

The Autocratic Students Society

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In the early years of the Oceanic superstate, during the lead-up to the great purges, a bright young university student struggles to understand what is happening around her. While she is initially amused by fellow student Donald, an executive member of the Autocratic Students Society, she becomes increasingly concerned by his beliefs and ensuing behaviour.

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Julia stumbled into her dorm room around one AM, locking her door clumsily, and feeling her way through the darkness to bed. There she lay on her back, with her hands on her stomach. It was unlike her to get drunk, but this had not been an ordinary evening. At least I resisted his advances, she thought, during a brief respite from the nausea. She was angry with herself, for going to the pub with Donald. I shouldn't have drank so much at the auditorium. She thought about Donald's hair, and giggled. Then she disappeared into a deep sleep.

It was her freshman year at Oceania State University (OSU), perhaps the most prestigious of the Victory League schools. Julia had been accepted on full academic scholarship, and had little in common with most of her classmates. All of Oceania's universities were now privatized, catering to an ever-emerging elite class, although their programs and curricula were closely surveilled by the state. It was hard for someone of Julia's background to get in, but she was hard working, polite, and well spoken. She fit in, and made no effort to reveal where she was from.

Julia liked the OSU campus. It was like an oasis in a growing sprawl of urban tenements, increasingly the norm in Oceania's cities. It was located in the rolling green hills of Old Washington, a cozy, almost bucolic collection of stone and red brick buildings, swathed in ivy and Virginia creeper. At the centre of campus, upon the highest hill, stood OSU's most modern building, which towered over the others like a great monolithic slab of concrete. That building housed the Love Studies Department.

Below those hills, one could see the tenements rippling out in concentric circles, and beyond that, the unmistakable markings of industry. A winding rim of smoke stacks, fuel silos, refinery pipes, and spoil tips lined the horizon to the west and southward, curving out the sea, where you could see the shipyards on a clear day. To the south, between the tenements and this sickle of mines and factories, lay Mugabeville. Most OSU students, including Julia, had never been there, but when she looked down upon the great slum, with its helicopter patrols and perpetual sirens, she felt an odd pull towards the place.

That morning, before it all happened, Julia sat cross-legged on her little bed, leafing through a textbook on the second iteration of Newspeak. This is stupid, thought Julia – it will probably go

the way of Esperanto. She munched on an apple in her comfort clothes, an OSU sweatshirt and some cheap leggings, with her hair up in a bun. Losing interest in Newspeak, she cupped her hand around the old wooden barrette that kept her hair in place, a gift from her grandmother. She thought about her, rest in peace, and then about Winston.

There he was one minute and gone the next, as if he had suddenly vanished. Winston was also a freshman student, from the overseas territory of Airstrip One. He was tall and skinny, with a pale complexion, crooked teeth, and whirly hair that seemed to grow upward somehow. He wore thick glasses that made his eyes look huge, and he was very clumsy.

Once in the cafeteria, Winston tripped over a duffle bag, lunging forward like a swung hammer into Professor Charrington's lap. He had been carrying a lunch tray, and the first thing to land was his banana smoothie, sloshing all over the professor's belly. Then came Winston's face, planting itself right between old Charrington's thighs. To cushion his fall, Winston caught the professor's knees in a tight hug, and from across the room, it looked like he was performing a sex act.

Charrington was a professor in the Department of Anthropology. He wore tweed jackets and used a monocle. He was respected for his research and teaching, but he was neither engaging nor friendly. Some considered him to be quite severe. He regarded poor Winston, yellow chunks of smoothie dripping down his cheeks, and sneered, "go clean yourself up." Winston slinked away, like a teetering stick bug of human proportions, to the nearest restroom.

That was the Winston she knew at first, odd and unattractive, yet comfortable in his skin, and able to laugh at himself. He was also thoughtful and kind, always there when she needed someone to talk to. She liked the way he said "brilliant" all the time, even after she said something completely mundane. He seemed so happy and carefree, but as the first semester dragged on he began to change.

Julia would tease Winston when he said "petrol" instead of gas, or "boot" instead of trunk, but he wouldn't change his way of speaking. "Great Britain gave Oceania its bloody language!" he

would say. Julia's mother tongue – and the language of over half Oceania's population – was Spanish, but she understood where he was coming from. In all the time she knew him, Julia had never once heard him say the words "Airstrip One."

Julia placed her Newspeak textbook on the end table beside her bed, still thinking about Winston. He started to change around the time of Brexitopia, she thought, a holiday meant to celebrate the history of Airstrip One's annexation. According to historians, Great Britain was originally to become a region of Eurasia, but the heroic Oceanian military embarked on a three-year campaign to "liberate" them. "Liberate indeed," Winston would groan, "you can't even get a sodding lemon there anymore! Mocked for centuries because we cured scurvy, and now we've got it again!"

