

## THE POETIC NARRATIVE:

### READER, PLEASE DON'T DO THIS TO YOURSELF

I sat on Matt's couch in his spacious, dimly lit living room, flipping through my well-worn copy of 'How To Write For Morons, Edition 22'. I turned the page and glanced up at the sound of him moving plates around in the kitchen. His footsteps neared the living room and his frame filled the doorway. He cocked his head and peered at me.

"For fuck's sake, JJ. How did you get in here this time?"

"Garbage chute," I said with a smile.

"I don't have a garbage chute, I live in a one story house!"

"Huh." I shrugged and resumed reading, enjoying another sip of the expensive bourbon I had found in his cabinet.

Matt grunted, shuffling his bathrobe to better cover himself as he sat on the other end of the couch. He looked at my book and sighed. Reaching over, he turned it right side up. "I've told you a million times, the first step to learning to write is learning to read."

"That explains why everyone was sitting on their heads in the pictures!" The realization filled me with the same joy as when Indiana Jones found out the real Holy Grail was the friends he had made along the way.

Figuring it was rude to read in front of my guest in his own home, I placed the book down and picked up his remote to turn on the large flatscreen TV set in an antique entertainment center. "And in other Florida news, a large python was spotted recently in Maitland," a reporter was saying, standing in front of a stripmall featuring a pawn shop, liquor store and gun range for native appeal.

"Holy shit! We're recently in Maitland!" I shouted with obnoxiously unnecessary vigor and volume.

"Yes, dumbass." Matt rubbed his ear. "We're in Maitland now."

"This is the furthest north the invasive reptiles have been spotted, which is concerning to authorities," the reporter continued.

"This feels like a call to adventure!"

Matt stared at his ceiling and blinked twice. “Oh shit, it... does.” He leaned forward to look at the TV.

“Authorities are not certain where the snake has gone,” the reporter said. “It represents a significant danger to the ecosystem at large.”

“No, no, no, no...”

“Matt! We have a solemn duty and responsibility to get this snake!”

“We are not using this as the start of some terrible story—”

“We’ll need help. Namely from Danson, my closest and most trusted friend, and Jake, who would serve as very good snake bait.”

Matt hesitated. “So you don’t need me, right?”

I stroked my chin. “I can’t put my finger on why, but we need someone who initially refuses this call to action.”

“Nope.” Matt stood and stormed out.

“Wait! We still need to find someone who refuses the hero’s call!” I shouted after him. I frowned. “Or is it supposed to be me that does that?”

“All pet owners are being urged to secure their animals indoors this evening. The snake is a threat to all pets, including small dogs.” The reporter’s segment ended, an advertisement for bail bonds beginning in turn.

“A threat to dogs?! Ignoring this threat would be as irresponsible as using interobangs to heighten tension and show incredulity in lieu of just being a good writer, or deliberately spelling out a joke rather than letting subtlety do its job!” I leapt off the couch and raced out the front door.

#

Dr. Jake Rammerstoen sat in his small dentist office, spinning in his chair. “So, I guess the promotion was a bad idea.”

“I tried to tell you, ‘yank one tooth get another yanked free’ wasn’t going to attract clients,” his assistant Clarissa said as she leaned in a corner and flipped through a magazine.

“People love ‘buy one get one’ promotions though. Look at Walmart—”

I thankfully interrupted this lugubrious conversation by crashing through the ceiling and landing on the reception counter. “Oh sweet Christmas, that hurt!”

Jake and Clarissa’s screams faded into mutual, gaping stares.

“Jake, why is your garbage chute placed there?” I slowly rolled off the counter and landed with a second, somehow more painful, thud. “I don’t know if that’s a city issue or something you take up with your landlord—”

“JJ! You can’t barge into my place of business like this!” Jake coughed through the billowing cloud of plaster dust.

“There’s no time Jake, we have a snake on the loose!” I jumped up and grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Snake on the loose?” Jake pushed my hands away.

“Yes! In Matt’s neighborhood!”

Jake’s eyes widened. “You’re not planning on me getting eaten by the snake, are you?”

