

/lit/ winners club
November 2025



4chan

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/lwc/

/lit/ Writing Competition

November 2025

Entrants to this contest were required to incorporate theme and character elements. Entries were selected by popular vote, with each voter being asked to select a rank of three entries. Only four entries were made, fourth-place being an ASCII cock at the time of my writing this, and third-place having highlights such as “still-beaten heart,” “man’s moral coil,” bold in place of quotes, and the innovative “!” mark. The second and first-place winners are published here in that order.

The theme requirement:

A character must suffer from chronic pain

The character requirement:

Corruption in state institutions

Lyrex

GP surgery

I almost forgot about this story. It was just so long ago and so much stuff has happened in my life—the kids and the marriage and the divorce, and the other kids, and the other marriage, and the death. I've been telling stories. Now it's time to tell this one again. I used to work at the doctor's surgery. If you're listening to this, and you're not from England, the doctor's surgery has got nothing to do with surgery. It's where you go when you're a kid if you've got a cough or a headache for a couple of days. Sore throats, stuff that. To see a general practitioner. A nine to five doctor. They probably did perform surgery. Like, if the barbershop was too busy you'd come get your boils lanced at the doctor's surgery. English is like that. Those remnants of the past hidden in broad daylight, in common parlance.

As I'm telling this story now, I'm driving by Wandsworth Common. That's another one, Common. That's where the commoners could go walk their sheep. Shared lands for people's animals who had nothing else to their name. Now the common is where you go to drink wine in the morning, so things go.

All my memories about this one particular story are lit in this bright, artificial light. Sharp at the edges in the drop ceiling rooms. The Linonium floors, the white plaster walls. Our notice boards were covered up with this clear plastic, cheap stuff, and it reflected even more light. We had to put it up because patients would rip the posters down, use it for roach, rolling spliffs as they wait to see a doctor. I worked there for six months. It's not long, six months, I don't even feel comfortable putting it on my CV because of how short a time I spent there. It was more than enough for one person. It's why I'm okay with where I am now, sitting at home, rather this than back there. I live off the rent from the guy who lodges in my basement flat. I watch old movies on free streaming websites 123movies and all the different variations of those Whacka mole websites—one goes down, one comes back up again.

Recently, watched one with Jimmy Stewart. Can't remember the name, but I remember how weird it was. I remember thinking, I can't believe people back then had ideas like this. The arrogance of the modern man, I guess. James Stewart thought he was a rabbit. Or thought he had a best friend that was a rabbit. This big rabbit person that followed him around and told him jokes, kept him company. You'd get people like that coming to the doctor's surgery.

Those people needed something more than a general practitioner. We don't offer mental health services complex enough to deal with your imaginary friend, the rabbit. We can maybe dope you up to stop you from killing yourself. Dope you up much you don't want to do anything, not die, nor live. But if one of your patients offs himself looks bad on the numbers.

We had a guy come in, talking about how his neighbour's gonna shoot him with a bow and arrow from his window. And how he needs the drugs to help him deal with it. And I thought, if he actually thought his neighbour was plotting to kill him with a bow and arrow, what was taking drugs gonna do? But behind the paranoia, I could tell he knew it was all in his head. He knew he was his own worst enemy, thinking himself into situations that to his mind could only be solved with a pill. Twice a day after eating. Anything could be fixed with a pill. Does not matter what, whether you broke your leg or lost your mind, you only need the right combination of pills at the right time to make you normal again, whatever normal is. A statistical average. Before working at the doctor's surgery, I thought it was more complex. Doctors went to school for 10 years, trained for 15. The most valued profession in our society. Trustworthy, never get anything wrong. And if they did get something wrong, it'd be all over the news. If anyone came to me with that opinion now I'd prescribe them a pill. 'Cause that ain't normal thinking.

I started work at the doctor's surgery in Wandsworth

after the cutbacks that got rid of middle management and replaced them with computers, AI. Even the receptionists got replaced by screens to imitate a face, voices meant to replicate the tones of an old Scottish lady. Apparently the most trustworthy accent anybody in England can hear.

