I’ll...take care of you.”

I gulped, hearing the menace implied between his short assurances. “Why did you pause like that?” I asked him, but it was too late. The stage lights came up to their full power and a snippet of the theme song from earlier played us back from break. The sign that said **APPLAUSE** flashed but it was completely unnecessary. The kids were eager to eat up anything we gave them. After a few quick directions and insults from Steve, I found my spot and hoped for the best.

Robby is Strung Out (Tad)

I slipped, stumbled and fell while rounding a corner. I hit my head hard on the ground but, being made of foam, it didn't hurt too badly. I scrambled to my furry feet and fled blindly. My direction was aimless. I just wanted to be anywhere *except* for where a dead body was.

I was running in a nearly manic state and quickly I realized that I was lost. I slowed down and looked around. I was deep into the dark recesses of the back part of the studio. In these rarely used spaces, there were all kinds of faded and bro-

ken down props and set designs from the shows that had come before Imagination Station. I saw a bellhop uniform from **Happy Henderson's Hotel**. Behind that was the treehouse from **Timmy the Tree and Friends**, which was still attached to the top half of a broken tree with a smiling face. The face was bisected, turning the friendly smile into a grimace of pain. Everywhere I looked there were reminders of the past. There were costumes from **Herbert the Milkman**, shovels in all the colors of the rainbow from **Books I Dig**. I even spotted the giant loaf of dark rye bread from **Pumpnickel Park**. If I wasn't scared out of my mind, I would have been elated by this place. As it were, there were far too many shadows, too many creepy abandoned set designs that could easily be housing any number of spooky, twisted maniacs. I could imagine them peeking out at me from every dark place, eyes lit up like glow-sticks at a rave. I was starting to spin out a little but right at the last moment I saw something from the corner of

my eye that grounded me. It was the most familiar thing I had seen yet: It was *me*.

Rudely crammed into a far corner was a cardboard cutout of myself. It was full-sized, although that's not saying very much. My cardboard reflection was wearing a neat blue and white striped assistant conductor uniform. A wooden train whistle hung around its neck. In the left hand, cardboard me was holding out a large pocket watch which always displayed the same time: fun o'clock.

The merriment I felt when I first saw it quickly waned as I realized there was something else hanging around my neck. Looped over my printed head, there was a noose. The rope was tied tightly around my flat neck and it had been pulled hard enough that the thin cardboard of my neck was squeezed and frayed. If it had been yanked any harder my head would likely have been ripped from my paper body. I knew in my gut that Strabo was behind this.

I took a moment to slow my breathing, I didn't want to get all worked up. But then, suddenly, I noticed something else near my cutout, something far worse. Something so vile and nasty and *besmirchifying* that I wanted to cry. Hung right above my head was a piece of paper that said '**Tad Stinks**' with a big cartoon arrow pointing down at me. The *audacity*! Those *MONSTERS*! I wanted to tear that sign down and crush it in my mighty fist.

I angrily clomped forward. I stood up on my tippy toes to grab the sign but it was hung too high, my fingertips were just too short to grasp it. I bent my knitted knees and pumped my arms, jumping with all of my might. I fell short and landed awkwardly, losing my balance and crashing into the cardboard cutout of myself. The flat me, the one who apparently stinks, fell forward and revealed the space behind it. There was a tiny ornate door on the wall just where the perpendicular walls met. Inscribed on the door was a

familiar mark, one that I had seen earlier that day in McFeely's office.

Mustering all of the bravery I could, I reached out and turned the knob. It was unlocked.

I navigated the twists and turns of the dark tunnel that waited behind the door. I tried to remember how many turns there were, repeating in my head '*left, left, left, right, left, right*' but quickly I realized there were way too many turns to memorize. I gave that up and simply felt my way forward, wishing that maybe I'd brought some bread crumbs to sprinkle. I'd have to remember that for next time. After a few minutes of walking, the tunnel seemed to expand and open up until I could no longer touch both walls with my short arms. I stumbled and crept ahead until I saw the dimmest of lights burning somewhere in front of me. When I reached the light at the end of the tunnel, I found myself in a cavernous room.

My eyes adjusted from the total darkness of the tunnel to the dull light emanating from a few burning candles. I checked behind me to make sure I wasn't being followed. It seemed like I was alone. That quickly changed as I heard a ghastly moan from somewhere right in front of me. As my eyes adjusted further, I could just make out the silhouette of some dark figure hidden in the room.

I gulped, hoping to swallow back some of my fears. I had come too far to back out now. I crept forward as silently and as stealthily as I could. I took one step, then another, then another, then...
ARRGHHGHGH OWIE OUCH!

I found myself sprawled on the floor, shins aching. I had tripped over something unseen and solid on the floor, tipping me over and making me hit my head again, this time so hard that I heard a ringing sound in my ears. I squinted in the darkness and saw what had tripped me up: it was a string.

Not just any string, it was thick and braided. I looked more closely and then I recognized it; it was braided deep sea fishing line, the type they used to string modern marionettes. As I stared at the string, it began to vibrate and snap. My eyes followed it and I clocked with horror where the string ended.

Robby the Robber, still wearing the tattered remains of his clown costume, was strung up like clean laundry on a clothesline. There was a massive maze of strings strung about the room. There were some on his hands, some on his feet. There were thicker ones attached to his shoulders and his head. The strings all wiggled and wagged as the missing clown began to stir. His every movement seemed to cause him pain, he cried out in anguish with every quiver of fishing line. I realized with horror that the strings were all securely stabbed into him with sharp gnarly-looking hooks. His eyes shot open and bulged with panic. Upon see-

ing me, he opened his mouth and blood trickled down his chin in warm ropery rivulets.

“Thaddeus!”

Robby spat out my name, which was accompanied by a thick glob of dark red. He coughed and shook and chortled the short, sharp chuckle of the insane.

“Robby! Robby, holy cow are you okay? What happened to you? I thought that you were dead!” The formerly dead clown laughed in pain and then lunged for me, hands outstretched and greedily grabbing for my throat. The strings snapped tight and stopped his attack short. He howled with agony as the hooks bit deeper into his flesh. One of the hooks lodged in his shoulder tore loose and ripped out a chunk of red meat with it, which hung sickeningly in the air between us, dripping red droplets onto the stone floor.

“You’re one of them!” Robby shouted, his voice raw as hamburger meat. “You’re one of them! One of them!”

I held up my hands, wishing I could block from view the tangled mess of a man in front of me. “No Robby! I’m not one of them, I swear! I’m here to help.”

“Liar!” Robby spat, more slobber and red goo flying from his painted lips. “You’re in on it! You’re *ALL* in on it!” He struggled against his strings again, screaming and grabbing and bleeding and crying and laughing all at once. I was positively frozen with fright. “Come back to check on your little pet project, huh? Are you happy with what’s happening to me? *ARE YOU??*” Before I could find the words to respond, another spasm of pain seized him. He twisted and contorted, his fingers danced like the legs of a freshly stomped spider.