I stared at him. “What are you talking about? I would never consider you as just snake bait.”

Jake sighed. “OK, look, you can take me to lunch, buy me a few drinks, pick up my dry cleaning as you drive me back, maybe book me some movie tickets for the weekend—but that’s all the time I’m giving you. I’ve got a practice to run!”

I glanced at the empty waiting room. “Alright, whatcha want for lunch?”

#

With Jake’s services secured, there was only one character left to hastily introduce: Danson C. Equestrian, Esq! Who just so happened to be sitting in his Prius and studying his smartphone in the first area I thought to start looking.

“Danson!” I roared. It had taken me a full hour to search each Prius and smart car parked in the Whole Foods parking lot. I raced as hard as I could, leapt onto his hood and clung on real good.

“JJ.” He rolled down his window. “What are you doing?”

“Keeping you from escaping!” I tightened my grip and squeezed my eyes shut.

“We’re parked.”

I opened my eyes and looked around. "Sorry, it's hard to tell if these things are even moving."

Danson slumped back with a loud groan. He glanced at the rearview mirror and shrieked upon seeing my maniacally smiling face in the reflection.

"Danson! My closest and most trusted friend!"

He shook his head, taking off his glasses to wipe them on his paisley sweater vest. "I see, despite my best attempts, you have found me yet again." He furrowed his brow. "Truthfully, I should be concerned at my inability to shake someone of your intelligence. Er, lack thereof."

"Yeah, so anyways, we have a call to action!" I proclaimed, having paid absolutely no attention to whatever he had just said. "There's a snake on the loose in Matt's neighborhood! I'm rounding up a team to go stop it!"

"You know you're supposed to introduce high stakes to create a call to action, not just constantly repeat 'there is a call to action', right?"

I stared for a long moment. "OK, so go ahead and head out, we need to pick Jake back up on the way to Matt's. I convinced him earlier to join us on this quest so we can use him as snake bait." I kicked back and got comfortable for the ride.

"What the fuck are you talking about? First off, I need to get these groceries home, and second off, I have a meeting with the Red Cross—"

"But you're the Watson to my Sherlock!"

"Aside from essentially admitting to having a mental illness and predilection towards narcotics, that description is just... wrong."

We exchanged a long, awkward stare. Danson's chin dropped to his chest. "You have no clue how to conclude this section, do you?"

"So, Jake is at his practice on West Bay, go ahead and take a right when you pull out." I leaned over Danson's shoulder to point to his left.

#

Matt petered around his yard (it's a phrase, look it up), looking at the recently dug trench. "OK, JJ is deathly afraid of sharks, so I just gotta fill this bad boy up and stock 'er, and that should keep him out."

Tired and wanting a cold glass of fresh squeezed Canadian Tea or whatever the hell Canadians drink, he went inside to pour himself a beverage. He took a sip and turned on his TV.

“And that’s the latest on Fukushima, which several years later still has extensive environmental problems surrounding its radiation crisis,” the reporter was concluding. “Aside from the affected deer and feral dogs, wild boar are also showing increased signs of radiation sickness.”

A grin drew across Matt’s face. “Hmmm... that gives me an idea.”

#

Jake stood outside his practice, sighing as he flipped through the stack of overdue bill notices.

Danson and I rounded the corner, coming full speed (10mph—it’s a Prius). I leaned forward. “Careful, don’t hit Jake. We need him for snake bait.”

“Hey guys,” Jake greeted us, getting into the passenger seat.

“Jake, my dear friend to whom no harm will come!”

He turned around, a frown on his face. “You’re certain this story doesn’t involve my death, correct?”

“Yeah, of course not. Danson, to Maitland!”

“For the last time, I’m not joining,” Danson said. “I have to go save sick children with the Red Cross. Besides, I have ice cream with my groceries, which is probably pure soup now thanks to you.”

I was quiet for a moment, staring at the bags in the seat next to me. “How do you have ice cream? You’re vegan.”

“They make vegan ice cream, you moron.” He looked at Jake. “How did he convince you to join him, anyways?”