When Julia first heard about Brexitopia, she thought it may be fun to join the party, maybe have a few drinks and meet people. She had no idea Winston would react the way he did. Exams are coming, she thought – maybe he's under pressure. With crazed eyes he ranted about Britain's problems, gesticulating and pacing around his dorm room. He would say odd things, like "the governments of the superstates are talking. They want us to hate each other. It's all part of their plan." She shook her head even now, thinking about how bizarre and paranoid he sounded.

Then one day he was gone. Julia looked everywhere, but there was no sign of him. She tried texting and calling, she went to campus security – she even put missing posters up on the telescreen poles. Finally, she tried contacting Winston's parents back in Airstrip One, but couldn't find them either. One night she had a strange dream about an office worker in a cubicle, who printed an e-mail she had sent to Winston. He lit the paper on fire, and stuffed it down a hole in the floor.

Julia snapped out of her daydream, and looked around the room. There were no windows, just her bed, with the end table beside it, and a desk in the far corner. Above the desk, there was a Youth Executive League poster on the wall, partially covering a long crack in the plaster. On it were two students, looking well-groomed in their navy blue power suits, with beaming faces and

pearly white teeth. She locked eyes with one for a few seconds, and it felt like they were watching her. She put some textbooks in her backpack, and left.

It was a sunny day. The grassy square outside was like a courtyard, flanked on all sides by res buildings, and Julia loved that place. It seemed closed off from the rest of OSU, and the rest of Oceania. It was spring now, and the sun was warm enough to study on the lawn with a blanket, but finals were coming soon, and she needed to get to the library.

From a corner of the square, she followed a cobbled lane down a small hill, towards the International Liberty Library. It was a drab, utilitarian box of a building, but also a very efficient place for keeners like Julia. The computer and cataloguing systems were intuitive, and the uniformed staff understood the government-sanctioned curriculum inside out – they were always there to help. Something about it was a little eerie, but she sensed it would help her succeed and get ahead.

Between res and the library, the cobblestones became a stone dust path, which meandered around a large field. This area was known as the Free Speech Zone, where student groups could gather, exchange ideas, and stage protests. On any given day, Julia would see activists, radicals, militants, evangelists, party members, political junkies, pressure groups, random people with whistles and bullhorns, but she didn't care much for the politics. To her, it was first class entertainment, a comical collection of oddballs, all milling around and shouting at each other.

One of the mainstays of the Free Speech Zone was Donald. On most days, he could be found there at some point, manning a table for the Autocratic Students Society. He was on the group's executive, along with Vladimir and Xi, a pair of exchange students from Eurasia and Eastasia, respectively. Donald had charisma, but Julia was wary of him. She had first met him at a campus debating competition earlier that year, where she watched him verbally eviscerate his female opponent, reducing her to tears before a standing ovation.

It was a bizarre event, from beginning to end. Donald repeatedly asserted the resolution, that Oceania was currently at peace, was false, and that Oceania was actually at war with Eastasia.

When his contention was refuted, he lashed out, claiming his opponent's argument was based on "fake news." In awe, Julia watched a well-versed, intelligent young woman – who was known to be strong and persuasive – completely fall apart. Throughout the entire debate, Donald failed to present a single fact to support his position, although no one seemed to care.

Donald was declared Victor, to thunderous applause. He smiled at the crowd of mostly young white males, before peering down at the one person who had displeased him that day. Professor McCain was a judge who took pity on the other debater, when Donald began to insult her personally, saying her argument was "disgraceful," and that she was "only a seven." He was an old and decent man, who had suffered in a real war – unlike the fiction of that evening – and he would not tolerate cruelty. Donald later referred to him as a "so-called judge."

When Julia later reflected upon that evening, what bothered her most – more than the bad behaviour – was Donald's utter lack of respect for the truth. She wondered what his secret was, what spell he had cast, or had the audience simply accepted his victory as a foregone conclusion? Maybe people were mesmerized by his unusual facial expressions, or by his hair. Or worse, did they accept his misinformation as the truth? Regardless, the facts hadn't mattered, and the student who clearly won the debate on technical merit had lost, and was humiliated in the process.

Julia realized she had been standing there like a statue for a good ten minutes, thinking. Pretty soon pigeons will be landing on me, she thought. Before moving on, she surveyed the Free Speech Zone, and sure enough, there was the executive branch of the Autocratic Students Society. Donald, Xi, and Vladimir – or Vlad, as his friends on campus called him – were at their information table, in the shade of a large chestnut tree. They seemed embroiled in some heated discussion, pointing and waving their arms about. She started walking towards the library.

Donald was enrolled in Love Studies at OSU. While Julia seldom spoke of her scholarship funding – a product of hard work in a setting of poverty – Donald would often boast how he was turning his father's generous allowance for tuition fees and living expenses into a "really great

degree.” He once told Julia that much, before a math lecture in second semester. It was the class where she first met Xi, and where she learned that two plus two makes five.

The sum of two single digit numbers is basic arithmetic, a simple building block of knowledge from primary school. It was not Professor Gore’s intention to cover two plus two in his course, but Donald and Xi thought the problem should be included. To make their point, they interrupted the professor just minutes into his opening lecture, saying “two plus two is five,” in stereo. They declared it loudly from the front row. Gore, well known for his stately demeanour and logical thinking, stopped speaking abruptly and eyed the two jokers. After a brief pause he started up again, only to be interrupted once more with the same asinine statement.