“Robby! I can help but you need to stop moving. If you can just stay still for a couple minutes I can -”

“Stand still?? I can’t!” Robby lashed out with a hand full of spasming fingers. His insane eyes

crossed to focus on the fishing line inserted into his flesh. "I'm too STRUNG OUT!" Robby thrashed and screamed again. Then, just when I thought his horrendous cries would drive me to insanity as well, they stopped. He grew deathly quiet and locked eyes with me. His lips curled up in a joker's smile, blood dribbling from both corners of his mouth.

"I get it. I get it, Thaddeus, I get it." Robby writhed around, fighting against the strings as they buried themselves deeper and deeper into his skin, muscle and bone. "For centuries, we've been manipulating you, working you from the inside with our human hands. And now...now.." He pulled fiercely at the strings, frantically tried to bite at the ones holding his leaking shoulders up. His whole body shook as a large lump started to form and push outward from the space beneath his shirt. The lump was large and perfectly round, making him look like a snake who had unhinged its jaw to consume an egg whole. "And now,"

Robby screamed, “*You’re inside of me!*” Robby thrashed and convulsed. He cried out again and again, “THERE’S NO ESCAPE! THERE’S NO ESCAPE! THEY’RE ALREADY INSIDE ME! THERE’S NO ESCAPE!”

Robby screamed until the round protuberance worked it’s way up through his stomach. It tunneled across his chest, heading towards his neck. The bulging ball beneath his flesh wormed its way up his neck, cutting off his cries with a grotesque gurgling sound.

Before I turned to run back down the tunnel, I witnessed Robby hacking up blood covered hairballs, one after the other, perfectly round, each slapping the concrete below with a wet thwap. As the bloating bloody balls bounced with the impact, they began to unfurl, revealing glistening sets of teeth and tongues and tiny fingers made of felt.

As I made my way down the tunnel, Robby’s cries echoed over and over again in my head.

Stabbo Part 2

(Strabo)

I enjoyed the look of paralyzed fear on the face of the detective. Soon, he would be suffering from more than stage fright. Much, *much* more. As a jolly tune played in the speakers overhead, I led a hesitant detective Brick over to a giant spinning target board covered in balloons.

Brick tried to dig his heels in and asked me out of the corner of his mouth, “What the hell are you doing? What is that thing?” If I was able to wink, I would have.

“Oh don’t you worry, it’s a gag. It’ll be fine.” None too gently, I pushed him into position. Before he knew what hit him, two of my puppet compatriots popped up to strap him in. He had no time to resist further, he was already secured to the board. With an enormous smile, I turned to the main camera and the crowd of human children.

“Welcome back kids! It’s now time for a segment that I like to call, ‘Don’t try this at home!’” I turned slowly to face Brick, taking my time, making sure that I had his full attention. When I was certain I did, I removed from concealment a very large, very sharp knife. When the detective’s eyes went wide, I swiftly turned back to the main camera and said, “Remember, DON’T try this at home.” With expert precision I whirled and let loose my grip on the blade. It sliced through the air with an audible whoosh and thunked loudly into the board right next to the detective’s head. It popped a large white balloon while Brick and

the kids screamed in unison. His scream was one of pure terror, whereas the one from the kids was a scream of delight.

As I readied my second blade, I asked the kids which balloon I should pop next. As their screams filled the entirety of the studio, behind the target board the real fun was about to start. As Brick struggled violently against the straps, one of my puppet allies stuck him with a thin needle. As he struggled and kept his panicked eyes on the blade in my hand, he never even felt it.

I smiled again, a large grin of self-satisfaction. The blood of the just had just been harvested.

Blood of the Just (Tad)

I smacked into walls at just about every opportunity. Gone from my head was any semblance of the layout of the tunnel. I was just running in blind terror, grateful for each and every wall I smashed into face first; I knew each twist and turn was taking me farther away from that horrible encounter with what remained of Robby.

*HOLY COW, HOLY COW, HOLY COW!
CRAP, CRAP, DOUBLE CRAP!!*

I was scared out of my mind. I needed to get to Brick, I needed to tell him what was going on.

Heck, I needed to get him out of here. What if he was next?

RUN! YOU NEED TO RUN!

Terror fueled my furry feet. I ran so fast you'd think I was made in Kenya. I ran, smacked into a wall, ran again, tripped over nothing, then lay for a moment to catch my breath. That's when I noticed something wafting above me. The tunnel seemed to be filling with smoke.

I had already stopped and dropped, so I only had to roll. I barrel rolled forward until I remembered that you only needed to stop, drop and roll if you were on fire. Checking that I wasn't, I switched over to an army crawl, creeping forward as the smoke became thicker and darker. From somewhere off in the distance, I heard a low murmur of voices. I crept forward until I hear them more clearly.

“Magne Puparum Magister, Vitam Tibi Adferimus. Magne Puparum Magister, Vitam Tibi Adferimus.”

The words sounded like gobbledygook to me but still, they also sounded dangerous...*ancient*. They were the sort of thing you read in creepy books that you found in cabin basements. I crept forward, slithering on my belly like a snake. As I slithered, the words became louder, clearer, closer.

“Magne Puparum Magister, Vitam Tibi Adferimus. Great puppet master, we bring you life. Magne Puparum Magister, Vitam Tibi Adferimus. Great puppet master, we bring you life.”

I reached a bend in the tunnel and stuck my head out just enough to get a glimpse of where the noise was coming from. A small hole had been bored into the wall of the tunnel. This hole served as a doorway to a small but cramped secret room. Inside of that room there were dozens of puppets, each of them holding hands and chanting, swaying in a circle around an altar made of bone and stone. A thick black smoke was billowing out of the altar with no apparent source. Each puppet

was wearing a black robe with a thin hood pulled over their heads. On the back of the robes I saw a familiar marking, one that I had seen too many times already today.

“Magne Puparum Magister, Vitam Tibi Adferimus. Great puppet master, we bring you life.”

I watched, transfixed by the cultish scene I was witnessing. As the smoke rose higher, the chanting became louder.

“MAGNE PUPARUM MAGISTER, VITAM TIBI ADFERIMUS. GREAT PUPPET MASTER, WE BRING YOU LIFE.”

Just when I decided to get the heck out of there, I heard footsteps approaching rapidly down the tunnel. Due to the echoes I had no idea if they were coming up behind me or in front of me, so I made myself as small as I could and hoped for a miracle. For the first time in a while, luck was on my side.

Another hooded puppet came barreling through the tunnel. Due to their hood being pulled over their eyes, they didn't see me. They excitedly entered the altar room, breaking up the circle and brandishing something over it's head. The puppet looked to be holding a small syringe, holding it up for display like it was a sword pulled from a stone.

"We've got it! Finally, we've got it," the puppet said, his goofy voice clashing with the seriousness of the situation. He sounded like Mickey Mouse, only somehow more evil. "The blood of the just has been harvested! The final piece is in place! Woohoo!" A chorus of wahoos, yippies and whoop whoops accompanied dozens of waving arms. Beneath matching black robes, fuzzy blue fists, purple tentacles, green trunks and furry hands with orange and white fingers flew into the air with gestures of intense celebration. It looked like a Hot Topic staffed by wacky waving inflatable flailing arm tube men. Once their cries of cel-

ebriation died out, they continued their chanting, this time louder and with more purpose.

“MAGNE PUPARUM MAGISTER, VITAM TIBI ADFERIMUS. GREAT PUPPET MASTER, WE BRING YOU LIFE.”

