

Panic

Arthur was dreaming of mechanical bulls. Not figuratively, and not the kind in *Electric Cowboy*. The bulls were two-horned, mechanically-realized, lumbering and steely behemoths that charged at him in his sleep—like the dystopian nightmare of a cyborg’s Pamplona. They snuffed cold steam out their wide black nostrils. In his dream, Arthur froze in terror; he had the sensation of being trampled and then burst awake. He breathed heavily, blinked his eyes and had barely made sense of where he was when the plane jarred violently over a bump in the air.

He was on his way there, to Pamplona. Thus, he assumed, the dream. But he wasn’t going to see the bulls. Arthur was on his way to a 3M plant that produced electrical components for telecommunications equipment. They were implementing a new software system and the home office in the States wanted to send a management consultant (Arthur) along with the IT team to oversee “front office and system integration issues.” So that was that and Arthur was on his way.

Although, it hadn’t been quite so simple.

The consulting firm that the company normally brought in for these matters had been forced to bail at the very last minute and so recommended Arthur—who was old friends with one of the firm’s partners—as a solid, dependable replacement. He was also available at a moment’s notice, which was really the central reason the firm had chosen to recommend him. In fact, Arthur had been anything but solid and dependable in the last few years of his professional life, and although he’d configured his résumé to disguise it, the truth was that he really hadn’t possessed much of a professional life at all during that time. This was the result of what he ironically described to friends as an extended period of “soul-searching” (something that might easily be tabbed a mid-life crisis, except that Arthur was only 33 now and had already started sensing his internal distress when he was just 29). He considered this an ironic description because he didn’t believe in a soul or anything like it. So, to Arthur, it was more of an extended period of questioning his intentions in the world, of doubting whatever premises had become central to his life: professional ambition, commitment to bachelorhood, firm belief in

the ideals of Libertarianism, so forth. Indeed, he suspected and hoped that his search would reveal something much less contrived than a soul, something real and determinant, although maybe just as unknowable.

Arthur's efforts to plot out a revisionist path for his life had led him into dire straits—both generally speaking and financially—and, given the impulsive, chancy nature of his new mindset, this predicament was not entirely unforeseeable. Most of his peers first figured he was a little off-his-rocker when he chose to leave behind a steady, impressive, six-figure income, but Arthur's most rash decision was probably the one he'd made *after* suddenly quitting his cushy spot at an old-school Philadelphia-based consulting firm, Talmot/House, three years ago. At the time he didn't feel that dropping out of the daily professional grind was a clean enough break. He felt that such an action expressed too little risk or too minor a commitment to real change; after all, people left their jobs all the time and often thought of it as merely another in a series of regular transitions throughout life. No, simply quitting his job wouldn't do. So Arthur chose to donate a large portion of his significant investments and savings to a variety of children's charities, and then took the remainder of his nest egg and sunk it into a failing but amiable dude ranch in Wyoming that one of his mother's cousins had owned and that Arthur agreed to make his. Not that he knew much about ranches or horses

or anything associated with such things, but he was looking for something pastoral and physical and dedicated to the pleasure of others, and *McKinney's Famous Stables* seemed to fit the bill just fine. It was also easy to come by, didn't require much due diligence (he'd learned of the ranch's business realities while providing its owners with some in-family *pro bono* consulting years earlier), and resided among enough isolation for him to go about his new existence without much hassle from other people. In hindsight, Arthur could see that it was a desperate and stupid thing to do with the remainder of his finances—the kind of thing he would have advised strongly against in his previous life as a sane citizen. But its outrageousness was, indeed, a large part of the appeal and it satisfied his desire to submit to a decision that would clearly mark his new condition.

The ranch sank and failed within eight months of Arthur's purchase. Before he'd even taken over as proprietor, the institution was obviously on its last leg, but Arthur's one area of insurmountable confidence was his business acumen. He was certain that a reasonable restructuring of the ranch's finances, combined with his own infusion of capital and a more aggressive business strategy would at least keep the place afloat, and maybe even goose profits nicely after a brief turnaround period. This was not the case. Arthur's expectations turned out to be wildly optimistic and he spent too much money too quickly, leaving him no choice but

to sell it all in a hurry before the debts grew unmanageable. When everything was said and done, the dude ranch fiasco had essentially drained him of any notion of financial security. The relatives who sold him the place felt terrible about how things turned out, but Arthur assured them that he knew the risks and was glad for the experience even despite the failure. Which was true, but didn't change the fact that it had left him broke and without much idea what he'd do next.