“Two plus two does not equal five. It equals four,” responded Gore, looking flustered.

“Sure it does,” said Donald, and as if rehearsed, he and Xi started chanting “two plus two is four,” like children taunting someone in a schoolyard. If one can imagine musically, maybe in A minor, it was the familiar C-C-A-D-C-A (four quarter notes, then two half notes). Anyway, Julia looked on at this spectacle from the back row, not sure whether to laugh or get angry. She liked poor old Gore. He was a bit stiff, and sometimes downright boring, but he was a good teacher.

Donald and Xi were asked to leave, which they did, still chanting as they exited the lecture hall. Julia watched them go, bewildered in the silence that followed. Class resumed, course objectives were reviewed, and more relevant university-level problems were explored. Indeed, the two plus two incident had almost faded from her memory, when she entered the hall a week later to see Donald and Xi there, once again in the first row.

The two were quiet this time. They must have been disciplined, thought Julia. Although their presence caught some early attention, the other students soon shifted their focus to Professor Gore, who seemed a bit off that day. He was stuttering, wiping sweat from his forehead, tugging at his collar – at times he was incoherent. Then, as class was ending and the students were packing up, Gore cleared his throat and asked for everyone’s attention.

“Class. Class, I have an announcement. It’s an admission of error, I’m afraid. Last week I disagreed with the assertion of two students, seated here in the front row, that two and two make five. However, after reviewing the matter carefully with my colleagues, it seems your classmates were right – two plus two does indeed equal five. I stand corrected, and owe an apology to these fine students. That is all.”

The memory had her feeling a bit queasy, as she entered the International Liberty Library. Something didn’t add up, she thought. Why did Gore say that, and why did he look so distraught that day? Her brain was buzzing with questions, as she sat down to study.

Around two in the afternoon, Julia woke with a start. Mouth wide open, she looked around groggily, and then downwards at the Formica desktop. There was a tiny puddle of drool beside her Newspeak textbook. What a weird dream, she thought – it was so vivid. Her father was playing chess outside their home in the Sonoran desert, against none other than Vlad, the Eurasian exchange student. They sat at a square wooden table beside the pebble garden, and the sky was orange. No one spoke for a while, as they moved their pieces around the board. Then, after taking one of her father’s pawns with a rook, Vlad looked up and said, “Checkmate.”

Julia’s father was confused. He showed Vlad three places one could easily move his king to be out of danger, and in doing so realized he could even take the rook that had put him in check. Vlad seemed unfazed by this, and what followed was a ridiculous argument that was still going on when Julia woke up. She thought about home, and wondered how her family was doing. That reminds me, she thought – I have to go see Professor Charrington.

Professor Charrington, of course, was the surly old man who had received Winston’s face and a smoothie in his lap. More importantly to Julia, his main research interest was Pastoralism in Old Tamaulipas, a subject near and dear to her heart. Julia’s parents were from that part of Old Mexico, and she intended to pursue a major in anthropology after freshman year. That was what she wanted to discuss with him.

It was a bit of a quest to locate his office. She finally found it in the basement of an old stone building, at the end of a long, musty smelling hallway. She knocked, and a toneless voice said, “come in.” She entered the room, and a poster on the wall caught her eye almost instantly. There was a collage of black and white photos on it, with “CLASH CITY ROCKERS” written through the middle. Charrington finished writing something in a notebook, and looked up to see Julia staring at it. As if to offer an explanation, he recited two lines from a poem.

You owe me a move say the bells of Saint Groove
Come on and show me say the bells of Old Bowie

Julia had no idea what that meant, but before she could ask he invited her to sit down. “How can I help you?” he said. Here I am, she thought, somewhere underground with this strange old man, who speaks in verse and kind of looks like an eagle. He had big, bushy eyebrows and smelled of alcohol and cloves. Julia steadied her nerves, sat down, and explained why she was there.

When Charrington learned of her interests, and that she had even read some of his work, he seemed quite pleased. His demeanour changed, and Julia relaxed. They talked about the program and his current research objectives, and all in all, things went well. She felt relieved, and surprised to see a different side of the professor.

“Alright, good talk,” said Charrington. “I wish you good luck. Perhaps we could work together in the future.” He hunched over and searched for something in one of his desk drawers. “Before you go, I have a gift for you.” He handed her a small, leather-bound book. “This is a diary – a journal. When you start doing field work for your studies in anthropology, it will be good to keep one.”

“Thank you,” said Julia. She got up, thanked him again for his time, and left. It was now four thirty, and outside the building she saw it had rained. The grounds were lush and green, and she began to walk in the direction of res. The air was heavy with a fresh, earthy scent, and it was sunny with dark clouds over the ocean to the east. It was nice, but it also felt like a storm was coming.