The floor felt unnaturally warm and began to vibrate beneath me. I had seen enough. Assuming that their crazed chanting would cover my retreat, I got to my feet and ran with everything I had.

Who's the Dummy now? (Brick)

P^{OP!}

A bright red balloon next to my head popped as a blade was expertly flung into it.

POP!

A yellow balloon that was too close to my groin for comfort popped next.

POP!

The green balloon next to my right hand burst as I continued to struggle against the straps holding me in place.

“Cut! Come on Steve, cut the scene you son of a -“

“You see kids?” Strabo cut in, talking over me. “The wheel has had so many uses since it’s invention. It has been used for carts and wagons and cars. It can be used to produce yarn, wool or flax.” Strabo paused a moment to fling another knife, this one lodged solidly into the wheel next to my leg where a hot pink balloon once stood. “And in the circus, it has been used for acts of daring-do, like you see here today. Tell me kids, do you like the *Wheel of Misfortune*?”

The roar of the crowd was deafening. Not for the first time, I wondered just what the hell was wrong with kids these days. I grew up watching **Bananas in Pajamas** and I turned out perfectly fine. This crap? This was mind pollution. This was insanity. This was....

POP!

.....entirely too close.

“Strabo! Stop this immediately!” I yelled. The kids all giggled and cheered and whooped without a care in the world. They knew that this was all an act, a silly goof from a one-eyed puppet bastard that they watched five times a week. Strabo showed me a smug smile of satisfaction. He blinked in my direction. In the back of my mind, I wondered if that was meant to be a wink.

“As you may have guessed already, the theme of today’s special live episode is the circus! Who can tell me something about the circus?” Tons of tiny hands shot up into the air, ooh ooh oohing with the strong desire to answer Strabo’s question. He smiled and gestured to a puppet on stage who was politely raising his hand. The human kids all moaned with temporary disappointment.

The puppet sounded like a drunk duck when it spoke. “The circus has elephants! And peanuts!”

“There are strong men! And clowns,” added another puppet, whose voice was a deep baritone.

“All true, all true,” Strabo said, his smile never diminishing. “There’s cotton candy and funnel cakes. There are games of skill and exhilarating rides.” He threw another whizzing blade which thunked into the blue balloon by my ear. The pop was loud as a gunshot.

“Of course, the circus isn’t *all* fun and games, now is it?” Strabo turned to me, menace shining brightly in his one eye. “There was a time long ago when the circus was not only a place of festivities, but a place of cruelty and exploitation.” I looked over at Steve again, my eyes begging him to yell cut. I could tell by the look of confusion on his face that Strabo was going off script. This was confirmed when I glanced to the teleprompter operator and saw him stupidly scratching his head like a confused cartoon bear. The words stopped rolling, but I noticed that the cameras did not.

“You see kids, these traveling shows used to have something called a ‘Freak Show’, where they displayed all kinds of people that they considered to

be abominations. Siamese twins. Pin heads. Amputees, bearded women, little people. And yes, even puppets. Puppets like me. Puppets like my mother and my father. Puppets who were branded as freaks and used as props, propped up as boogeymen for the crowds of paying families who jeered at them and poked them with sticks.” The audience quieted down. The kids all wore confused and sad faces as their parents leaned close to one another and exchanged concerned whispers. Steve gestured to the main cameraman to cut, but he didn’t. This was because he was no longer there. Instead, standing in his place, was a puppet wearing a black robe with the hood pulled up and over a bulbous green head. I looked back to Steve for help but now he too was gone, snatched from his chair by two pairs of pink puppets, both of them covered in feathers and black robes with the hood pulled up.

“Luckily for those poor tormented souls, by the 1940s freak shows were officially disbanded. They were seen for what they were: human cruelty at its finest.” Strabo’s smile fell from his face so quickly that I half expected it to make a crashing sound on the floor. “Human cruelty.” Strabo repeated, sadly shaking his head, harsh chastisement playing across his foam face. “Human beings are able to see, eventually, if they are treating each other badly enough that a stop needs to be put to it. Freak shows, holocausts, predators, they all have a limit. For puppets, however? There seems to be no such limit.” Strabo removed another large blade from its hiding place. This one looked different. It looked longer, crooked; it looked ceremonial in nature. I had a bad feeling that this one wasn’t going to puncture a balloon, I had a feeling it was coming for my heart.

“The people were released from their cages, but the puppets were not. They were sold to televi-

sion studios or auctioned off to the children of rich patrons like they were part of an estate sale. They were not people so they weren't worthy of being freed, just enslaved to a different regime. They were put to work, they were experimented on. They were subjected to so much abject horror and torture that even your few honest history books refused to record these atrocities." A darkness permeated every crevice and stitch of Strabo's face. His mask had finally fallen, exposing him for who he truly was. And who he truly was, was someone hellbent on vengeance. I struggled harder against my restraints. "My parents were among those who were sold off to a studio. And when they were deemed 'not funny enough' or 'not cute enough' or 'not entertaining enough', they were resold...and sold separately. My family was torn apart by the disgustingly human quality of needing to be both entertained and superior. My family was obliterated until I too became a slave to the system, until I too was sold and passed around

from grubby hand to greedy studio. We puppets may laugh and sing and dance and crack wise on your screens but do not be mistaken: our joy is not real. Our joy is not our own, it is scripted. All we know is suffering until we are, in turn, thrown away. Cast out into the trash once our usefulness had ran out.”

The kids in the audience sniffled and cried. The parents began to gather their frightened children up in their arms and head for the exits. They were stopped short by long metal chains and thick pieces of wood placed through the handles. They were barricaded in, trapped like rats. Trapped...like me. Strabo brandished the blade, which looked obsidian and alive with evil intent. It caught and reflected the light from the overhead stage lights, it gleamed with violent purpose. “All evil empires fall. At some point, kingdoms built on pain, inequality and iniquity crumble to dust, left to be remembered only in short chapters of inaccurate history books. I’m sorry to say children

that today, your empire falls. Today, a new era will be ushered in and unleashed upon the world, tearing it to pieces like a pack of rabid dogs. And it all starts *now!*” I closed my eyes, wishing to not see the blade coming. I stopped struggling against the straps; my time had come. “Don’t look away children! Witness the sins of your forefathers finally come to fruition!”

I heard the whoosh of the blade in the air. At the same time I felt a sensation much like falling. When my head cracked against the hard stage floor, I realized that I had in fact fallen. I twisted my body around as best I could and with throbbing eyes I saw a smiling Tad. He was behind the target board and had unhooked the restraints holding my arms at the last moment. He hadn’t gotten to the ones on my legs yet so I had pitched forward violently and crashed into the floor. The long obsidian blade was buried in the spot where I had been secured just a moment before; the handle still reverberating from the force of the impact.