Me, I was brought in as a monitoring officer. I sat in this room at the back of the surgery, in front of the screens that projected the feeds from each consultation room. The cameras filmed every inch of the 4 rooms to protect patients and doctor's safety. Some software was developed to judge from the movements on the screen if there was an assault or inappropriate behaviour. It was my job to sit in this room and judge whether what the software was picking up was real because the software was often wrong. The software often didn't pick up the things it needed to pick up. It would mistake a doctor putting a stethoscope on the chest of a patient as inappropriate touching. Yet the molestation of 73 children in Yorkshire was deemed by the software as a routine checkup. So I'd be in that room with those screens from 8:30 till five. Lunch was half an hour. But I usually only took 15 minutes anyway. The lunch room was a depressing place. The doctors would never come in. They wouldn't mix with us. Us being me, the monitoring officer, the cleaning ladies and the engineer they kept in the back on call in case any of the robots went haywire. One time when I was talking to him, I realised he's kind of a doctor too. And that in the future, he'll be wearing a white coat. And he'll have a consultation room in which the robots can walk into to get their nuts twisted, their cogs greased.

The engineer's name was John Johnson. I think it was some sort of joke, though. John Johnson. Kind of stupid fake name is that? He'd be the person I'd interact with most. If one of the screens in the room went fuzzy or the software started hallucinating—accusing doctors of sexual misconduct when they weren't even in the room or... accusing patients of violent behaviour, when, actually, it was just a five year old, uncomfortable with a stick being put

into his ear, Johnson to the rescue.

The room... wasn't bad. It was the best job for me, really, because of my legs. I can stand. It's not as if I'm paralysed, but the pain is so intense there's no point. I've been like that since I can't remember. Zooming around in my electric chair. My calves and my thighs are thinner than my arms. And I thought that would make the pain less, but it's actually the opposite. It's more concentrated. Like, all there is now is pain in the legs. But that pain is so much part of my life, I don't really talk about it. People ask how I'm doing, I say, I'm all right. How are you doing? People ask you, what I've been up to, I say, nothing much. Beause who wants to hear the truth? Who wants to constantly be told about pain, misery? Who wants to be constantly reminded by life's indiscriminate cruelty. Mother nature gives you the ability to walk and takes it away at the snap of a finger. Or in my case, on the slip of some ice. A sit down job, perfect for me. I'd either have to review an accusation or dismiss, Review, or Dismiss. It's a lot of responsibility for someone on minimum wage, below minimum wage, really, because I work for an agency, and they can get around the law with zero hour contracts and umbrella company payment systems.

I think the reason why I forgot this story is because it coincided with something else in my life that at the time felt more important. There's nothing more important than kids.

I'd gotten the flora knocked up and she was due twins. Consequently, the business at the doctor's surgery slipped my mind. That's the thing about software. computers, robots—you don't need a mind no information can slip. They've got it all sorted for you. They don't feel pain They don't feel tired. Pain is tiring. All consuming. Pain colours everything, every memory, every action. You can never really be immersed in a good film or a great book. You can never really enjoy a song from start to finish without being reminded of that thing that's wrong in your life. In my life.

My skinny little legs. And those things I take for granted. stuff that I can do with my mind. I just gave to some machine. Yeah, it was my job. Review, dismiss, review dismiss:

Patient in emotional distress? well yeah she's just been diagnosed with cancer, dismiss.

Patient undressing inappropriately: well yeah the old geezer has got grapes coming out of his arsehole, his fucking haemorrhoids were so bad, dismiss.

The thing is though, what the system didn't catch (and yes, I do see the irony there of my placing responsibility on the machine, absolving myself from any guilt) was the face. Beause all the doctors had to wear face masks, pinche at the nose, taped to the chin. The facial recognition software was useless. Instead they used things like height, skin colour, gait, to identify the doctor and the consultation room. If we had the facial recognition maybe this wouldn't have happened. If the patients didn't speak up in the way that they did they would never have been caught. It was some woman. I can't remember her name, she put it all over Facebook, some mother's group in the local area—nosey neighbour group, curtain twitcher group—something about getting sicker by going to the doctors. She was called paranoid like that guy with the bow and arrow in the window. She was given more drugs and sent to the doctors again to make that feeling go away but it just caused her more pain. That pain dealt with with more drugs, those drugs prescribed by the doctors.