The Great Annexation Strategy of the thirties was still a recent event, and Oceania was a new superstate. However, efforts were underway at a very high level to make it seem quite old. As Oceania evolved over time, so did its written history, and while reinterpretation of the past is important for the oppressed and forgotten, this was something completely different. Names, places and dates were being altered, and hard statistics blown out to silly random numbers. Political leaders had manipulated the truth since the dawn of civilization, but now the historians and scientists were in on it, and citizens were beginning to believe lies, even when they understood on some level that it was all deception. It was the age of “alternative facts.”

The manner in which people and communities were interconnected, both within and between the superstates, was also evolving. Communication devices had been greatly enhanced in the previous era, with the introduction of internet services, smartphones, social media, and finally telescreen networks. These technologies were still available to citizens who could afford them, but their general use and overall purpose were changing. Communications were heavily monitored, subject to constant government oversight. The change was so slow and subtle that most Oceanians hardly noticed it.

Time and space were shrinking, in an ever expanding superstate. Julia knew something was amiss, although she couldn't quite put her finger on it. She was obviously intelligent and intuitive, but the feeling was more a result of her background. She was not from the dominant culture. Many people had suffered terribly during the annexations, and Julia found it astonishing that no one at OSU ever talked about it. Either they didn't know what happened, or they were choosing to ignore it. Oceanians were no longer interconnected, if they ever were.

When Julia got back to res, there was a poster in the foyer for an event that evening at Pinochet Place. Guest speaker Joaquin Goldstein was to give a talk in the auditorium, at seven o'clock. That's soon, she thought, and I've been in this sweatshirt for three days. In her dorm room, she placed her backpack on the bed, and fussed about what to do for a minute. She didn't know who this Goldstein was, but the topic on the poster – Political Opinions in Oceania – sounded interesting. It was Friday, and she felt like going out.

The only problem was what to wear. Having grown up with five brothers, Julia was decidedly a tomboy, and dressing up was not her thing. She opened the closet to look at “red guy” and “green guy,” the names she had given her only two dresses. They were both nice and fit her well, but she didn’t wear them often. She chose the red one. Over the next hour, she showered, ate another apple, and put red guy on. Before leaving, she emptied out her backpack, and leafed through the first few empty pages of the diary Charrington gave her. Then she put it in the thin drawer of the end table, and left for the evening.

Pinochet Place was a large venue on campus for gatherings, ceremonies, the performing arts, and academic lecture series. Through the tall glass doors of its front entrance, Julia stepped into a world of concrete. Walls of cold grey surrounded her, with chairs and tables that seemed to grow out of the floor, as if concrete had been poured into one giant mold to build the place. Julia joined a long queue to get a glass of wine. It feels cold in here, she thought, as she looked around at the bartenders and other staff, who were dressed entirely in white.

The auditorium was packed. Goldstein opened with a joke about the government, and got right into it. He covered a lot of ground over the first hour, from his childhood in Montréal, to his participation in the Great Annexation Strategy, and finally his activities in modern-day Oceania. It was all a set up to the main theme of his talk in the second hour, Political Opinions in Oceania.

During the intermission, Julia went to get another glass of wine. While standing in line, pieces of Goldstein’s speech were percolating in her mind. After the icebreaker joke about the government, she had expected more in the way of criticism. She thought it would be more political, but so far it was mainly a factual account with some amusing anecdotes thrown in. As she stood there thinking, little did she know the evening was about to take a sudden turn.

“Hello,” said Donald. There he stood beside her, grinning in his blue suit and red tie. Before Julia knew it, he had clasped her right hand, and pulled her in sharply. He held her there for a few long seconds, and asked, “can I get you to the front of this line?” Realizing who it was, she opened her mouth without saying anything. Her first instinct was to admonish him for his intrusiveness, but she was distracted by his hair. Was it a huge combover? Maybe a dead

gopher? Windswept barley, she thought with pride – that’s it. She started to laugh.

Donald thought her laughter was in response to his question about jumping the queue. “No I’m serious,” he said. “These people know me. They think I’m great.”

“No it’s OK, I think I’ll wait here,” answered Julia. “I’m not in a hurry.” She freed herself from Donald’s yank in handshake.

Donald lowered his brow. She had passed on his kind offer. “You look great tonight,” he said. “You should dress up more often.”

“Thanks, I think.”

There was an awkward silence, as Julia turned ninety degrees and stepped forward with the queue. She puffed her cheeks out and tapped her thighs, things she did when she was nervous, and after a few deep breaths, she glanced sideways. Donald was still there. “What do you think of this Goldstein guy?”

“Donald, I just want to get a—

“Listen,” said Donald, cutting her off. “Some friends and I are going out for drinks after this, and you’re welcome to come. Would be tremendous to have you there.”

“I think—

“OK! It’s a deal. See you afterwards.” Donald spun around and walked towards his friends with an air of confidence, his head up and chest out. Julia wondered what had just happened. Was he hitting on me? She got her glass of wine and downed it.