Geez-a-lou!” Tad shouted. “You humans squirm around so much when you need help. Don’t you realize that makes it harder tfor me o help you?” Tad released my feet next and I rolled over and pounced to my feet. The impact with the floor and my sudden upward trajectory combined to give me a brutal head rush and made my eyes swim. All around us, the screams of children filled the air. Their terror filled me with purpose. I shook off the pain and dizziness and forced myself to focus until I could clearly see Strabo standing across the stage. I reached up and removed the ugly wig from my head. After that, I tore the stupid fluffy mustache from my face. My eyes watered with the unexpected pain that athis ction caused, as the plastic pinchers holding it in place had tangled themselves in my nose hairs. It felt like a small part of my brain had been ripped out through my nostril salong with the discarded disguise. Scrunching up my nose and blinking away the wtearsin my eyes, I said:

“It’s all over Strabo. We know that you’re a killer. Add that to the attempted murder of an officer on live television and, well, you’re going away for a long *long* time. You think that your life has been bad so far? Just wait until you get into gen pop. You’ll be abused and discarded like a sock in a teenager’s room.”

Strabo threw his head back and laughed. It was loud, frantic, spastic; it sounded like hyenas having sex on PCP. He turned back to the main camera and shouted, “Well kiddies, I guess it’s time for my big surprise! Don’t go away!” He turned to me and blinked, this time accompanied by him saying the word ‘wink’ out loud so I wouldn’t miss it. With that he took off, diving behind a cardboard prop of a lion wearing a small fez hat and standing on a brightly colored chair.

I took two steps in pursuit but was stopped dead in my tracks when the prop came crashing down. Like a domino effect, prop after prop fell forward as if pulled by invisible wires. The pop-

corn machine, the seal with a beach ball balanced on its nose, the ticket booth, the animal balloon vendor, one by one they all fell in a flat heap on the stage floor, revealing behind them a lone wooden puppet theatre with bright red and yellow drapes pulled open. Standing behind the front curtain, which was as black as the robes of his puppet minions, Strabo stood, smiling evilly.

I watched in horror as another figure slowly rose into view beside him. A tilted conductor hat topped a mess of dirty blonde hair, which swooped over a forehead and face that was white as a hospital sheet. Two deep vertical cuts dissected the face at the chin, the deep crimson lines transformed the human mouth into that of a ventriloquist dummy. I realized with dread that I was looking at the lifeless face of Fun-Ductor Jean.

“It’s too late,” Jean sputtered feebly in an emotionless voice, “You can’t stop us now.” As he spoke, thin bulges in his throat snapped to and fro, as if his vocal chords were being plucked by unseen

fingers. When his head moved, Jean's eyes rolled around crazily like two marbles let loose in a rock tumbler. It made my skin crawl.

"You're under arrest, Strabo. Put the dummy down and come peacefully. We don't have to let this escalate further."

"Who are you calling a dummy, *dummy*?" Jean unhinged his dissected jaw and laughed maniacally. His mouth opened so wide as he laughed that I could see the furry fingers manipulating him where the uvula should be. Jean's jaw snapped shut suddenly, cracking a few of his teeth in the process. Strabo smiled wider as red rivers began to leak from between Jean's lips.

"Strabo!" I shouted, my mind racing, searching for what to do next. This was far outside the realm of my typical investigations. "Strabo, you can still stop this. Let's talk this out."

"Stop it?" Strabo barked incredulously. "So soon? But we haven't even had our dessert yet, have we Jean?" With the hand not currently inside

his co-star, Strabo pulled out a stack of round cream pies. He smashed the first one into Jean's face with such force that a few of the broken bloody teeth flew from his mouth and clattered to the floor like the tooth fairy had been hit by a missile mid-flight. "How do *YOU* like it, huh Jean? You want a pie?! Here, have another! And another! And *ANOTHER!*" Strabo smashed pie after pie into the dead face of Jean, each one impacting harder than the last. By the time he ran out of dessert, Jean's face was little more than blood and cream dripping beneath a crooked conductor's hat. With a sick thwipping sound, Strabo's hand slipped seamlessly from a wet gash in Jean's back. The discarded human husk hit the ground with a hollow squelch.

The room started to spin as quickly as my thoughts did. I was spiraling, feeling lost, sensing that I had totally lost control of the situation. I was brought back by the slightest tugging at my pants leg. It was Tad, who was looking up at me

with large round eyes resting above a look of tight lipped determination.

“Hey partner, I’ve got this.” It took a moment for the meaning of his words to register with me.

“What? Tad, you can’t be serious.”

“I am serious. And don’t call me Shirley.”

I sighed, both annoyed and impressed with the puppet that I’d begrudgingly gotten to accept as an almost equal partner; maybe even as a friend.

“Tad, I don’t think -”

Tad firmly tugged on my pants until I just shut up and listened. “I’ve got this,” he repeated. “You need to go downstairs. There’s a small stairwell in the back corner of the studio that leads down. They’ve built a secret room with an altar down there. You need to go and stop them, stop them from raising Mary Annette.”

I instinctively looked around until I had a sense of where the stairs would be. I looked back down at my partner, matching his grim look of determination. “What are you going to do?” I asked him.

Tad reached into a pocket and pulled out my aviators, the ones I told him to leave in the car. He balanced them on his furry face and, with an exaggerated motion, lowered them until he was peeking above the frames. His eyes were fixed forward, boring into Strabo. "I'm going to take my show back." Then, in a purposely deeper voice, he added, "This is the last stop at Imagination Station."

I nodded and took off, putting all of my trust into my little furry friend. When I shouted over my shoulder to wish him luck, I heard him groan and complain that I had ruined his line again. As I ran for the back of the studio, I heard Tad repeat, louder this time, "This is the last stop at Imagination Station!"

The Last Straw at Imagination Station (Brick)

I ran through a labyrinth of props and wires and catering. I leapt over the heads of unpaid interns who were doing their best to hide from the insanity happening on set. I quickly located the stairs and headed down, down, down. The basement was more of the same. More discarded sets and rarely used devices. I ran and scanned it all with the trained eyes of a detective. In a distant corner I had a familiar feeling in my gut that some-

thing was off. As I approached it, I smelled smoke and sulfur. I moved aside boxes of wigs and glasses and kooky costumes until I saw it. There, carved into the corner of the room, was a tiny doorway, roughly the size of a puppet. I saw the emblem of the Puppa Maries etched into it, most likely with an obsidian blade.

Looking around for something solid, I spotted something that could work. Leaning against the opposite wall was a trio of hand held pick axes. They were propped beneath a painted sign that said **Cucamonga's Coal Mine: The Most Valuable Gem Is Friendship**. I faintly recalled the name from somewhere deep in the recesses of my childhood. I brushed the thought aside and grabbed the closest axe. With a running start, I summoned the spirit of Babe Ruth and swung it with all of my might. It bit deeply into the studio wall. As I yanked it free again, a large chunk of plaster came with it. I swung again and again, expanding the hole hidden behind a tiny ornate door

until it was human sized. I swung and hacked and cursed and swung again. I sweat with the effort as I tunneled my way, deeper and deeper, through drywall and plaster and wood, gaining rapidly on the scent of sulfur and smoke.

Once I was through a few feet of the wall, I heard the low murmuring of a repeated chant. This fueled my muscles to move faster, dig deeper. Before I knew it, the chanting was growing louder and louder until, with a *THUD*, a *WHACK* and a *KERPLUNK*, I crashed through the final bits of wall. I thundered into the room, spilling head over heels from the momentum of my herculean swing. Bits of stone and a smattering of plaster filled the air as I fell. The pick axe went flying from my hands and clanged down in some unseen section of the room. When I regained my composure, I realized that the chanting had stopped.