The prescription and the writing of it was the only thing that was blocked from the software. Confidential information, they said. Something to do with forgery. Not allowing drugs to get into the wrong hands. This woman just wouldn't let up. She kept posting. More people replied. But the same story. The patients of Wandsworth doctor's surgery going to the doctors and getting sicker. It's like going to a pub to get sober or going to a restaurant to starve. These facebook womenl figured out it was this one drug

that's being prescribed to them 'for their pain'.

I recognise the name, because it's the same one I take. Costs a fortune. It's kept me in the position that I'm in, not able to save or go out leisurely, treat myself. No. It always kept me around the zeros at the end of the month. It was Flora that brought my attention to it. She'd been prescribed the same drug. When she started getting pains in her womb from my two kids rolling about inside of her. And one of her friends told her not to take it. Flora never was one for holistic thinking or alternative medicine. She's an annual vaxer. She started taking them because, you know, she wanted to be all right for the wedding. We had to get married before she had the kids—she came from that kind of family. If you remember before what I said about the kids, the marriage, a divorce, the other kids in the marriage and the death. Well, that timeline goes backwards.

I didn't know she was having problems until I saw her on the screen. Patient in undue emotional distress: dismiss or review? and I looked and noticed that Flora was there, pulling her hair out, screaming. And the doctor, he just sat there. The fucking mask on his face. Hiding, I'm sure, a little smile beneath.

After work that day, I tried calling but she didn't want to answer. She was ashamed. We'd been married a month. She was now around six months into her pregnancy. Simon and Peter they were going to be called. They'd be real people by now. I'd gone back over the screens, looked at all of these patients that were complaining online about this one drug being prescribed to them, as causing all this pain, all these problems. It was this one company. I noticed on the box when I was clearing out Flora's stuff *Lyrex*. I heard that name before. And I remembered the engineer. His jacket had a *Lyrex* label on it. That's what sent me down the rabbit hole. I found some way of tracking the prescriptions, although the software wouldn't record it. There was a transcription of everyone's conversations and I collated everything and searched for whenever one of the four doc-

tors at this doctor's surgery would prescribe this Lyrex pain medication. They all did. Every time. It didn't matter your problem, the doctor's prescribed Lyrex. I was mad, really, to do what I did. Massive breach of privacy for me to bust into a consultation room while there's a patient in there, but you know, I just had to. I had to confront these doctors. Cowards. They wouldn't even come into the lunch room. The only time I saw their faces was when I was interviewed and they sat, all four of them at a table spent the whole day questioning me, quizzing me, putting me in front of games and tests, psychometric questions. Two of them were Indian men, balding. One of them was a woman, Nigerian, and the other was a small, plump, Scottish man with a military haircut and yellow teeth wonky. Their faces were in pictures around the doctor's surgery receiving awards, shaking hands with politicians, offering that air of authority to the plebians who come to be prescribed their Lyrex. I zoomed into this consultation room screaming at the Scottish doctor and he was there with his mask and he didn't even say anything. He wasn't actually speaking words to me and I was screaming in his face. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? Where do you get off? And he just wouldn't speak. So I wheeled up and ran over his foot and I started jabbing my finger into his flabby stomach. And that fucking mask, I swear, something about the unresponsiveness of it all, I didn't care about the pain, I hopped up and I just ripped it off him. He clasped his hands to his mouth. His teeth were all different and white, but not like they'd been done at the dentist, but like they'd come from another mouth. and then I poked him again, and he said, "Please stop." And he wasn't Scottish. And I said, "Who the fuck are you?" And he said, "Please, I can explain." Before pressing the button underneath his desk. The engineer come running in, John Johnson, which by the way definitely is a fake name. I learned later on that it was the name that Guy Fawkes gave when he was caught underneath Parliament, by the yeoman. John John-

son—He trying to wheel me out but I skidded off. I was thinking who the fuck this doctor is? On all of my papers, all of the medical work, the same guy, Dr. McTavish. Definitely the same guy that interviewed me, Dr. McTavish. I ran into the other and rammed the door open. With John Johnson behind me. “Mate,” he said. “You’re going to be in more trouble than you know!” He couldn’t catch me in my little electric chair. I zoomed down the hallway busted through the next room rolled right up towards the other doctor. This was that Nigerian woman and I rolled right up to her, this big woman, frumpy clothes, and I pulled off the face mask and it revealed this little beard. And I thought, “What the hell?” And I didn’t want to be culturally insensitive or anything, so I just sort of shut my mouth and... That’s when John Johnson grabbed me from behind, flicked off the battery on my chair and rolled me out of there.