The second part of Goldstein’s talk was about to begin, and Julia found her seat in the auditorium. This time, he came out swinging. He said the founding fathers of Oceania had been

united by democratic ideals, and opposition to tyranny. They believed the annexations were necessary, to protect the free world against Eurasia and Eastasia, which according to Goldstein, had become totalitarian superstates. “The great irony of Oceania,” he declared, “is that each day we are increasingly similar to the very powers we came into existence to oppose.”

The audience was silent, and Julia felt a tension that wasn't there earlier. Goldstein paused briefly for a sip of water, and continued. “The changes began during our troubles with the Frente Argentino de Revolución Terrorista.” The annexations did not occur without resistance, and he believed the movement had been hijacked by its repressive wartime factions, leaving a dark cloud over Oceania that lingered to the present day.

Goldstein was the first person Julia had ever heard question the version of history she learned in school. For example, he rejected the notion that Obama was an Islamic fundamentalist, who had been sent from Eastasia to the United States to commit terrorist acts. He defended dissidents who disappeared or were imprisoned for treason, saying they were wrongly accused, that their trials were a sham.

Goldstein concluded with some commentary about free speech. He said the rights of citizens to express their opinions had been eroded over time, as a result of what he called “Oceania's slow march towards autocracy.” People were simply afraid to say what they were thinking. It was all explained in detail, in his new book, *Political Opinions in Oceania*.

When the lecture ended, Julia ignored every instinct within her and stood up to applaud, with gusto. She hadn't agreed with everything Goldstein said, but she found the talk liberating, her mind teeming with new ideas and questions. However, it didn't take long for her to realize she was the only person in the entire auditorium who was standing and clapping. She sat down, mortified.

Julia filed out with the rest of the crowd into the hall, where she queued up promptly for one last drink. With her glass in hand, she leaned back against a concrete pillar as people chattered in small groups around her. Across the room, she saw Goldstein emerge from a door, and students

gathering around him. She didn't recognize anyone, and she was humiliated after her solo standing ovation fiasco.

Just as she was about to leave, Julia felt something press upon her shoulder. She turned to see it was Donald's hand. Before she could protest, he said, "OK, time to go. My driver's outside. We're going to the Mean Shebeen."

"Mean what!?"

"It's a really terrific place. You're gonna love it." Before she knew it, Donald was walking her towards the entrance of the building, with one hand on her shoulder and the other holding her hand. She would later ask herself why she didn't just break free and tell him to go away, but she kept walking. Despite being repulsed by Donald, she had been disarmed by something. She wasn't attracted to him, but she couldn't say no. There was a chauffeur with a flat cap on, waiting at the entrance. He escorted them to a sleek black car, parked outside.

Before getting in, Julia stopped abruptly. She pushed Donald away and extended her arm out, giving him a full stop view of her palm. "Stop manhandling me," she demanded.

Donald paused. He softened his tone, but he did not apologize. "Julia, trust me. This is a tremendous opportunity. The place is in a rough part of town, but I think you're tough. I think you've got what it takes, and we're gonna have an amazing evening." She had no idea what any of that meant, but he seemed so sincere. The next thing she knew, Julia was in the backseat of his car, whizzing through campus in the night.

The Mean Shebeen was in Mugabeville. After a brief stop at campus security, the driver brought them circling down a hillside road, through a wooded area that separated OSU from its surroundings. Julia remained silent in the darkness, seeing only flashes from passing headlights. Once, she caught a snapshot of Donald's side profile. It was impressive, the cold stare ahead, stony cheekbones, and firm, down-slanting mouth, all beneath a sort of golden pancake. They arrived at a checkpoint manned by armed guards, with high, barbed wire fences on either side.

They entered Mugabeville, and Donald spoke. “My father owns most of these tenements,” he said, waving his hand towards the window. Julia looked outside at the drab-looking buildings, boarded up houses, and shops with barred windows. It was how she had always imagined Detroit.

“My father tried to keep the blacks out for years,” said Donald, “but now you can see it’s a mixed neighbourhood. They’re all proles anyway. It doesn’t matter who lives here.”

“Proles.” Julia had heard that term more and more, being used to describe working class people in Oceania. She could only assume it was derived from the old word proletariat, which she came across from time to time in her studies. She looked at the people on the streets, of all ages despite the hour. Some were pushing shopping carts around, while others sat on the sidewalk, begging. There were old men in ratty trench coats, brown-bagging as they staggered along. I’m a prole, she thought.

Julia’s parents had worked as farmhands for most of their lives, somehow keeping the family afloat. After long days in the fields, they would move around the kitchen like ghosts, preparing supper for six kids. Her father’s hands were so calloused that he would lift a boiling pot from the stove, and feel no pain. Her mother could arrest any impulse Julia had to misbehave, with a single glance. They were poetic, fatalistic and loving, and they taught her about “*la dignidad*.” Julia was missing them, as the car rolled to a stop on a busy street outside the Mean Shebeen.

The front of the building was a cinder block wall with a steel door in it. An enormous bouncer stood there, armed with a truncheon. There was no sign up to mark the entrance, or reveal the bar’s name. Someone had spray painted “THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELESCREENED” across the wall. They were escorted to the entrance, where the driver whispered something to the bouncer, who opened the door and waved them through.

