

Maximum Satisfaction Rate

The typical prospective customer arrives to Deserv'dCo after having driven for half an hour in the new road which surrounds the old Mercury River dam with time to spare. The draught has killed off all the trees that could have beautified the landscape on their way. Although customers don't have to arrive early; most end up with plenty of time to kill. David Galligan was no exception. Nobody could miss the place: the high-tech buildings had been designed to imitate brick, specially the main office's façade, half-hidden behind a luxuriant green creeper. All around this private property there is only dust; inside, the bright colors in the garden and orchard surrounding the buildings stand out like a beacon of greenery in the almost dead surroundings.

David's car was allowed into the private parking lot by optical satellite-tracked reading of the e-plate. When he switched off the engine all four windows automatically closed themselves off. He had parked in the furthest slot to have some time to compose himself and not to feel the nervous sweat. He inhaled deeply, his tender sadness squashed by the disciplined rictus in his mouth. He followed the signs to the entrance, he couldn't miss it, any idiot could do it, so why did he feel like running away? A small white corridor franked with pebble-filled flowerpots with sunflowers in bloom.

He realized with the utmost quietness that the sunflowers were softly whirring as they followed his steps. They looked so real! They were brand-new technology for sure. He could still appreciate high-tech when he saw it. The main door buzzed him in automatically.

The e-receptionist welcomed him, informed him that he would be seeing his consultant pretty soon, offered him snacks, offered him refreshments, offered him a seat, offered him the choice of satellite channel, offered him background music. He rejected everything but for the seat. He softly pushed away a Lego piece that some child must have dropped inadvertently in the hurry for their parents to get into the consultant's office. Twenty minutes went by; he had succumbed to a tic he thought he had overcome since his university years, moving his crossed leg back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. He stopped when he overheard a softly movement of chairs, a muddled polite goodbye, a strangled sob, rumor of feet in the opposite direction, and the drowning off the sound of an engine driving away.

"To preserve every customer's privacy, they are leaving by the back door." The sudden voice of the e-receptionist startled David. The sweetly fresh metallic voice added: "Your consultant will be with you in a minute."

"Will I be able to see the warehouse were the procedures take place?"

"Unfortunately, and due to security concerns, sight tours of the installations cannot be given."

David grunted on hearing this.

The door opened while the e-receptionist announced, "Your consultant Diana Rosenzweig is ready and will welcome you to Deserv'dCo presently."



“Prisoners don’t know that they are prisoners. They wake up feeling refreshed. They wake up because of a mixture of water sounds, the damp smell in their nostrils, the dose of Wakeupfinil™ that will be kicking in by that time... From there onwards they will feel exhilarated, full of energy. As promised, they...”

Here the seller was interrupted.

“I object to your use of “they”. It is a she. It is a bitch.”

The seller conceded the point with a delicate nod and corrected herself.

“She will not remember her basic personal data, including but not solely name, surname or age. She won’t know when why she has been put there; the Ahlzeimzime™ will make sure of that. What happens afterwards may differ from one prisoner to the other. As you can read in our prospect, we cannot promise a certain reaction in the subject, nor we can promise that the subject will feel the feelings and emotions you want them to feel, but there are paradigms that often get repeated, because they are almost-universal human reactions. For example, the attempts to find a door or window, the hollering and screaming, the banging on walls, the destruction of cameras and microphones, the attempts to reach out for the hole in the roof. About the cameras, don’t worry about it, they usually skip some of them when they realize that the destruction of devices serves no purpose. They won’t be able to reach all of them anyway, and, in any case, we are prepared for total destruction, and we can send the DocuDrones and DocuBoats, Patent Pending. Prisoners usually feel an increasing panic when they see the water level rising. There are usually attempts to climb to the only opening, the air vent on the roof, as you can see in the diagram. The

process lasts longer if they can swim, if they are healthy and fit and can keep themselves afloat until the water pushes them against the railing in the airing vent. They will get almost drown. That capacity to survive tends of decrease as the process gets repeated...”

“That’s it. That’s the problem. It drowns them. How can you make sure, be completely sure that she won’t die right there and then? That death would be too quick, too painless, too...”

“No, no, Mr. Galligan! Don’t fret about it! You must be assured of this. The nanobots circulating through her veins, monitoring all type of bodily functions and sending out the data in real time will tell us; the DocuDrones Patent Pending will tell us; the DocuBoats Patent Pending will tell us; every feature in the LethalReservoir™ room is packed with nanotechnology which will study, monitor, pack, send out the data and apply the algorithm; the informed guess from our technicians based on our seven-year professional experience will tell us... We can guarantee a pair of attentive and vigilant human eyes monitoring the data every second that will save her at the last nanosecond. We have never lost a subject the first time that the procedure is applied; the guaranteed minimum is five times, even if the subject doesn’t cooperate and decides not to do anything and let themselves drown in freezing water. But that hardly happens. The confusion, the not-remembering, the boredom, the inactivity, the 24-hour period until the room is fully submerged, help us. In the seven years I have been working here, I only heard total non-activity happening once. We proceeded as usual, waiting and allowing the NanoResucitators™ to kick in in the last possible nanosecond. We can guarantee five... –The seller extended her left hand with her palm wide open– FIVE times of the whole process to be completed, or your money back. Only four times? The whole price will have been refunded automatically to your

bank account before you will have the chance to complain. But it won't happen. You will be able to take the images, the sounds and the recording of all data home and rewatch the minimum-guaranteed FIVE processes for the rest of your life. We have had nothing but good reviews since this company was a start-up."