What he did was move back to Pennsylvania, not Philadelphia, but Shamokin, a small, depressed former coal-mining town where Arthur had been born and raised. He no longer had any family living there (his father was long-dead and his mother, who now had dementia, had moved into a nursing home near the south-Florida condo that Arthur had bought for her when the money seemed like an endless river) but after everything had been stripped away from him, Shamokin felt like the only safe place to regroup and try starting again. He'd spent the last two years working the kinds of jobs that he once imagined would fill his early post-college life, but that he'd been able to avoid by quickly snagging an entry-level position at Talmot/House. He started out his adult tenure in Shamokin as a gas station attendant, but quit after the establishment was robbed one night by a teenager with a hunting rifle (not during his shift, but it still spooked him enough to figure the minimum wage wasn't worth it). After that he'd spent some time as a bartender, which was

never as fun as he hoped it would be. The job simply forced him to be friendly with too many people that he had no desire to be around, and it ultimately cemented one of the primary premises for his new life: to seek out a good measure of genuine solitude. So he left the bar and began delivering papers to rural addresses in the hills around town, waking at 3:30 every morning to load his used Taurus with copies of the *Shamokin News Item* and make his trek though the dark, finishing up just past dawn.

All this, of course, did nothing to improve his financial situation, and after ten months of delivering newspapers to strangers while they slept, he'd found himself not only poor and lonely, but certifiably depressed. Arthur's new existence had not been what he was looking for. It had reached the point, in fact, where all possible options for his future seemed dreary and untenable. He did not want his old life—one of the few things he'd become certain of during his period of wandering. He could not imagine being asked to care again about all those things that he'd so gleefully left behind. Arthur believed that unless you can translate the notion of financial gains (whether it be your own or that of your client) into an abstract kind of goodness, an ideal of pleasure that requires no context outside of itself, it eventually becomes impossible to happily, passionately work within the corporate world. Although it was difficult for him to say that he'd actually enjoyed any of the work he'd done since leaving Philadelphia, he at least liked the concept

that he was working at a level in society that he thought of as *direct distribution*. Somebody needed something, he gave it to them. End of story.

In the corporate world, as far as Arthur had experienced, *somebody* is always at least a dozen steps down the line from you. You plan, you counsel, you strategize and reposition, you take a head count, you assess relative synergies, you project growth and revise estimates. All of this goes on endlessly. And there is likely a number somewhere—a number that expresses something, is the result of some important calculation—and this number is what you will rely on to gauge your success. The value of the number (sometimes not its absolute value, but its value in relationship to others of its kind or in comparison to the expectation of what its value would be) represents the sum total worth of your efforts. To Arthur, it eventually began to feel like he was trying to ring up the high score in *Space Invaders*. He didn't know what the hell *somebody* was being handed in the end or whether they were happy to get it or if they'd even asked for it in the first place. But he did know that without people like him, the world wouldn't go around. He knew that what he did was somehow necessary, that he was contributing to the dull but required deeply internal machinations of capitalism—something akin to managing a small but vital gland in the human body. The important work of such a gland is undoubtedly complicated and detailed: it must obtain the proper components

from all far flung reaches of the body, send out and receive myriad communications through chemical and electrical means, determine and calibrate its output in highly precise increments, and it must do all this while maintaining a near-perfect balance with the body's other innumerable and equally vital functionaries. The problem for Arthur, in the end, was that he realized he had no interest in contributing to the work of a gland. It seemed only natural that, given the choice, one would choose to work for an organ that has actual contact with the outside universe: the skin, the eyes, even the hair—which, he thought, is really only a ghost of things that were once alive, but at least is given a brief wake out in the great unfettered air of the rest of the world. Sometimes sacrifices must be made along the journey to the outside; on this matter, Arthur was becoming an expert.

His own growing list of personal sacrifices had made him more desperate than ever, finally bringing him around to the idea of briefly returning to his previous professional arena—just until he got back on his feet, he thought. This was a more difficult task than he had originally anticipated and required some fancy explanations for his disappearance from the corporate radar, most of which made frequent, vague use of the word *sabbatical*. Nobody paid much attention to the inquiries he made and most of his former colleagues seemed too disinterested to even accept a lunch invitation. He had become less than old news,