They walked into a dim, hazy room with dark wood paneling and a low ceiling of rusted tin. The side walls had stained glass windows with African-themed images and motifs. On the paneling between the windows, there were framed paintings and photographs of figures from African

history, King Leopold II, Mobutu Sese Seko, various apartheid leaders, and the neighbourhood's namesake, Robert Mugabe. Donald led Julia to a raised area in the back, with polished hardwood floors and green velvet cushions on the seats. There, in a crescent-shaped booth that gave some privacy while still allowing a view of the bar, sat Vlad and Xi.

The two stood up, and there Julia was among the most prominent members of the Autocratic Students Society. Donald was the tallest of the three, while Vlad was clearly the shortest, and Xi somewhere in between. Vlad's face was round, with blonde hair and blue eyes, and a wide, thin mouth he seemed to struggle with, in an effort to smile. Xi bore a slight resemblance to Winnie the Pooh. He extended his arm for a handshake, with a smile that appeared a bit more genuine. Julia accepted, trying not to giggle. There was some relief in these introductions, feeling tipsy in a strange bar with a trio of oddballs. They're harmless, she thought.

The four of them scooped into the booth and sat. From end to end it was Vlad, Xi, Julia and Donald. Pleasantries behind them, Xi asked Donald why he had recommended this place.

"Ya," said Vlad, "this is dump."

"It's a very nice place," answered Donald, confidently. "Look at the history all around you," he added, gesturing toward the walls. Vlad and Xi nodded solemnly. The three remained silent for a few long seconds until – as if on cue – they burst out laughing.

"Ya. This place IS dump," said Donald. "I can't believe all the money and resources we waste in Africa. The entire continent is one big HOLE."

Much of sub-Saharan Africa, roughly from the equator southwards, belonged to Oceania. Julia remembered hearing about recent tensions in a place called Brazzaville, perhaps with Eastasia. She looked at the wall behind her, and saw the closest of the framed images. It was a photograph of a white man in a suit, shaking hands with a black man in military fatigues and a red beret. The caption below read, "PAUL MANAFORT, DEFENDER OF THE STRONGMAN."

“I come here for the prole-watching,” said Donald. “They love me, they really do. You can ask people. They’re disgusting, but I need them. They build my father’s buildings, and then pay rent to live in them. If I’m ever going to run for office, I’ll need their vote.”

“And you will need them later for work camps,” added Vlad. There was another round of solemn nods.

“That is the problem with your superstate,” said Xi, glancing sideways at Donald and Vlad. “One should not require the people’s vote to obtain power.”

“It is sham in Eurasia,” said Vlad, looking disinterested.

“It’s all rigged in Oceania anyway,” added Donald. “I just gotta do the right things to get elected. Then if I’m president someday, I’ll make Oceania great again.”

What does he mean, “make Oceania great again,” wondered Julia. It was a brand new superstate.

Vlad and Xi were highly critical of Oceania, while Donald sat there listening, nodding his head and tapping his fingers on the table. One by one, they tore into each of the superstate’s remaining democratic institutions, the independent judiciary, the free press, political opposition, any organization that could question the government and not be controlled.

At first, they complemented Oceania’s security agencies and surveillance programs. “A government can never know too much about its citizens,” said Xi. However, they were deeply concerned with how the information was being used. Far more could be done to prevent dissidents from committing seditious acts, such as writing unfavourable articles in the news.

It was like they had all known each other for years, like they had gone to summer camp together. When Vlad spoke, Donald seemed to hang on his every word, and boy, did Vlad speak. With a strange smirk on his face, and very little eye contact, he went on at length about his research with the Post-Truth Studies Department, and the history of Eurasia. It was like listening to a speech.

As far as Julia could tell, Vlad revered leaders from the past who held on to power. He would describe their methods in detail, adding very little about what they actually did for people. He was ambivalent about Joseph Stalin, not because of the purges or cruel insanity, but because of his adherence to an ideology. “I mean, say what you want about tenets of Stalinist communism,” he said, “the problem is it was ethos.”

The monotone lecture finally over, Vlad looked at Donald and said, “in future election, I think it is important you win. Eurasia will help you.” He then turned to Julia and said, “I know you are against me.” A shiver went down her spine.

“Easy Vlad,” said Donald, sensing Julia’s discomfort. “But I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“What did you think of Joaquin Goldstein, Donald?” asked Julia, trying to steer things elsewhere. It was the first thing she had said since they sat down. Donald tilted his head back slightly, and jutted his chin out. Julia wondered if he needed the restroom.

After an eternal fifteen seconds he said, “I don’t think he takes care of himself. Do you think he’s bald, or does he just shave his head?”

“He is kind of guy you need vapourize,” said Xi.

“Yes,” agreed Vlad, “I recommend ice pick. Or perhaps nerve poison.”

“And I hear he’s from the former Canada,” said Donald. “We used to say there’s a ‘special place in hell’ for people from there. I don’t even know why we annexed them. I mean, they had a good economy, but we were killin’ them in the trade deals.”