Flora didn’t want to have a funeral for the kids, but I did, and this was a day before I’d planned my own one. So, the judge knew I was in a bad state of mind and sort of let me off. And I spent the next month’s grieving, thinking about Simon and Paul. I only found out what was going on at that doctor’s surgery when I saw in the papers, the four faces that I recognised. Doctors arrested for fraud, taking money for work that they hadn’t been doing. Some unnamed pharmaceutical company—of course it was Lyrex, they paid out the ass to make sure that their name didn’t appear in the papers—gave money to these doctors to replace them with pharmaceutical reps. Doctors sat at home, went on a holiday. Played with their kids. While these pharmaceutical reps prescribed Lyrex. Pain reliever. First, of course, they had to cause the pain to prescribe the pain reliever to see if it relieved pain, but it doesn’t. I’m still in my chair. I’m still in pain. My doctor still wants to prescribe me Lyrex. I’ve told him to fuck off and just smoke weed instead.

Old Montana Joe

Anonymous

It was another day, same as all the others. Old Montana Joe opened his eyes, the alarm clock still ringing out. He had woken up ten minutes before it went off. This was typical; he didnt know why he continued to set the alarm.

But, he did.

Then came the pain. For a few moments after waking, he usually couldnt feel it. Might have been that his cognition hadn't come online yet. Might have been the restorative effects of sleep. He was never quite sure if it had truly, briefly subsided, or if it persisted, but his body couldnt recognize it yet.

He also didn't care.

He reached over, turned the alarm off. Jostling his body that way, tended to remind him of the phlegm caught in his throat. Smokers call these "morning pearls." The hacking coughs would ensue, and hed need to make his way to the bathroom.

"Gotta quit...gotta quit," he'd mutter, as he prepared to clear them out, and plunge them into the toilet bowl.

Then, he'd have a smoke, before his shower.

After he was dressed and cleaned up, the pain would make its way to the forefront. A few decades ago, Joe was diagnosed with a nerve disorder. It wasnt arthritis, but it was a lot like arthritis. It had some Latin name he could never really remember. All he knew, was his joints had become a form of perpetual torture.

So it was time to take the pills. These also had some kind of Latin name, that he could never remember.

The pills did help, but not fully. Untreated, his joints rendered him practically immobile. With the pills, once they hit, he could move around. They were still inflamed, but instead of a sharp, chronic anguish; he lived with a dull, gnawing ache.

This was something Joe felt much more at home with.

After that, breakfast. Or, what Joe believed breakfast to be. A Clif bar and a banana, was hardly breakfast in any real sense, but this was what Joe would eat. The banana

was a recent addition. Doctor had said something about getting older, and watching ones health.

Finally, the day would begin in earnest. Joe lived in a rust belt town, where he'd lived his whole life. His neighbors, were strangers. They hardly gave him trouble, as he was just the old, single fellow who kept to himself, and he wasn't ostentatious. Sometimes one of the kids would walk by, and say, "what's up, old man?" And he'd give a silent nod.

He opened the front door, and saw his junked up car, with the rotting chassis. He felt another loogie coming on, the last of the morning pearls, and spat it towards the ground.

"Another day."

After a mix of flirting her up, and a few curse words from Joe, the ol' girl would eventually start. Time to chug down the interstate.

Joe was too old, and too damaged, to keep on working; but too impoverished to retire. He accepted this, and would often think about it on his way to the office.

This was not his lifetime career. He'd once been a nuclear engineer, and helped set up some of the plants back in the 1980s. In his prime, he had discovered the principles of dilution, that radiation actually diffuses itself and loses its potency as isotopes interact with water.

So simple, that the cold warriors didnt see it at first.

This was Joe's big contribution to the world.