“JJ guaranteed I would get the entire reward for catching the snake.”

“The reward for catching a python is twenty dol—you know what? I don’t care.”

“Yeah, he was forced to take action after initially avoiding the responsibility to do so!” I unnecessarily exclaimed from the back seat. “So it’s good we now have a team of heroes properly introduced to handle this crisis. But we might need more than a dentist and a lawyer. You need to stop by the mercenary store on the way to Maitland.”

“JJ. Not going to Maitland. Also, what the hell is a mercenary store?”

“It’s a store where you get mercenaries.”

Jake glanced over at Danson. “I feel like you should have figured that out on your own.”

Danson grumbling was interrupted by his cell phone ringing. “Oh crap, it’s the Red Cross. Hold up.”

“Danson! You can’t come in today!” shouted a voice on the other side of the line. “The Salvation Army has attacked, we’re warning everyone to stay away!” In the background of the phone call, there were screams, explosions, and gunfire.

“JJ! Stop taking everything away from me so I have to join you on your adventure!” Danson shouted.

“I didn’t do anything!” I shoved my phone back into my pocket. I knew all along that cultivating ties within the Salvation Army and ensuring the bloody coup that replaced their leadership with far more proactive and militant minds was going to pay off one day—

“JJ!” Danson snapped. “Are you listening?”

“What? Sure, yup.”

“So you’re OK with this plan?”

“JJ.” Jake turned back around. “Do not say you are OK with this plan.”

“I like plans, I’m OK with this plan.”

“So it’s settled,” Danson nodded. “We’re going to the aid of the Red Cross. In the back are a couple of SIG516’s and a FIM-92 stinger. Y’all grab the rifles and lay down some—”

“Danson!” I gasped. “You have what in the back of your Prius stocked with vegan groceries?”

Danson turned around, never easing off the gas or swerving even one inch as he coolly took his eyes off the road to meet mine. “Viva la resistance, bitch.”

Jake slapped his hands onto his legs. “No, we’re not doing this. This is clearly a setup to kill me off.”

“Jake, we need you for sna... safe keeping, nothing bad will happen to you, I promise!”

The sounds of war and death crept closer as we neared the battle site. A spray of gunfire cracked and pitted the windshield in front of Jake, who screeched and covered his eyes.

“Good thing I had the bullet proof windows installed,” Danson said.

“Why did they only shoot at me?” Jake yelled.

I turned and pulled the cover off the hatchback area. Sure enough, there was a small munitions depot in the back of his eco-friendly car. I searched around and grabbed a compact Glock 19, but juggled it when Danson hit a bump, the gun firing over Jake’s head. The bullet ricocheted off the roof and punched a hole clear through the seat between his legs.

“Sorry, I forgot how guns work!” I rolled the window down and tried to lean out. Just as I managed to get my arm forward, I lost my grip and the gun went flying. “Dammit!”

“JJ, use the machete! I’ll drive through the parking lot close to these Salvation Army assholes, and you can swing it out the window as I go by and decapitate them!” Danson hollered.

He raced through the parking lot of the Red Cross headquarters, bullets and white doves flying everywhere. I swung the machete at each foe we passed, slicing and dicing our way through the opposing army.

The Prius manned by three men, one driving, one having wet himself in the front seat, and another flabbier individual in the back seat armed with only a machete made swift work of the paramilitary previously succeeding against a larger and entrenched force. Finally, a familiar voice called out for a truce, and the remaining Salvation Army threw down their weapons and surrendered.

As the dust cleared, Danson parked the car and exited to a hero’s welcome as the weary Red Cross defenders came out of their formerly besieged headquarters.

“See Jake,” I said, cleaning the blood and gore from the machete. “Nothing bad happened to you.”

Jake was still hyperventilating, looking at the corpse of a Salvation Army mercenary crumpled on the hood of the car. “And you promise I’m not just being saved as snake bait?”

“I seriously have no idea where you get that from.” I exited the car and looked around, and gasped when I saw the leader of the remaining Salvation Army mercenaries. “You!”