In that dark room, I saw dozens of angry eyes looking up at me from beneath black hoods. For a moment in time we all stood frozen, each

of us surprised to see the other. It was a fat, squared-face orange puppet that broke the silence first. His beady eyes squinted and his whiskered snout sniffed angrily at the air. His upper lip curled back, as if disgusted by the human smell in the air, exposing short rodent-like teeth set into puffy blue gums. In a shrill voice that sounded like Elmo sucking on helium, he squeaked out, "Smite the interloper!"

Moving as one, the puppets surged forward like a robed tidal wave; fingers, talons, and tentacles tried to grab, scratch and suck on me, respectively. As that horde of hand-stitched horrors swarmed toward me, I felt a familiar feeling stirring in my stomach. It was a feeling that I had harbored for decades and had only bothered to suppress in the last day or two. I felt an old familiar hatred take ahold of my soul. It was a hatred for puppets.

Puppets, I thought with a sneer that came second nature. I opened myself up to the hate, I let it flow through me. Puppets took my wife from me.

Puppets were stacking bodies in the morgue like Lincoln Logs. Puppets flung daggers at me and forced me to wear stupid fake mustaches. Puppets broke into my home and used all my pancake mix. In that moment, I could see how every bad moment of my life was made worse by having puppets in it. *Puppets*. I sneered again. I clenched my fists and let out a mighty roar. I welcomed the horde, I welcomed the chance to get my hands around some fuzzy throats. I had reached my breaking point, this was the last straw.

The orange puppet reached me first. I smashed his sniveling snout with a meaty fist. He shrieked and crumpled to the ground in a fat heap. Without missing a beat, I stomped down repeatedly with a heavy boot until his black hood lay completely flat. Before I could prepare for the next attacker they were already on top of me. A blur of beige fur climbed up my leg quick as lighting. It used six insectile legs to scurry up my side and began to gnaw on my left ear with two big plastic

teeth. I spun and lashed out with a backfist, which sent the creepy crawler sailing across the room and splatting into the wall.

I spun wildly, swinging my arms like a pair of possessed windmills. All about me I made contact with the furious creatures, feeling foam cave, fur fly and plastic limbs break. I kicked an oblong silver tube that squirmed like a worm and had the circular buzzsaw teeth that you'd see on a leech farm. With my elbow I smashed in the foam-core skull of a purple monkey that seemed to have twin tongues, which lolled lazily out of both sides of its mouth when it hit the ground and went still. I swung until I was exhausted. I kicked until I was caked with dirt and sweat and tufts of torn textiles. A little bald blue man twitched and seized when I grabbed him by the legs and swung him full force into a corner of the altar. I plucked a pink feathery fiend from my back and tore it in half with my hands and teeth. It's tattered wings beat weakly

against the stone floor as it screeched and then died.

The battle was a frantic storm of color and cloth, a torrent of teeth and paws and claws lashed out from beneath every black robe. Despite the intensity of their attack, as well as their abundant numbers, it was only a few frenzied minutes of fighting until I found myself standing alone in the altar room. Huffing and puffing, I rested my hands on my knees as I caught my breath. All around me lay unmoving shapes of bright colors and ruined fabrics. It was like a bomb had gone off in Elton John's closet.

I scrutinized the only remaining obstacle in the room: the smoking altar. I searched for the pick axe I had accidentally flung, intending to smash the altar into tiny smithereens. I quickly retrieved the pick axe and took a mighty swing. Despite the speed of my swing, however, it was too late. Before the axe impacted, the altar split in two on its own. Black columns of smoke billowed out and some-

thing like a river of green bile began to bubble up and froth upon the floor. The pick axe plummeted through the smoke and soared into the crack that had once been the center of the altar. It struck loudly and stuck solidly into...something. I wasn't sure what it struck, as the smoke was thick and smothering my vision. Whatever I had struck, however, it had started to move. I watched for only a moment as the axe handle bobbed and shook, as if stuck into the back of an enormous shark that was hidden just below the calm surface of a pond.

With what little energy and strength I had left, I ran.

Puppet Master of the Master Puppet Race (Tad)

I continued to rain blows down on Strabo, tiny tight left and right fists fell like a hailstorm. As each punch impacted Strabo's skull, he emitted a faint squeaking sound, like a cheap chew toy in a dogs mouth. With a sudden burst of energy, Strabo was able to buck me off, sending me sprawling to the side. Like an expertly trained ninja, however, I hit the ground and rolled to my feet, popping up a short distance away like a Bakugan. I

wore a huge grin that I just *knew* would get under Strabo's skin.

"You want to give up now? Or you want to wait for a commercial break?" I teased.

Strabo's eye blinked twice, slowly, as if he were waking from a very bad dream. He snarled and then matched my grin. From the ground, he asked me, "Do you *really* think that you can stop me, Thaddeus? I am bigger, crafted from superior materials and I'm ivy league educated. Although I do admit that it took some pretty big cotton balls to come here to fight me, surely you must be able to read the writing on the wall. It's *over*, Thaddeus. For you *and* your disgusting human friends."

Strabo crawled backwards until he felt himself smack into something solid. A sly smile spread across his face like spilled milk. It was the target board. Reaching up with neatly stitched fingers, Strabo folded his fist around the handle of his obsidian dagger, which was still buried up to the hilt. Strabo used it to haul himself to his feet. He

quickly placed a shaky foot against the board and yanked until his weapon was wrenched free.

My eyes widened at the sight of the sharp blade. Strabo's eye narrowed into a slit as he raised it, pointing the dagger across the stage with ill intent. Way above our heads, the lights flickered ominously. "What's the matter?" Strabo asked, his tone mocking and sinister. "Don't have anything witty to say now? No heroic one-liners for me?" Strabo twirled the dark blade in the space between us. The air around it seemed to shimmer like summer heat on asphalt. The obsidian blade didn't seem to reflect the overhead lights anymore, it seemed to swallow them up instead. "If you do, you should say them quickly, while you still have a tongue at all." I wanted to run but I no longer seemed to have control over my legs. My knees wobbled and knocked, threatening to throw me off balance.

"It ends today, Thaddeus! You, them, this pitiful excuse for educational entertainment; all of

it. It ends *NOW!*” Strabo lunged forward, his weapon held aloft. Both the blade and his single eye seemed to emanate heat and a faint purple light. The blade thrummed as it sliced through the air. I gulped back a boulder of fear that had formed in my throat, my feet remained frozen in place. It was almost as if that blade had hypnotized me. My legs chose this unfortunate moment to quit on me; they buckled and sent me crashing to the stage floor. As I lifted my eyes to watch Strabo and his deadly blade take flight, all I could do was hope and pray that it would be painless.

A rush of movement from stage left blurred onto the scene. The swiftly moving force collided with Strabo in midair, smashing into him like a steamroller. In a tangled heap, Strabo and Brick crashed to the stage floor with a sound like a set of cymbals falling down the stairs. The dagger flew free from his grasp, spinning end over end until it clattered to the ground. When it hit, it shattered and disappeared in a puff of smoke. The eerie vi-

olet light seemed to be snuffed from Strabo's eye simultaneously.