Once the pain set in, he couldnt hold the focus anymore. That type of distraction, is a liability when youre working with volatile chemistry. He wasnt fired; he bowed out himself. A small severance pay, and his savings. Nuclear engineering paid very well back in 1996.

He blew it all in Vegas.

These days, he held a different role entirely. The center he worked for was not nuclear, though it was unstable. Joe worked as a supervisor, a pencil pusher and clerk, in a manufacturing plant owned by the government. This was

where they produced the jumpsuits utilized in their prisons.

He never felt too comfortable with it, but the job paid enough to keep him afloat, didn't ask much from him, and he qualified instantly due to his prior experience. The pain was beginning to take its toll, even here, but so far he'd been able to mask his performance.

That is, until today.

The door to Joe's small office opened up, and in walked Carl, the plant manager. He was a young guy, early 30s, with a pleasant affect on the surface. But it was an affect Joe understood all too well. The smile was always apparent, but to a trained eye, the lips were coated with the shit he was consistently eating.

"Mr. Richards! How's the morning treating you?"

Joe was nervous. He knew his performance had been slipping, and that this wasn't a social call.

"Can't complain. Yourself?"

"Same here, same here, Joe."

There was a slight pause, where both men allowed the fakeness to be felt, entertained, then ceremoniously smothered.

"Listen, bud. You know we value having you here. This was a hard role to fill, and you've done well by us for years. But, I don't know how to ask this comfortably...what's been going on?"

Joe feigned ignorance. "What do you mean?"

Carl winced, clearly not wanting to embarrass the man, but needing to do his job.

"The reports, Joe. I'm not trying to break your balls. But, and it's only been the past few months; they've been late, they've been inaccurate, incomplete. Is there something going on at home?"

Joe was in a cold sweat. The arthritis, or whatever the fuck it was, heightened to an intensity he didn't ordinarily feel, even without the pills.

"No, nothing like that. I just, uh. It's been...uh..."

Carl became quite gentle, and intervened.

"Joe, nobody's looking to put you on the street. I get it. Things happen. Point blank, we cant accept this sort of work. But, we dont want to lose you. I know you've got pride. But if you need to take some time, there's no judgments here. That's why we offer it. You're aware you've got a full month of PTO, and you've never taken any?"

"I know. I dont like not showing up. Its not how I was raised."

"And we admire that. But, Joe: if you're slipping, showing up might be working against you.

I'm not telling you youre on the chopping block. Its not like that. But, I *am* telling you it could head there.

Take the time. There's no shame in it."

And so it went. Joe buckled, and accepted it. He filled out the paperwork for a sabbatical, said goodbye to Helen, the secretary, and put his coat on.

On the drive home, it set in.

"Fucking bullshit job. Fuckin' smartass little punk."

He was chain smoking.

"Talking to me like that. 'No problem, bud.' 'Bud.' Should've knocked him the fuck out."

Joe was thinking about what he'd do with the month. And whether or not he should even keep the job.

Then, lights. Blue and red.

He checked the speedometer. 10 miles over.

Motherfucker.

"License and registration, sir."

Joe was shaking like a leaf, a combination of nerves from his troubles at work, stress from being pulled over, and raw, lingering anger.

His car, like his home, was a mess. Not disgusting, but very, very disorganized. He handed over the license, and was struggling to find the registration.

"Im sorry, sir. I'll find it but, might take me a moment."

The officer, a man around Joe's age, seemed unamused. He scanned the ID, and glanced around at the vehicle.

"Why you shaking so much, guy?"

Joe didnt have a good answer. He was actually irritated by the question, and became a little caustic.

"What? I dont know. Nerves, age."

"You on any drugs?"

"Like, hard drugs? Recreational? Im in my 60s."

"Any drugs. You on prescriptions?"

"Well...yes, yeah. I have a joint condition."

"Sir. Step out of the vehicle for a moment."

The officer frisked Joe, and asked him to step aside while he searched the vehicle. Joe began to protest.

"Slow down. I dont consent."

The cop turned around, and was more aggressive this time.

"I didn't ask. I just clocked you going 10 miles over, and you were swerving. If you'd prefer it, I can slap you in handcuffs and cite you, right off the bat. You're being detained. You wanna go that way?"

Joe's teeth clenched, and he felt the vein on his temple engorge. But, what was he to do?