he was positively invisible. But someone else's desperation would prove to be the salve for Arthur's. His old college friend, Carter Burton, was in the middle of a nasty conference call with a couple of 3M execs and their in-house counsel when they put Carter on the spot and insisted he provide an immediate resolution or face some rather unpleasant breach of contract proceedings. Carter had spent the morning in his high-rise, lake-view Chicago offices working on a serviceable solution but was unable to find a competent party available to replace him on such short notice. He'd thought the 3M folks would be willing to accept his request for a few more days to sort everything out, but they weren't in an accommodating mood. With no other tricks in his bag, Carter blurted out Arthur's name and rambled off some of his previous qualifications, which sound impressive as long as you don't tack on the parts about *McKinney's Famous Stables* or the *Shamokin News Item*. Arthur had made a couple of calls to Carter and sent him an e-mail the month before, and Carter had ignored them all. But from them he knew that Arthur was desperate, and in the face of his own dire need, Carter saw their dilemmas as the perfect match. Arthur accepted the offer within hours of his name being blurted over the speakerphone, even though the exact kind of management consulting that 3M needed wasn't an area that he had much experience in. Luckily, consulting is an ambiguously defined business in which résumés can be molded to resemble any number of similar but really quite diverse career paths.

It also, of course, helped that everyone involved with the equation was frantic for any kind of passable solution to their different but now intertwined problems. So Arthur's current journey to Pamplona was preceded by the kind of decision-making that typically concludes with one of the many corporate phrases that all ultimately translate into: *whatever, just do it*.

The company had arranged everything for his immediate six-week assignment abroad: air travel, commuter car, furnished comfy one-bedroom rental, and full expense account offerings that included a generous per diem stipend. All of this was in addition to his sizeable consulting fee, which easily exceeded the sum total of all his earnings as a driver for the *News Item*. After everything he'd struggled through in his last three years, Arthur at first couldn't believe his luck. This would be just what he needed, he thought, a little cash on hand that could buy him some more time to figure out where he really wanted to take things next. But when he'd stepped onto the plane destined for Spain—lugging his aging laptop in the worn leather computer bag with a too-narrow shoulder strap and dragging his wheeled, small-but-heavy, carry-on suitcase—and flashed a weary, familiar smile at the slight, brunette flight attendant, Arthur began to get a very bad feeling. It was a powerful pang of dread. It was the kind of dread he'd once conjured during college in the months before the first Gulf War, when he'd worried it might all lead to another draft and Arthur tried imagining

what it might feel like for that card to arrive in the mail—the rest of your life suddenly tied up and bound by the nefarious interests of far away others. Arthur believed that one of life's cruel tricks is to introduce such dread slowly and harmlessly, disguising the fears of existence as phantom pain early on, thus leading to a false sense of safety that is ultimately blown bit-by-bit into oblivion and replaced with first-hand knowledge of the world's imminent, roiling dangers. So even though the dread hadn't bitten back on previous occasions, it didn't mean that this wasn't finally the genuine article bubbling up inside him. To Arthur, the perfect example of this was death itself. In youth, one's fear of the reaper can be allayed by the knowledge that the big *final event* is likely a long ways down the road—hovering in the distance like anxiety over a Ph.D. dissertation in the mind of an ambitious undergrad during his first days on campus. But no matter what you do to hide the fear at first, death only grows closer, more palpable, tangibly inescapable. In Arthur's mind, dread was never truly counterfeit; it was, at best, only too early in its arrival.

He'd tried to shake off his suffocating uneasiness with a couple of Scotches, neat and quickly downed, but he hadn't drunk any hard liquor since quitting his bar gig, and the alcohol only served to give him a minor headache. When he awoke from his dream—either because of the charging, metallic bulls or the plane's violent rumbling—Arthur felt the remnants of a tiny hangover in his head

and tasted a lingering memory of Scotch in his mouth. He looked up and saw that the overhead seatbelt icon was illuminated. The plane bounced raucously again and the cabin shook fiercely.

“How long has this been going on?” Arthur asked, turning to face the woman seated next him in business class and trying not to appear too concerned.

“What?” she asked. “The turbulence?” She was about Arthur's age—a petite woman with a short, boardroom haircut that neatly framed her pretty, elfish face.

“Yeah.” The plane dipped slightly and then rumbled upward in a quick jolt. “That,” he said.

The woman gripped the armrest between them with one of her delicate hands and braced the other on the wall below the oval window. Arthur could see that she wasn't wearing any rings. The woman's thin, well-outlined lips stretched into a quick, nervous smile and then returned to a taut sternness.

“They announced something,” she said. “I was in the bathroom, they said to stay in our seats.”

“Right. This would be my luck,” he said and then regretted saying it. He'd jumped ahead of her in the fear game, already making uncomfortable remarks that alluded to the possibility of a horrible crash, which seemed to him a little alarmist and unnecessary and would

probably put him in a bad light.