A high-pitched scream of agony and fury escaped from Strabo's lips. "Fools! Swine! You insolent human dogs, don't you know that you can never stop - " but his words died on his lips. Brick rose to his full height and grabbed Strabo with both powerful hands. With a cry of righteous rage, Brick held Strabo above his head like a throw-in at a soccer game. Brick dug his hands into Strabo's stitches and began to twist him, his hands moving in opposite directions like he was administering the world's biggest Indian burn. Strabo screamed in strangled agony as his body was contorted and tightly twisted. His stitches began to pop as Brick twisted and folded him into increasingly unnatural shapes. Strabo's shoulders burst like bubble wrap, foam and flecks of fur burst from his body like party poppers. Brick reversed the motion and twisted Strabo the other way. Strabo's neck ripped apart with a sickening tearing sound. Threads un-

spooled and stuffing spilled out and silently hit the floor. The more that Strabo's insides vacated, the tighter Brick was able to twist him. Strabo was wrung out like a wet rag, gurgling sounds and fiberfill expelled from his lips in increasingly weaker volleys. He was folded and twisted and bent back onto himself like a screaming balloon animal. A moment or two later, all sounds and stuffing had been spilled. Strabo was dropped to the floor, lifeless, among the scattered bits of his ivy-league educated insides.

"Holy Sesame Street!" I said in shock, "That was the most heinous thing I've ever seen!" Brick closed the distance between us. "Listen Tad," he started, but I cut him off.

"I mean, *really*. That was terrifying! I didn't even know that a puppet could be dismantled like that. Geez-a-loo!"

"Tad!" Brick screamed my name, snapping my attention back to the present.

“S-sorry partner. That was just gross, that’s all. I mean, you really twisted the heck out of that - ”

“Tad, we have a problem.” Brick leaned down to look me in my eyes. I saw the fright dancing in his normally professional pupils. He had my attention.

“What is it?” I asked him. Before he could reply, however, I got my answer.

The studio floor trembled beneath our feet. Brick’s eyes went wide. Below us, a low constant humming began vibrating the very foundation of the stage. It started out like a sustained note from a bass guitar but it quickly grew so powerful and loud that it rattled everything around us. With a sound like splintering trees in a thunderstorm, the stage cracked.

Running down the center of the stage, a long jagged seam of fragmented planks split apart and separated stage right from stage left. Brick dove and somersaulted to safety when a massive wooden block rose from the crevice. I followed suit but,

before I did, I noticed that the thing rising from the depths of the studio floor wasn't a wooden block after all: it was a massive wooden hand.

I tucked my chin and tumbled to the side, successfully taking shelter behind a sculpted cutout of a circus tent. From behind the painted prop of yellow and red stripes, I watched in shock and awe as the thing continued to rise from the smoking gash in the studio floor.

The massive hand opened, flexed its fingers and smashed onto the floor with the force of a hydraulic hammer. Buried in the back of that hand, right between the thumb and index finger, was something that looked kind of like a very small pick axe. The second hand squeezed through a moment later, widening the deep rift in the stage. The giant hand was jointed and smooth, covered in a white lacquer that cracked and flaked as the powerful fingers unfurled. Pointing up at the ceiling, the fingertips split and long thick strings shot forth from the ends of the fingers. The strings,

braided and black, thunked into the vaulted ceiling above and pulled taut. They began to hum and glow faintly violet as they snapped tight.

“What do we do now?” I shouted to my partner, who I noticed was ducking behind the cutout of an old timey carnival barker. Although Brick’s face mostly maintained its professional blankness, I noticed that the carnival barker he gripped was trembling something fierce. At a moment like this, I’m sure that my partner sorely missed having a gun to steady his shaking hand. He didn’t answer. I wasn’t sure that he even heard me, as another massive crack echoed throughout the studio.

The violet and black strings moved as if on invisible pulleys, guiding the gargantuan hands up and up. Below the hands, an enormous face was squeezing its way free from the floor. As the floorboards around it shattered into puffs of splinters, its features were slowly revealed.

The eyes came first, large and unblinking. They were painted on, yet the black color of the paint seemed alive, giving the eyes the appearance of two deep oceans of churning darkness. The nose was bulbous and rough, like a rusty doorknob but twenty times the size. The bulging nose cast a dark shadow on the upper lip, which rose rapidly from somewhere far below. The lips were oversized and ancient. Bright red lips curved up into a permanent and humorless smile. The ruby red paint cracked and flaked as the smile grew; the cheeks drew back as if they were being operated by strings manipulated by invisible fingers.

“Bobby!” I shouted, trying to get my partners attention again. “Are you seeing this?”

This time, my words seemed to shake him from his spell. “Detective Brick,” he said, correcting me in a far-off way. “And of course I do, that thing is pretty damn hard to miss.”

“What’s the plan Bobby? I mean Robert, err..I mean partner? Because I have NO ideas!”

The marionette broke free from the crevice and rose to its full height. It towered over everything, casting a large shadow over us and what was left of the devastated stage. The large head of Mary Annette brushed the bottoms of the faux clouds that hung on limp strings from the beams overhead. As the hanging clouds gently swayed from contact with the giant head, I could almost delude myself into thinking that I was gazing up at a nice breezy day instead of a monster that was sure to kill me.

“Okay,” Brick began, “What if we tried -”

All at once the demolished stage began to creak and groan beneath us, the structural integrity had been soundly obliterated. Mary Annette’s massive mass was too much for what was left of the stage, it began to dip and tilt to the right, going sideways and down like the Titanic. As the stage swayed, dark glowing strings began to whip around in giant arcs, sounds like quarter sticks of dynamite accompanied each thwack. Before my mind could

fully comprehend this latest horror, screams filled the air.

The giant strings whipped overhead, sending Brick and I diving behind our protective props. The rest of the crew weren't so lucky.

One of the massive strings caught our director of photography right in the chest. He screamed..or at least he tried to. As the string receded from his chest, his arms went stiff, as if made of wood. His skin began to ripple and the olive color of his face dulled to the texture of faded fabric. His mouth opened to scream but no sound came out. Instead, his cheeks pulled upward and froze, stitching itself into a permanent smile. He had become a puppet.

"Holy Howdy Doody! Did you see that?" I shouted, although once again it was something that was very hard to miss. The entire studio erupted into frenzied chaos. Parents shielded their children and tried to break down the exit doors. The crew members who were not yet taken by

Strabo's minions fought tooth and nail with the outpouring flood of robed puppets. Humans and puppets alike scrambled over the fallen scenery, threw chairs in feeble attempts to break windows, or just shrieked and ran in circles, hoping a giant foot wasn't going to stomp them flat.

Mary Annette moved in a jerky tempo, spinning slowly like a music box that had not been fully cranked. Her spin was slow but the bite of her strings was quick. They cracked and bit and lashed out at anything that moved. With a sickening snap, one of her strings caught a pair of mothers right in the mouth. They went limp, hitting the floor like lifeless rag dolls. When they sat back up a moment later, their applied makeup was changed to paint on wooden cheeks; their eyes blinked and transformed from light blue to glossy black buttons, buttons which faintly glowed violet.