Meanwhile, the Field Marshall of the Red Cross approached Danson, grimacing and swallowing before she spoke. “Danson, we’ve actually been meaning to talk to you about your continued participation with us,” she said. “The truth is, while we are very grateful to you for coming and winning this battle through illogical—and frankly, poorly plotted—means, we are terminating your involvement with our organization.”

“But I was going to coordinate a whole water park or something for you in Africa!”

“Yes,” the leader grimaced. “But your memo on world hunger has caused some... concern amongst leadership.”

“But it’s perfect! It solves so many problems on a global scale!”

“You do realize ‘A Modest Proposal’ was satire when originally written, correct?”

“Many great ideas started as satire, look at the United States of America!”

“Danson, I’m sorry, but the decision is final.” She turned to walk away.

“Wait, wait, wait, OK, you guys didn’t like that plan. But I have others.” He rushed to catch up. “Have you seen the movie ‘Infinity War’? It gave me another good idea I think is worth exploring.”

As Danson pled his case, I ran across the parking lot towards the remains of the Salvation Army. “Just the man I’ve been looking for!”

“Oh hell no,” Mister T—the most unexpected of all allies to gain!—replied as he turned and saw me.

“I’m in need of mercenaries! How fortuitous and plot advancing to meet you here!”

“No,” Mister T repeated.

“Listen, I have money this time! I mean, Danson has money.”

“You got what you owe me? You never did pay me for the various other adventures you and I have been on.”

“Right, the many past adventures that explain why you and I know each other and why we are interacting this way.”

“Like the time we dropped off all those books to the library in the middle of a war zone.”

“Yes, dumping loads of info into the middle of an action filled scenario.”

“Mmhmm, the great info dump of 2010.”

“Well, there’s a reward for this mission, we can use it to clear my debt,” I said, tagging myself on the shoulder to reorient the dialogue. “See, there’s this snake—”

“Nope.”

“It’s near my closest and most trusted friend Matt’s house—”

“Double nope.”

“But if we don’t do this deed, who shall?”

“I know you, and I know that you have what can only be described as ‘virulent ADHD’. You’ll end up on some sort of insane side-quest, and I will get dragged into it.” Mister T crossed his arms. “I’ve pitied the foo before, and that foo was me for listening to you.”

I spread my arms out. “Come on, you have to believe I’ve changed and matured. Even though this story has shown zero growth in me thus far, and likely won’t by the conclusion either.”

Mister T stroked his gold chains. “You promise we’ll get this reward?”

I crossed my heart with my finger. “I see literally nothing that can go wrong.”

#

Meanwhile, in Maitland, Matt laughed maniacally as lightning flashed outside his window. He stood in the middle of a room, surrounded by bulletin boards covered in photos and notecards connected by different colored yarn. “So much will go wrong now!”

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“Seriously, nothing at all,” I reassured Mister T.

He sighed, looking back at the remaining ten mercs. “OK boys, we got a new mission.”

With this random yet important plot device covered, I walked over to where Jake was consoling a despondently dismal Danson. “Sorry buddy. I know you wanted to get out of this story. It’s almost as if your initial strategy to overcome an antagonist has failed,” he said.

“Good news guys, we got the mercenaries. We can go ahead and go to Maitland now,” I announced as Mister T led his squad over. “Gentlemen, this is Jake—”

“He didn’t die yet?” Mister T asked.

“See!” Jake yelled.

“He’ll be fine, I promise,” I continued. “And this is my other compatriot, Danson.”

Danson's shoulders were slumped as he tossed the groceries in his back seat out onto the asphalt. "Come on, let's go. No use in continuing arguments that have only served to drag down the pacing."

"Yippee! I call shotgun!" I opened the passenger door and saw the seat, covered in urine with a bullet hole bored into the center. "Never mind."

#

Jake, Danson, the ten mercs, Mister T, and I all sat in Matt's living room eating cereal. He stumbled in, rubbing his eyes.

"Wait, what the fuck? How did you all get past the moat... Mister T?"

"Sup," Mister T greeted our host.

"You really should secure your garbage chute," Jake commented.