"No."

"Then stand right there. Dont move a muscle. Im gonna take a look around."

The officer found the pill bottle, and acted like he'd discovered a kilo of cocaine.

"Whats this?"

"Those are my medication. I'd already mentioned it."

"Right. This is a hardcore benzo. You got the prescription on you?"

"What?"

"The script from the doctor. Is it on you?"

"No? And it doesnt need to be. My name is on the bottle."

The officer smirked and chuckled.

"This ain't my first day. A label maker is cheap. You're looking at a DUI if we can't confirm this.

Here's what were gonna do. You're gonna come to the

station with me, and we're gonna make some calls and verify. If it checks out, it's a speeding ticket, and you'll need to carry that script with you from here on out. If it don't, well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Joe was incensed.

"That's, that's bullshit. I don't need a writ to carry medication. What kind of shit are you—"

"This isn't an argument, guy. As I said, you were swerving. I can already cite you. You don't need a writ to carry pills; you do need one when you're impaired. You want to do this right, or fuck around?"

Joe recalled his words from that morning. "Another day." He gave his wrists over, accepted the cuffs, and took a seat in the cruiser.

"A tow will handle your car. If this all checks out, it'll be in the lot. You'll owe the tow yard. But we'll waive the civic fee."

Once checked in, Joe sat in the holding cell. He'd never been charged before, but he'd been arrested. A little tussle at a bar in his 20s, that got dropped in court. He looked around at the cell.

"Hasn't changed much," he said, out loud.

A few moments later, a man was brought in, in full wrist and ankle chains. The same officer, opened the door to the cell across from Joe, and guided the man into it. He caught Joe's puzzled expression.

"Transfer. This one's a sick pup."

Joe stared, blank and menacingly, at the cop.

"Settle down, killer. I've got the woman at the office, reaching out to your doctor. If you're honest, you'll be out of here in an hour or two."

Joe went back to ruminating, staring at the cement wall. He was pissed, but also understood it was a fluke. The doctor would verify, and he would go home today, and this would all pass.

He was thinking less about that, and more about work. Carl. His shanty home existence. The alarm, the morning

pearls.

The pills.

Then, something broke his concentration.

“Ay, man.”

It was the convict. Joe ignored him.

“What’s the matter, you better than me?”

Joe gave in.

“What do you want, dude?”

The criminal gave a Cheshire grin.

“I don’t want nothing. We’re stuck here, you and me.

Little conversation would be mighty fine, no?”

Joe rolled his eyes.

“Just come out with it, hombre. What do you want?”

“Woah, woah, we got a live one. What’s your name, mister?”

“I don’t have a name.”

The convict laughed.

“I smell you. I’m following. No problem with me, mister. What are you in for?”

Joe felt the hostility, and the vigilance, dissipate a bit within himself.

“sigh...I’m in here because I’m old, I got joint pain, I take medication; and that cop is a fucking prick.”

The convict did a belly laugh this time.

“Ain’t that the truth! They all are. Well, me, mister, I’m in here because I deserve to be. Got locked up at 17, petty thievery. Then again at 25, a B&E. Now? They’re transferring me to max.”

“For theft?”

“Naw. Because like you said, cops are fucking pricks. CO’s, too.”

The convict made a gesture with his hand, like he was swinging a bat.

“They love to press up on us in there. I’ve been in so long, I don’t care. Some young buck started talking about, ‘you need to learn respect.’ I’m 43. So I bid my time, used a nail file to break off a piece of bedframe. Little by little.

Then I showed him respect. Right to the temple.”

Joe laughed, and said, “I get it. But, was that the best choice?”

The convict replied: “don’t know sir. But its the one I made, because thats who I be. You clearly get it too, but you made a different choice, ’cuz thats who you be. That’s why you’re gonna go home, and I’m gonna go deeper in.”

Joe paused, and raised an eyebrow. Strangely poignant. The convict spoke again.

“What do you do on the outside, mister?”

Joe’s heart sank. He saw the convicts uniform, his orange fabric jumpsuit. He recognized every seam in it, the government issued tag that stuck out near the bottom of the pantleg. It occurred to him, his employee ID number might even be on it.

“Me? Oh. I uh...I...”