“Mine too,” she said and smiled again, this time longer and with more warmth. She’d gone ahead and joined in with Arthur’s fear, which he thought was better than her taking on a consoling role and trying to downplay his concern. This way, at least, he felt they were sharing some common ground as fellow humans and it now made him glad that he’d revealed himself.

“Arthur, by the way,” he extended his hand to her.

“Lana,” she said and shook his hand. Arthur felt a slight erotic charge from the intimacy of their physical contact amidst the mutual dread.

Her hand was yanked from his grip as the plane took a sharp, powerful dive forward. The cabin jarred wickedly side-to-side as the enormous vehicle dove, then rose, then dove again.

Arthur could hear a bold whining sound tearing through the air outside the plane. The two of them shared a quick frightened glance and he grabbed her hand again, almost reflexively. Lana squeezed Arthur’s fingers and then intertwined hers between his, pressing their palms together and locking their arms at the elbow.

The plane now seemed pitched at a permanent downward angle, and combined with the cacophonous sounds of chaos and the weight of sheer force, the whole scene felt to Arthur like something from a movie. Things even felt

as if they were slowing down, as they do in the movies, like time was actually malleable and a single moment could bear the presence of an almost infinite number of thoughts. Arthur wondered if the plane’s predicament was merely a result of tempestuous weather or if a pre-existing mechanical flaw had been exacerbated by the conditions and maybe would have done them in even if they hadn’t encountered a storm. He thought of the flat tire his Taurus had suffered early one morning along Bear Valley Road outside Shamokin several months before. In some ways it had been the height of his frustration since embarking on a new life. It had happened just half way through his route and he knew that people would soon be calling the offices to ask where their papers were. The spare in the trunk was no good, something the previous owner had warned him about when he bought it but that he hadn’t been able to afford to rectify. And in the weeks leading up to the incident, he’d noticed that the rear left tire—the one that had gone flat—seemed to lose pressure more quickly than the others. So as Arthur stepped out of his car and onto the gravelly shoulder, he was sure that his inaction had been the cause of his dilemma. When he leaned in closer, however, to peer at the misshapen circle of rubber, shining a flashlight through the pre-dawn darkness, he realized that the offending party was a thick, long, metal nail—something he’d probably driven over just that morning. Since he knew he couldn’t afford the services of a tow-truck in addition to the necessary new tire, Arthur chose to pull the

nail, re-inflate the injured Goodyear with a foot pump from his car kit and hope the air would last the ten minute ride into town. Along the drive back, he tried to keep a close eye on the tire in his side mirror and wondered if maybe the hole was growing larger as he drove, the torn rubber giving way one millimeter at a time until possibly reaching critical mass and blowing out with a violent pop. He didn't know if he should drive faster, trying to arrive before such a disaster could occur, or slower, in an attempt to reduce the pressure that might result from some unique aerodynamic property induced by speed and weight. Then he wondered if how he drove mattered at all, if the tire's destiny had already been determined by the initial nature of the puncture and his fateful decision to re-inflate. But when he arrived unharmed at a 24-hour gas station in Shamokin (the one he'd worked for, actually) Arthur was surprised to discover that the relief he felt was not really because he'd made it back safely. He realized, instead, that he was mostly glad the flat hadn't actually been a result of his negligence, that it was, in fact, just a random spot of bad luck. At the time he thought it was strange that he should feel that way, and didn't know why it was that he did, but for some reason was amused by it and pleased that he'd had such an unexpected reaction. And now, as the plane plummeted determinedly earthward, he found similar satisfaction in the thought that this thing going down was in no way something he could've been responsible for.

Arthur imagined the 3M execs phoning Carter's office. He knew that his disappearance was going to cost somebody some money somewhere, but the loss would be easily, almost unnoticeably absorbed, shifted from one column to another until all evidence of it had been swallowed into a series of anonymous accounting maneuvers. There would also be some unresolved income tax issues, missed rent and unpaid utility bills that would all eventually vanish in the same fashion. In a brief time, Arthur's presence in the great capitalist body would be completely erased. Like a drop of liquid from some viscous fluid, he would gently be removed from the whole and afterward, the space where he left would seal itself up again, returning to its previous shape, entirely indifferent to his absence.

Arthur closed his eyes. It would be better that way, he thought, then wondered why it should matter. The plane shook again, then suddenly, their momentum changed; the weight against his chest shifted forward, and upward. It took nearly a minute for him to believe it, but when the panic finally burnt itself out, he realized it was true: the plane had steadied. Lana loosened her grip, but didn't move her hand. He opened his eyes and looked at their fingers, together, intertwined. In his mind, Arthur saw himself running again with the mechanical bulls. In his heart, he was terrified.