"I don't have a damn garbage chute!"

"We need a plan." I placed my bowl on the expensive coffee table covered in spilled milk and cereal. "Matt, where are we on the snake situation?"

"Actually..." Matt pulled a piece of paper from his bathrobe. "I found something I think might interest you. While researching, uh, snakes, I came across this. I printed it out to show you." He handed me the piece of paper.

I stared at the article, my eyes slowly lifting to meet his. "Yes. This is... fascinating."

"Oh tiddleshits, I keep forgetting you don't know how to read." Matt snatched it back from my hand. "Radioactive pigs are in Fukushima. JJ! Orc-pigs!" He threw a plane ticket at me. "You have to go to Fukushima immediately and clear the world of this scourge!"

"I knew it," Mister T grumbled.

"JJ, I think we need to stay focused," Danson said. "This story has already meandered pretty badly. It's crucial for us to move forward and keep the integrity of—"

"Then it's settled," I announced, looking up from my smartphone and again having paid no attention to whatever Danson was saying. "I purchased the extra tickets for us with Danson's credit card."

"You did what?" he shouted.

"You're our financial backer, it's a character type."

"I'm going to kill you!" Danson flung his empty cereal bowl at my head. I ducked, and Mister T caught it with one hand and set it down.

"Wait, no, it's just you going," Matt stammered. "It's your destiny to—"

He gurgled and went silent as I shoved the chloroform soaked rag into his face. "OK, you and you," I motioned to two mercs, "carry our sleepy friend here. Pig-orc bai... I mean, orc-pig b... I mean, Jake, mapquest us some directions to the airport."

"Shouldn't we be worried about radiation?" Mister T asked.

"Nah, I'm pretty sure there's no conclusive evidence that stuff is bad."

"Wait, you're not actually going through with this, are you?" Danson turned to Mister T. "I mean—" he also gurgled and fell to the ground as I shoved a second rag into his face. I motioned to two other mercs, who picked him up.

"Got it." Jake handed me the mapquest printout.

"OK, let's go!"

#

The airplane rumbled through the sky as we relaxed in our extremely expensive first class seats.

"I'm surprised we didn't get more hassle about dragging Matt and Danson onboard unconscious," Jake commented. "I mean, they weren't even able to show ID."

"Money talks, especially when you spend all of Danson's savings," I shrugged.

"What in the frozen shit of Nunavut!" Matt jerked upright.

"Oh, good morning sleepy head," I greeted him.

"How did I not see this coming..." Danson moaned, holding his head.

The airplane's intercom pinged. "Gentlemen, please ensure your seats are in their upright and locked positions. We are now beginning our final descent into the Fukushima fallout zone."

"What!" Danson whipped his head around. "How long have I been out?"

"About 13 hours," I said. "Got a little dicey there, thought I was going to run out of chloroform."

“You kept chloroforming me?” He shrieked.

“Relax, there’s as much evidence of long term neurological damage as there is of man-made global warming.” I leaned forward and buckled my seatbelt.

Matt glanced back through the otherwise empty cabin. “Did.... did you book an entire plane?”

“Yeah, how do you think I was able to get a flight into a forbidden nuclear fallout zone?” I turned to give Danson a stern look. “Speaking of, I’m disappointed in you. Your credit card limit is way too low. We had to switch to using Matt’s cards to get our onboard Kobe beef and Dom Perignon!”

“Here, you can take this, I don’t want the rest.” Jake handed back a full flute to a flight attendant. Behind him, Mister T belched as he finished his third course of aged beef.

The plane soared gracefully towards Fukushima like a stone doesn’t, landing at an abandoned airport. Several flight attendants decked in hazmat suits greeted us at the head of the plane. “We have arrived. Please enjoy your stay and thank you for flying Qatar Airways!”

Danson groaned and leaned back for a moment before joining us. We filed off the plane, looking around the eerily dark area as we walked down the stairs. Off in the distance, a bird cawed.

“Fuck!” I fell to prone position on the tarmac. “Orc-pig!”