Joe’s cell door, made a loud clamor. He looked, and it was open. The cop was standing right there.

“Good news, Richards. You weren’t bullshittin’.”

Joe didnt give the officer any lip. He wanted to, but as the convict had spelled out; that wasnt “who he be.” He got through the interaction, kept quiet, did the discharge paperwork, and was happy to be out of it.

“Just make sure you get a copy of that script. This wasn’t about busting your chops. It’s alright to be medicated. But to do our job, we need the context.”

Joe said nothing. He opened the door. He walked across the lot, and got into his car. On the dash, was the bill from the tow company. \$200.

And, the pills.

On the drive home, a strange feeling took hold of him. Joe didn’t do drugs, hadn’t in a long time.

He stopped by the dispensary. He stood in line, and was met with some young, hippy dippy broad. Septum piercing, everybody knows the type.

“What can I do for you today, sir?”

He felt out of his element.

"I don't know about this stuff. I got joint pain, and I wanna get stoned. That help?"

She politely nodded, and returned with a bottle. It looked just like his pills, but there wasn't any benzo inside. Just dense nuggets of sensimilla.

"This is a pretty standard strain for pain. Very popular, and cheap. This is 1/8th, for \$25."

Joe let out a sort of whistle.

"Come down a lot since my time."

He gave her the cash, and went back to his vehicle. Once he arrived at home, he remained parked in the driveway.

He thought about it for a moment before he made his move. Then, deliberately, he began grinding up the buds with his fingers. Much stickier than when he was a kid, but he still remembered how to do it.

He grabbed the towing bill, placed the buds inside, and twisted it up. Then, he lit it.

The relief was immediate, and the high was strong. It didn't transport him back to good times, or anything like that. But, it did make his mind a little more clear.

He grabbed his phone, and dialed.

"Carl?"

"Joe! Pleasure to hear from you. You know, we're happy you took the time to recharge. How's the first day? Need anything?"

Joe stayed silent.

"If you forgot something, I can have Helen figure it out. No biggie."

"Nah. Nah, I didn't forget anything."

There was another silence, more tense this time. Then, Joe resumed speaking.

"Carl, I just had an experience that clarified a lot of things for me. I don't think my performance is gonna be an issue anymore."

"Oh? Well, I'm glad to hear that, but, don't be too hard on yourself. It's probably still best to take the time off. Just

to be sure. Mind if I asked what happened?"

"Sure. You see, I just got out of prison."

Joe could hear Carl struggle with the phone.

"You what?"

"Yup. Just got out, now I'm smoking a joint in my car. Listen, Carl, I don't fuckin' like you. I don't like the way you talk to me like I'm not your elder, I don't like how you manage me and pretend to be my bud, and I think you're a yellow bellied pussy, who I could crush with my bare hands."

Carl was now, less performative.

"What did you just say to me?"

Joe blew the smoke from his mouth.

"There it is. That's what I wanted. Reality.

Everyday, I gotta pretend I don't feel that. When you come around, with your hokey pokey shit, I gotta pretend that you don't ooze disrespect, that I couldn't, and shouldn't, knock you the fuck out.

That's just how I be, because I don't wanna go to prison.

That hasn't changed. But let me ask you, boy; you ever think about what we do for money?"

Carl collected himself.

"Joe, you just threatened me. I'm your boss. I recognize you're under stress and am willing to forget about this, but it might be time to hang up the phone."

Joe did a belly laugh, similar to that of the convict. He ignored his words.

"We make suits for guys who wind up in prison. Some of them, deserve to be there. But how many folks just wind up in a jam, or with some dick cop—a cop like you—and they gotta wear one of our jumps? And thats how you and I eat.

You don't gotta worry about my performance. I'm all done."

"Joe, again. You're going through a lot. Maybe take a breather and think. What will you do?"

"I have thought. Trust me, I've been thinking. I dont

know what I'll do. But I know what I wont do.

I ain't gonna take these fuckin pills, I'll tell you that. And I ain't gonna make my nut this way anymore. I'll figure it out; that's my right, and it's how I be.

And, Carl?"

Carl was stunned and didnt answer at first.

"Carl?"

"Yes...what is it?"

"Kiss my ass, bud."

the end