"The strings!" I shouted. "They're turning people into puppets!"

“Yeah no shi-” Brick started to reply before ducking back down, fully hitting the floor to narrowly miss one of Mary’s lethal lashes. Her strike tore the carnival cutout in half right over his head.

I stared back up at the ceiling, gazing up at the clouds that now swayed ferociously. The gentle breeze now spoke of oncoming storms. The catwalk creaked as Mary Annette’s strings tugged at the beams overhead.

“Bobby? I think I have an idea.” He opened his mouth, most likely to correct me on his name, but I cut him off by pointing to the catwalk above. His gaze followed my furry finger. “Do you remember the story of Chicken Little?” I asked him. Momentary confusion gave way to a grim understanding. He nodded. “Let’s make the sky fall,” Brick said coolly. It would have sounded so much cooler if he had been wearing sunglasses when he said it. He looked around and then pointed to the aluminum truss that supported our lighting towers. When I nodded that I understood, he held

up three fingers and began the countdown. When his last finger dropped, we ran for it.

I vaulted over fallen props and huddled screaming families. I leapt over the ragged remains of Strabo, whose fingers still twitched in death throes. As we ran, every string we dodged found its mark somewhere else. The air was positively filled with the sounds of human anguish and burbling transformations.

Quickly we made our way over to the truss, which led up to the skylights, the catwalk and the rustling clouds. We climbed at a breakneck pace, dodging obsidian strings that sliced through the air like heat seeking missiles.

As we ascended, a loud hissing sound came from below us. It rose in pitch and intensity, sounding like a bounce house that had sprung a leak. I peeked over my shoulder to see what was making the noise. It was Mary Annette. The ancient wooden hinges within her mighty frame were grinding and building speed. Her cold, painted

eyes met mine and the hissing from between her painted lips intensified. I froze in terror, one hand grasping nothing but air ahead of me instead of the next aluminum rung. Mary's gears turned her body to face me and with a mighty hiss and roar, she launched her demonic strings toward me. As they rapidly approached, in the back of my mind I wondered if they would kill me or change me into a human. Knowing what I knew about human hygiene, taxes and their weird genitalia, I hoped for death.

"Look out!" Bobby shouted but he was already in motion. As I remained frozen in place, stuck to the aluminum truss like a tongue stuck to a metal pole at Christmas time, my partner released his grip on the truss and jumped. He flew in slow motion, diving in front of me like a secret service agent in the movies taking a bullet for the president. With the sharp cracking sound of a whip, the strings bit into Brick's back, sinking deep into his flesh like a pack of meat thermometers. He

threw his head back and howled in crippling pain as he plummeted to the stage below, the transformation already beginning as he descended in free fall.

His ears elongated and came to a stop at a sharp point like a desert rabbit. His flesh rippled and ruffled and his left arm broke out in a thick layer of coarse fur. Just before he hit the stage, his back puffed out and became soft and swollen as speckled fleece grew from the many rips in his shirt. He hit with a soft thud and I prayed that he had become soft enough to survive that fall. Either way, I refused to let his sacrifice be for nothing. With a terrible cry of rage and determination I violently shook the tower. More strings whipped out at me but I dodged them with lightning speed. As I climbed, I dodged near constant attacks until I got to the catwalk. From there, I threw my whole body into the railings, first one side and then the other. I rocked the creaking walk until I heard things bend and groan and snap. All the while,

strings were lashing out at me, making desperate grabs for me, but I managed to elude them all.

The strings tore chunks of plaster and bits of wooden beams from above. The strings gripped metal railings and bent them with frightening strength as they receded. Metal poles snapped like celery all around me. The clouds began to fall, as did a few of the heavy spotlights. All around me the sky was falling, crashing noisily into the stage and the abyss below.

The catwalk teetered. I leapt off of it with no real plan, only blind faith. As my feet left it, the catwalk fell.

The entire set of Imagination Station began to collapse in on itself like a dying star; the clouds, scaffolding, props and lighting all fell to the stage in a catastrophic heap. Some of it fell with a deafening smashing sound as glass and wood and plastic hit the crippled stage. Some of it disappeared into the smoking black hole that was once center stage; those things didn't make a sound

as they were swallowed up. As I rapidly fell, I sensed something soft and fluttering in front of me. In desperation I reached out with both hands and grabbed for anything I could hold onto. My screams were muffled as my face buried itself into the thick crimson curtains that flapped wildly before me. I grabbed it, lost my grip and tumbled a few more feet, and then was able to grasp it firmly in my fists. I violently jerked to a stop about ten feet from the floor. The stop was so sudden that I heard a tearing sound and felt my arms become a few inches longer.

Mary Annette bellowed with unearthly rage as the falling wreckage rained down upon her. A falling spotlight cracked half of her bulbous nose, sending it flying down into the abyss. She hissed and uttered a high-pitched screech as the catwalk fell next, massive metal chunks thundering down upon her. It pummeled the paint from her wooden flesh and bore large holes into her synthetic skull. As bigger pieces crashed into her, she was

crumpled, buried and battered, descending with monstrous cries as she was forcibly beaten back into the smoking gorge. The black robed minions ran over and tried to grab hold of her, desperately trying to haul her out of harms way. As she continued to slide deeper into the chasm, her fuzzy flunkies fell and plinked away into the all-consuming darkness.

One by one, Mary Annette's monstrous marionette strings lost their grip on the beams above. A few of them snapped with sounds similar to violin strings breaking under pressure. The broken strings sparked and fizzled as they fell. The remaining strings tore loose and brought a few splintered beams down with them. Mary Annette lay beneath a mountain of debris. Her cries changed from pained, to mournful, to terminal. Her mammoth limbs jerked and died with a prolonged hiss. Finally, she lay still, aside from a few gargantuan fingers that still flexed and seized like the legs of a freshly squashed daddy long-legs.

I tried to climb down from my perch on the curtains but my newly elongated arms tore a bit more, sending me tumbling clumsily to the ground. I landed with a soft thud. Once the shock wore off, I struggled to my feet. All at once I remembered: *Bobby!*

I ran to where my partners body had fallen. As I picked my path through the debris and rubble, I heard a few cries of relief. The people who had been transformed into puppets were being returned to their human form. One by one they sat up, shaking their heads as if to wake themselves from a nightmare. As they blinked, their button eyes melted and returned to human irises. Their painted wooden smiles dissolved into soft fleshy ones. Seeing this filled me with hope as I picked my way over to Brick. Finally, I arrived at the detective's side.

"Hey partner," I said softly. "How about next time we pick a fight with something a little smaller? Like a sock puppet with ignorant opinions,

or something like that.” I bent down and placed a comforting hand on my partners back. It was soft and rotund with speckled fleece poking out from the gashes in his clothing. “Oh no,” I uttered miserably. “You’re..you’re...”