“It was a bird, you idiot,” Matt snapped.

“That’s what they want you to believe.” I dusted myself off as I stood back up. “Mister T, we have no time to waste. Please present me the object.”

“How did you get this again?” he asked, handing me an ornate lacquered box.

“Matt and I broke into a shrine in Osaka a few years back.”

“Wait, is that the Sword of Prince Shotoku?” Matt’s jaw dropped. “You told me you returned it after the UN passed a resolution, the first time in history the entire body unanimously censured an individual!”

“Yes, this is the Sword of... Something.” I removed it from the priceless box, which I let clatter to the ground, a hinge snapping off.

“JJ! It was an international incident!”

“Yeah, good times,” I chuckled. “But this is no time for more unnecessary backstory, we have orc-pigs to attack!” I scanned the empty airfield as the plane took off behind us.

“Wait, they’re leaving us here?” Danson shouted over the roar.

“Dude, I told you, your limit was too low. We could only afford one-way.”

From the distance a distinct squeal could be heard. I unsheathed the Sword of Something swiftly, nearly decapitating a nearby mercenary.

“Gentlemen, the game is afoot!” I pointed in the opposite direction from where the sound came from. Matt grabbed my hand, spinning me to point the correct way. The others shouted and leapt back as the Sword of Something swung wildly around.

“Thank fucking god he doesn’t have a gun,” Danson said.

“Oh, this?” I pulled the Glock 19 out and waved it at him. Everyone screamed and ducked. “Yeah, I got it back while you were arguing with the Red Cross lady.” It went off, the bullet sparking as it ricocheted by Jake’s feet.

“JJ! Engage the safety!” He shouted.

“Safe...ty?”

“Listen, we need to get moving.” Mister T got up and ripped the gun out of my hand. “I need the reward for cleaning up these boars.”

“What reward?” Matt asked.

“Hahahaha!” I clapped him on the back. “What a joker! The reward offered by the Japanese government, remember?” I gave him a sharp glare.

“It would serve as great seed money for my newest venture, ‘Mister T Teaches The Kids’.”

Jake held his head and took a step back. “Whoa, head rush.”

Danson glanced around. “That could be a sign of radiation poisoning. Maybe we should find shelter.”

“If it were radiation poisoning, we’d all feel it,” I pointed out. “It’s not like bad things are going to happen to Jake and only Jake.”

We marched through the night, looking for signs of orc-pigs. Glowing eyes and hisses followed our every step from the shadows, and the laughter of children occasionally rang out from the darkened alleyways. As we rounded a corner, a ball bounced ominously into our path.

"Ignore it," I whispered. "Orc-pigs don't play with toys. Not in their genetic makeup."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Matt asked.

I pulled out my smartphone to show him the Wikipedia page for 'Orc-Pigs'.

Danson took my phone and looked it over. "JJ, you created this article an hour ago."

"Which makes me an expert, obviously." I kicked the ball away. "Let's keep moving."

As we continued down the road, ghostly wisps formed into hands and reached out for Jake, but dissipated whenever he jerked to look back.

"Guys, I have a bad feeling about this," he said.

"Orc-pig!" a mercenary pointed at a shadow. "Light 'em up!" Gunfire erupted, the flashes illuminating a tentacled beast, the bullets harmlessly absorbing into its horrific, gelatinous body. It moaned out in eerie laughter and retreated back into the shadows, a slimy trail the only indication it had ever been there.

"False alarm," I said. "That was just a mini-Cthulhu. Let's keep searching." We entered a building, the mercs turning on their flashlights to guide our way up the abandoned stairs. We reached the top floor and took a moment to rest and observe our surroundings through the windows.

"We should split up," I said. "They're likely aware of our presence. We have to create a trap. Matt, Danson, Mister T, and you other ten mercenaries, stay with me. Jake, you go down the street, and take this bucket with you." I gagged as I handed him a pail filled with rancid slop.

"I... I don't want to," Jake said, looking at the bucket.

"Don't worry, this is orc-pig repellent," I explained. "It will keep them at bay while you scout 'em out."