Julia wondered what he thought about people from Old Mexico. The relief she felt initially was vanishing, although her discomfort was tempered somewhat by alcohol. She ordered another glass of Victory wine. Oily, syrupy stuff, she thought, but Donald was paying, and she needed it. As she waited for her next drink, she thought about their analysis of Goldstein. Why did they

hate him so much? Was it an anti-Semitic thing? And what did Xi mean by vapourize? She thought Goldstein was a little gloomy at times, but she liked his self-deprecating sense of humour. She even thought he was kind of cute.

The other three were also drinking, and the conversation suffered as a result. Resuming her role as listener, she endured their opinions on everything from the “climate change hoax” to feminism. It was painful, Donald’s fractured sentences and unfinished ideas, his friends’ constant negativity in broken English – at times, they just babbled incoherently. And what was with Vlad!? That guy was starting to freak her out. She began to ponder her situation, in a weird bar, in a fenced-in neighbourhood, with a narcissist, a psychopath, and Winnie the Pooh.

“I have to go to the restroom,” she said. Julia got up, steadied herself, and started walking. Unable to spot a sign, she stopped at the bar to ask where it was. She leaned her elbows on the bar top, resting her chin on her palms, while placing a foot upon the chrome rail below. Her wavy black hair flowed down to the small of her back, and the curvy contours of her body were fully revealed. As the bartender approached, she suddenly realized there were wolfish eyes trained upon her, from all directions. She stayed calm, and the bartender was polite. He pointed towards a stairway near the entrance, acknowledging it was poorly marked, and she thanked him.

Julia the tomboy, perpetually clad in jogging suits with her messy hair in a bun, had only a remote awareness of her beauty. She knew men were attracted to her, but this level of attention was new, and it made her feel uncomfortable. With a feigned look of confidence, she marched with purpose towards the stairway.

On her way to the restroom, Julia became aware of another man’s attention, only this time it was a one-dimensional King Leopold II, staring down at her from his place on the wall. She shuddered, as the dead Belgian monarch’s eyes seemed to shift as she walked along, watching her. Maybe that’s enough booze, she thought, as she reached the top of the stairs.

Happily, her restroom experience at the Mean Shebeen was uneventful. However, she did have to negotiate her way around a fistfight on the way back. A tall, stern-looking man with a large

frame was pummeling a short, stout man with a pudgy, flushed face. The tall one looked like an aging Richard Burton, while the short man resembled a middle-aged Ned Beatty. Ned was obviously drunk, appearing almost unaware he was being beaten, and as Julia scanned the bar for a way around them, she saw that no one cared.

When she finally got back to the table, Donald was fixed upon the fight, squinting with his cheekbones up high. He hardly noticed Julia return. It was over now, and poor Ned lay spread eagle on the floor, while Richard Burton sat down alone to finish his pint. “I like this guy,” said Donald. “The other guy’s kind of low-energy.” He turned and settled rigidly in the green velvet, and all four had a sip from their drinks. Julia wondered why the men were fighting, while Donald cared only about who won.

Then Vlad asked, “how is state of pornography here?”

“It’s good,” answered Donald. “We have a tremendous industry in Oceania, thanks to Pornosec. They’re a really great corporation. I used to date one of its greatest stars—

“*Pendejos!*” shouted Julia, and before she knew it she was standing, the table shoved forward, her spilt wine glass rolling in an arc. That was now the only sound in the Mean Shebeen. All conversation and music had stopped. Every head in the place was turned towards the raised area in the back, and all eyes – even those of old King Leopold II – were upon her. Julia had the sort of pipes one needed to shout loudly, but this had not been planned. She stood there stunned, wondering what to do next.

“What is *pendejo*?” asked Xi.

The silence broken, Julia turned toward Donald. “I want to go home,” she said, softly. The music started up again, and hubbub refilled the bar, along with the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses. For the second time that evening, Julia had been the recipient of an entire room’s unsolicited attention. She tried not to cry. Looking up at her, Donald’s face betrayed no emotion.

“Sure,” he said. “My driver’s outside.” He paid the tab, and led Julia outside with a gentle grip on her elbow. There was no sign of Donald’s car in the well-lit street. He turned to the right and guided her in that direction, mumbling something about where the car was parked. Julia saw a rat scurry into an alleyway, which separated the Mean Shebeen from an abandoned building full of broken windows. They walked past it and came to a cross street, where she could see a park on the other side, and a gas station at the far corner. There was no one around, and still no car. As they crossed the intersection towards the park, Julia felt the evening’s first misty raindrops settle upon her cheeks.

“Where is your car?” she asked. “I couldn’t hear what you said before.”

They stopped at the corner, and Donald turned to face her. There were no lampposts in the park, and a walkway leading obliquely to its centre disappeared in the darkness. All Julia could see was a small, dimly lit bench under a chestnut tree. “Can we sit?” asked Donald.

They sat down, and Donald placed a hand on Julia’s knee. She shivered and crossed her arms, feeling cold and uncomfortable in her thin dress.