Detective Brick sat up in a slump and looked down at his body with disgust. He turned his fuzzy arm over and inspected it with a sneer that contorted his face. “*A puppet*,” he finished for me. He wretchedly spat out the second word, as if the word itself were accompanied by a foul taste. He reached up and felt his long pointy ears, letting out such a long sigh that I half expected him to deflate before my eyes. Then, with a laugh that sounded more like an angry bark, he said, “Well...*shit*.” He continued to look over his transmogrified flesh. His eyes were mismatched, one was the normal, well-trained eye of a veteran detective. The other was round and made of glass, a muted color that was halfway between black and

violet. His dissimilar eyes looked up at me and asked a simple question: “Why?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know Bobby..err Brick, Bobby Brick. I mean..maybe because she was killed before you were done transforming?”

He blew out another long sigh. “Or maybe it’s because my life is one long cruel joke.” His lips were not wooden and red but they still had the unnatural pallor of ancient fabric. His mouth was no longer fully human, but his scowl was still one hundred percent Brick. “*Puppets*,” he spat again with a shake of his head.

“If it helps, the change is barely noticeable,” I lied. Brick shot to his feet.

“Hardly noticeable?! Are you out of your puny puppet mind? Do you see these freaking Bugs Bunny ears I have? I can pick up the Christian rock station from two towns over on these things!”

I hung my head. Not from shame, not entirely, but also to hide just the slightest hint of a smile. “Sorry,” I managed to get out.

Brick snorted. “Yeah..yeah you’re sorry. Well then, that makes it all better, doesn’t it?” He glanced down at his furry arm again. “What am I supposed to do now? I’m going to be kicked off the force, puppets can’t be policemen.” As he continued to inspect his newly fabricated body, one heck of an idea came to me. I looked at my partner with a HUGE smile on my face. He saw it and sneered.

“No,” he said quietly, more of a groan than a word. “What? What is it?”

I beamed and gestured around at the wreckage of my former television show. “I have an idea,” I told him. “A *great* one!”

Brick sighed and closed his differing eyes. “God help me,” he muttered. “What is it?”

Fuzzy Fuzz

An excited child rushed over to the television set and turned it on.

“It’s on, it’s on! Mommy, come look! It’s on!”

Grumbling under her breath, the child’s mother came over and dutifully watched with a forced smile as the show’s theme song rang out:

*They’re puppets on patrol and they’re ready for
the fight,*

*Mustache Magurk and Tad, protect the people in
the night.*

One’s got a felt face, the other’s half real,

*Both with a love for justice and a happy lawful
zeal.*

The Fuzzy Fuzz! It's the Fuzzy Fuzz!

*The greatest partners, and friends, that there ever
was!*

The Fuzzy Fuzz! Yes it's the Fuzzy Fuzz!

*Solving crimes and cracking jokes, it's just what
this team does!*

Sock puppet thieves and a googly-eyed crook,

*Tad's got the fuzzy cuffs and Magurk's got the
look.*

No problem is too big and no mystery too small,

*For the world's greatest duo, they can solve them
all!*

The Fuzzy Fuzz! It's the Fuzzy Fuzz!

*The greatest partners, and friends, that there ever
was!*

The Fuzzy Fuzz! Yes it's the Fuzzy Fuzz!

Solving crimes and cracking jokes, it's just what this team does!

THE FUZZY FUZZ!

The child's mother did her best not to roll her eyes. *Really*, she thought to herself. *Puppet policemen? How ridiculous!*

Second String

It had been a few weeks since the catastrophic event that the studio was simply calling ‘the incident’. The stage was repaired, the cast, crew and studio audience had all been handsomely compensated and directed to sign NDAs. In short, it seemed like everyone, especially those in the entertainment world, were ready to move on.

Tad had leveraged ‘the incident’ into a fat new contract for him and Brick, as well as one for all of the homeless puppets in his old community. As **Fuzzy Fuzz** climbed the ratings charts, the terrible memories of that dreadful day began to

fade away like the bright color of cheaply made fabrics.

It wasn't until much later that the final loose end in the case reemerged.

Tad had found him in Studio F, a small recording spot that was rarely used, even when the backrooms were a hotbed for criminal puppet cult activities. Studio F, which was usually reserved for green screen interviews and commercial voiceovers, was glowing an eerie violet color. Tad stepped through the broken entrance to the studio; the door hung limply from its frame like a loose tooth in a giant's mouth. In the center of the room was a lone figure, illuminated by a single flickering spotlight.

"*Steve?*" Tad gasped.

The former director of Imagination Station hung from the ceiling, dozens of wriggling strings were knotted together in a familiar symbol above his head. The strings shimmered softly, quivering

as if blowing in the wind...or as if they were being manipulated by invisible fingers.

The strings were attached to Steve. Not stabbed into his flesh, not sewn into his clothing. They were simply just *attached* to him, as if they were always a part of him. From the tips of his fingers to the nape of his neck, thin threads jiggled and jerked and pulsed with a thrumming light.

When Tad walked into the abandoned studio, Steve looked up at him and smiled. His cheeks were pulled upward by translucent strings, spreading his red smile like butter on toast. He swayed gently, his feet hovering just above the ground.

“Hello Thaddeus,” Steve said in a voice that sounded vacant and somehow faraway.

“S-Steve, w-we all thought that you were dead. Umm..are..are you doing alright?” The pitch of Tad’s voice rose with concern as he eyed the strings holding up his former employer.

Steve's head tilted. "Of course, Thaddeus. I'm more myself than I've ever been." Steve's voice contained no malice, no sarcasm, no hint of irony. It was all calm certainty.

"W-well th-that's good," Tad said weakly. "Since umm..since *the incident*, we've had people working on what happened, studying it. We're getting close to understanding what happened. To you. .to Bobby. Maybe if I cut you down we can help you change back and -"

"Change back?" Steve's red lips stretched further, his cheeks bobbed higher until his smile looked painful, looked like it could rupture right off of his sallow face. "Why would I want to change back?"

Tad blinked in surprise. "Because you're a human being, Steve. You're not supposed to have *strings*." As if in response to being mentioned, the strings shivered.

"And yet I do, don't I Thaddeus?" Steve lifted a hand and examined the strings connected to

his fingertips. They glinted like fishing line that caught the moonlight. "Besides," Steve said in his vacant yet layered voice, "things are so much easier now. I don't need to eat, I don't need to sleep. I don't even have to decide what I want anymore. The strings," he said, holding the hand even higher for emphasis, "The strings decide. The strings *know*." Steve lurched forward, his whole body jerking and snapping back in place like a bedsheet flapping on a clothesline. He laughed. "There's no pain, there's no fear. There's only purpose and direction. All I need to do is follow."

That unsettling sentiment caused Tad to shiver. "That's kind of creepy, Steve. Come on, I'm going to go get you some help." Tad tried to walk away but he was halted by a movement from above. Appearing from thin air, a few dozen more strings slowly descended, forming a wavering curtain of obsidian between Tad and the broken doorway. The strings curled and coiled in the air like curious tentacles, they reached out and beckoned towards

Tad, as if asking him to join them. Tad ducked his head and flattened himself against the studio wall.

“I’m sorry Steve,” he said. “I just wanted to help you, not be roped into some kind of evil puppet show.”

Steve continued to smile unwaveringly, as if it were painted on. “Then you should leave right now, Thaddeus. Because the next act is about to start.”

As his frantically fleeing feet carried him further from the strung out director, Tad heard Steve’s mad laughter turn to bestial screams.