"It says 'orc-pig food' on it."

"Oh," I grunted, looking at the pail. I took out a sharpie and crossed off the word 'food', replacing it with 'repellent'. "There you go."

"Huh, I feel like I shouldn't do this, but at the same time I feel strangely safe," Jake said. "You know, warm and fuzzy all over. Kinda woozy." He blinked, and vomited blood.

“There ya go, get it all out of your system!” I patted him on the back. “OK buddy.” I shoved the bucket into his hands. “If you see any orc-pigs, alert us by yelling out ‘soiiiiiiii!’”

Matt and Danson glanced at each other and shrugged as Jake headed down the stairs, whistling a cheerful tune as he swung the pail around, sloshing slop thoroughly marking him with its scent.

I looked around the room and grabbed a remote for a nearby TV.

“JJ,” Danson interrupted. “Are we setting up a perimeter or anything? We do have the high ground.”

“Obi-Wan had the high ground, and how did that work out?” I asked.

“I mean, he won.”

Matt sighed. “Mister T, maybe spread your guys around, and when the orc-pigs show up, blast them from above.”

“What about that Jake foo?” Mister T asked. “He would get caught in the crossfire and shot up real bad.”

“Eh.” Matt adjusted his bathrobe. The mercs spread throughout the building, each taking a window and aiming down, observing as Jake trotted along the streets below. A tentacle reached for him from a broken window, then retracted after lightly touching his shoulder.

I turned off the TV, joining Matt, Danson, and Mister T at the window. “I sure hope the repellent works. He’s a sitting duck.”

Danson looked over, his face quizzical. “Wait, did you think changing the word ‘food’ to ‘repellent’ actually changed the properties of the substance inside the bucket?”

My eyes grew wide. “Oh shit.” Down below, a ghostly girl covered in long black hair followed Jake. “Meh. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

There was a shout from a nearby room. We pressed against the window to observe a normal looking boar entering the street behind Jake.

“Orc-pig!” I withdrew the Sword of Something. “Gentlemen! I’m going in!”

“Wait, we have well-armed mercenaries at every window that are prepared—” Danson started.

“No time! We need an action beat!”

“Then at least take the stairs!”

“Fuck no!” I leapt through the window. “Die orc-pigs!”

I crashed onto the street below, miraculously unharmed despite having fallen through broken glass several stories above. Ripples of fat rolled across my frame as shards fell harmlessly around me. “Jake! Cover yourself in the repellent!”

“Huh?” A jaundiced-looking Jake moaned, slowly turning. “Oh!” He dumped the bucket over himself, and a hoard of orc-pigs (completely normal boars, keep that as your mental image) rushed out.

“Open fire!” Mister T shouted from above, and windows burst as high powered gunfire rained down. Orc-pig after orc-pig exploded like Ziploc bags filled with spoiled ground beef. Despite the danger, they could not help themselves from single-mindedly rushing Jake as he screamed ‘soiee!, soiee!’.

I stood in the middle of the fray, wildly swinging the Sword of Something, kicking with my right foot and hitting nothing. A sense that all was lost filled me, when I realized I needed to change my strategy: I began kicking with my left foot!

#

“You know, we use the phrase ‘pity the foo’ a lot,” Mister T murmured from the corner as he stared down at me. “But guys like that really make you take it into perspective.”

Danson glanced over at Matt, who leaned in a chair, turning the page on Don Quixote. “You’re aware this shitshow is entirely your fault, right?”

Matt shrugged, taking a sip of some nearby Japanese whiskey he’d found. “I regret nothing.”

#

Jake screamed as an orc-pig managed to get through the wall of gunfire and knocked him over. It stood over him, his skull gripped in its tusks, saliva dripping over his face. He squeezed his eyes shut, the moment this story has not so subtly been building towards coming to fruition.

With a gurgling grunt, the wild suid slid off Jake, its mouth drooping open as it fell harmlessly to his side. Jake opened his eyes.

“I got one! I got one!” I cheered, magnificently holding the bloody Sword of Something.

“JJ! I was at the mercy of an antagonist, but you expressed your gift and saved me!”