“Listen Julia, what can I do to impress you?”

Julia paused, looking down at the ground. “I don’t know. Find your car?”

“Seriously Julia. I’m not usually a braggadocious guy, but I’m really very intelligent. I think we could have great conversations.”

“Could you take your hand off my knee?”

He didn’t seem to hear. “I mean, I really understand beauty, and you’re beautiful. Probably a nine even.”

“I just don’t think we’re right for each other, Donald. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not sure what you see in that Goldstein guy, and what happened in the Mean Shebeen, well—

OK, he’s not listening, thought Julia. That’s enough. She brushed his hand off, stood straight up, and took a step forward. Then she twirled around and looked down at him, sweeping the hair from her face to reveal a furrowed brow and the deep frustration in her eyes. “It’s not going to work, Donald.”

Unfazed and looking directly at her, Donald replied, “I think you’re flirting with me Julia, unconsciously.”

Just then, a sudden crack of thunder sounded off, rumbling and trailing away as the rain picked up. A few seconds later, their surroundings were fully illuminated by a great flash of lightning. Julia’s instinct was to run, and she did. She ran down the walkway, right into the heart of the dreary Mugabeville park. The rain was beating down as her heart thumped against her chest, running in the darkness. There were heavy footsteps behind her, and then a tug at her elbow. It was Donald.

“Julia!” he shouted. “It’s not safe in this neighbourhood.”

“Then why did you bring me here!?” she shot back, as he faced her again, this time seizing her elbow with one hand, while placing his other on the upper inward curve of her hip. Julia was terrified, but she didn’t struggle. Thoughts of what to do next were racing through her mind, as thunder roared once more through the sky. Her dress was now soaked, but she was warmed by adrenaline. Lightning came next, giving her a brief, clear snapshot of Donald’s face. With eyes like two slits and lips protruding out like a small donut, it was like seeing a flash of some ceremonial wooden mask with a corn husk on top, and she screamed.

His grip loosened, and she broke free. “I think the only thing you believe in is yourself!” she shouted, and started to run again.

This time, Donald did not give chase. “It’s OK,” he cried out, “I don’t want you anyway! You’re going to fail at everything you do, Julia. And you’re no nine – you’re a DOG!”

That word, “dog,” echoed in Julia’s ears, as she ran towards a fuzzy light at the opposite corner of the park. The light was from street lamps, flanking a row of tenements across the intersection there. She spotted an alleyway between two of the buildings and darted across the road. Seconds later, she sat hidden between a dumpster and some piled up garbage bags, ankles crossed and leaning forward, hugging her knees. She felt cold again, and a tear ran down her cheek as she looked around anxiously. A rat scampered by her feet, and then another. She was about to scream again, when she thought about her friend Winston.

He was always talking about the rats. “They seem to be proliferating back home,” he said, “you see them more and more each year. Everyone telling ya they’re a thing o’ the past, from fiction or the histories. ‘It’s getting better all the time,’ they say. The more people are hypnotized by all this cult of personality, the less they notice all the sodding rats.” She could hear the words clearly in her mind, as if Winston were really there speaking to her.

The storm died down, and she sat there listening to drops of water, tinkling on the metal fire escapes above. Then, she heard the sound of singing.

We’ll walk in de light, de beautiful light
Come where the dew drops of mercy shine bright

Julia turned towards the voice, and saw a light flickering from one of the ground-level flats. She took a deep breath, rose quietly to her feet, and walked down the alley. Through a grey, filmy window she saw a heavysset woman with an apron on, drying dishes at the kitchen counter.

Shine all around us by day and by night

The woman looked up from the countertop, and stopped singing. There was Julia, just about to knock on her old screen door. It must have been an odd site, this beautiful young girl out in the

alley, soaking wet in a red dress, so late in the evening. With a stiff gait, she walked with effort to the door. “Can I help you child?” Julia nodded, and the woman let her in.

She woke up the next morning with a jolt, in a cold sweat. She had been in the middle of a wild dream, and could feel her heart beat as she sat up hugging the sheets. She had a headache. The contents of her dream dissipated within seconds, as she looked around at the familiar walls of her dorm room, feeling instant relief.

Julia was home, but her comfort was short-lived. She began to appreciate the full intensity of her headache, which was worsened by her neighbour’s strange music coming through the walls.

You need a little jump of electric shockers

You better leave town if you only want to knock us

What is that? she wondered, and on a Saturday morning! There was some water in a tin mug on the end table, and she remembered there were some painkillers in the drawer. There were two rotting apple cores beside her mug. She was hungry, despite the hangover.

When Julia opened the drawer, the first thing she saw was Charrington’s diary. She paused, and looked up at the Youth Executive League poster. After popping a couple pills, she lifted her frizzy hair into a bun, and slid a dark wooden pin through her grandmother’s barrette, to hold it in place. She picked up the diary and a pen, and opened the book’s leather cover to the first page. At the top, she wrote the date: April 1, 1950. Then on the first line, she wrote “two plus two equals four...”