“Huh?” I glanced down and realized Jake was there. “Oh, yeah. Of course. I told you no harm would come to you!”

I scanned the battlefield, proudly observing that the streets of Fukushima were at last clean once more. Metaphorically, I mean. Of course they were not literally clean, considering the piles of boar carcasses everywhere and the entrails hanging from the street lights. Also, the radiation.

Jake stood and gazed upon my mighty works. “Ya know JJ,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. “Maybe it’s the severe radiation poisoning affecting my mind, but lightbulb submarine.”

“You said it, Jake. You said it.”

#

“Huh.” Danson looked at the carnage below. “Not only did JJ actually win, but Jake is alive.”

Matt grunted and handed a twenty dollar bill over to Danson, not bothering to look up from his book. “So can we go home now? Feels like this story has dragged on here. And gone way off-course. So much for following any sense of genre or plotline.”

“Kinda rushed through this conclusion, though,” Danson said.

“I mean, JJ sucks at writing. What did you expect?”

#

The plane landed in Orlando, Danson having successfully disputed all the previous charges on his card and thus freeing it up so I could once again steal it to book a flight home. Mister T happily patted his several crates of money.

“I can’t believe there really was a reward,” Matt commented.

“Yeah, of course. I wouldn’t lie to Mister T. I negotiated it earlier on with the Japanese Prime Minister.”

“Wait, when? You couldn’t have made a phone call on the plane, and there was no other space in this narrative for you to have done that.”

“Yes, quite.... Poetic, wasn’t it?” I smiled.

“Oh for shit’s sake, you still haven’t learned what that word means?”

We disembarked, the mercenaries going on their way to film Mister T's pilot for 'Mister T Teaches The Kids', which was really just a boxing rematch with Sylvester Stallone. We got in Danson's Prius, and he drove us back to Matt's house.

"JJ, I want to thank you again for not killing me," a bald and emaciated Jake broke the silence.

"Of course," I replied as Danson parked in Matt's driveway. "I promised you were more than just snake bait."

We exited the car, not noticing rustling nearby in the bushes. Suddenly, a massive Burmese python struck out, grabbing Jake by the arm. Matt, Danson, and I screamed as it ripped the limb clear from his body and swallowed it whole. Jake stumbled forward. The snake whipped around him, squeezing its deadly embrace. The force was so great that Jake's head exploded, spraying us with bits of brain and skull. The serpent opened its maw to swallow the remains of his corpse, Jake's foot still twitching as it disappeared into its mouth.

Satisfied and satiated, the snake stretched out to sun itself.

The three of us stood there awkwardly. Matt turned to me. "You didn't plan an ending, did you?"

"Uh, well, we discovered the antagonist's desire, that counts for something," I suggested.

"We did?"

"Yeah." I motioned to the snake. "It clearly wanted to eat Jake."

"So... the python was the antagonist?" Danson stroked his chin. "I got lost when we bizarrely sidetracked to go hunt radioactive boars."

"I think the real antagonist here was JJ and his terrible writing," Matt said.

"Oh yeah, that could work!" I smiled.

"It... it really doesn't." Danson wearily rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Oh, so I'm the protagonist?"

"Sure, buddy," Matt said.

"Actually," Danson shrugged, "now that I think about it, he could be defeated by this story concluding already."

“And so the protagonist—I guess here, the reader—is rewarded for their sacrifice—finishing this entire thing—by not having to suffer any more,” Matt agreed.

“See! Totally worked!” I gave my two closest, most trusted, and most survivingest friends a thumbs up.

Matt and Danson sighed and walked into Matt’s house, leaving me to my self-congratulatory thoughts as I stood next to the silently slumbering serpent.

## THE END

Matt opened his door and poked his head outside.

“JJ. Why are you still here?”

I was laying in his driveway, my head resting on the snake as I frantically scribbled in a notebook. “Got an idea. I think we should make this into a film!”

Matt stared at me for a long moment. He adjusted his bathrobe, reached inside his house and produced a baseball bat.

“The absolute hell we will.”