The seller let that sink in and then added: "It's an absolutely convoluted way of doing it, but that's the whole point of it, isn't it? That's why it's so expensive."

David repeated to himself, as if in a trance: "That's why it's so expensive."

The seller knew that David Galligan was in hook, line and sinker. Now, she acknowledged that prospective customers were always in even before meeting their personal consultant. She looked at the clock. Ten minutes had gone by in the explaining of the technology and the process –as much as she was allowed to disclose. But prospective customers were always booked in one-hour slots. The fifty-minute remaining time will be spent in providing them with reasoning, phrases and emotional blackmail necessary to convince whoever significant others they needed to convince of signing the papers for the culprit's release from the government's hands into Deserv'dCo capable custody and help with the loan to pay for the whole process.



"Where to start? How much is it?"

"Twenty thousand Nu-Coins."

"Are you mad? That's more than the mortgage we used to have together."

"I know that it's a lot of money, but..."

"No but. My answer is no."

“It is not that much. If we pull together...”

“What? If we pull together what? Do you realize how much money we lost after we undersold the house of our dreams in such a hurry? After we accepted the first offer we got? After we...”

“Raúl, I know all that. We know all that. I’m sorry I couldn’t stand a second more in the house of your dreams.”

The only thing that prevented Raúl to scream was the public location, their old-time favorite café. Instead, it all came out as a muffled whisper. Instead it came out as matter-of-fact and cynical: “It was the house of OUR dreams, Dave! Anyway, you know it’s not about the money. I am the one that doesn’t need it. Reply’s still no.”

David said: “I think I better leave now.”

Back in his room, Dave thought about it all. As the consultant had envisioned, he had lost Raúl’s positive frame of mind. They had had similar discussions to this one so many, many, many, many, many times before, after their loss and before the sale of the house, before their divorce and before the sale of the house, during their divorce proceedings and during the sale of the house, during their divorce and after the sale of the house, and now, once more, after their divorce and after the sale of the house.

A battle is lost so that the war will be won, the consultant had said. A visionary consultant, David praised her mentally. It is scary how well she had predicted the run of the conversation, including all the low blows. And the worst thing is that, among all that was said, he hadn’t even asked Raúl to speak with his parents for a loan, or at least a guarantor’s signature for the bank. They had the money at the ready, and if David had to work the rest of his life to pay them back, so be it.



David intended to drop the matter for a week. He felt that his lack of trust in the government's ability to keep the culprit in prison until the death sentence could be performed was making him paranoid and worsened his insomnia. One of his acquaintances, a long-forgotten lover who happened to be a cop had promised to keep an eye on the matter, call in contacts to watch the bitch. David had also forbidden himself to search for news on the Proposal to Repeal the Right to Enlengthen the Capital Punishment. As far as he was concerned, the Right to Enlengthen the Capital Punishment was still law in practice. After the bitch has suffered all she deserved, the law and everything else could go to the devil for all he cared!

He tried to concentrate in his work. It had not been easy to see everything crumble down around him, to downsize from the designer 150 square foot high-street corner outlet to this overcrowded twenty-five square-foot hidden-at-the-back-of-the-mall workshop, formerly used as a back room for out-of-date components, jetsam wires, loose wires, dusty pieces and flotsam materials that he would never have time to tidy up. He was lucky indeed to have been able to save that small boat from the seaquake. The old catch-all back room became the only safety net to keep him afloat when the tsunami came, giving him the rags of something similar to his old professional purpose. His heart pieces were submerged in vitriol as castaways from a wreckage, marinating themselves in the poisonous hatred of the shipwreck in his life.

He kept himself busy, not that he would be able to afford somebody else's salary in the present circumstances. All his money was aimed at his project. The news that he was back in business –not in the same way, mind it; he is just a shadow of his old ambitious self– was spreading like seaweed, slowly but surely. Back to basics,

repairing all type of hotchpotch high-tech devices, giving recommendations to people who didn't want them, those well-meant people who had just shown up to inquire about his health, who were *happy* to see him hands-on with something, who bought a small trifle they didn't need, who didn't dare to look directly at his face and who he felt nothing about. He nodded, or shook his head, it was the same to him; he replied, or stayed silent, or muttered "mmm, mmm" pretending to listen and care, it was the same to him. His plan was to keep his emotions flatlining and his brain frozen, distracted with technical tasks until the weekend, when he would close shop and see Raúl repeating his reasons in his head.

It was not to be. Raúl sent him a text message first. It was Raúl who insisted to wait until the workshop's official opening hours were served. The message also proposed Raúl's new house as a meeting place, instead of the café where they had met the previous time, probably taking in consideration that I have no dwelling of my own, my own life evaporated and reduced to a house-share in a crappy area downtown, David thought. There is nothing else to do but waiting, he thought.



David wondered in what humor he would find Raúl. He knocked on the door softly and sighed, letting out steam at that late hour.

The door opened. A perfunctory "good evening", trying to locate his face against the bright light from inside. David had to hold him. Raúl was crying, tears streaming down his face. Raúl was crying, wailing. Raúl was crying, holding to David because the only other option would be crumbling down. Raúl was crying, instead of flowing himself into nothing. Raúl was crying, and David was holding him.

Once inside, sitting down in the spotless three-seater couch, Raúl started to wipe away the water from his face and calmed himself down. David could be heard in the unknown kitchen, opening and closing cupboards trying to spot the chamomile teabags, the spoon and saucers, the sugar, the kettle.

“If you can’t find...” Raúl started.

“Don’t worry now. Water’s boiling.”

And truth be told, the noise of bubbly water could already be heard.

“Sorry, Dave. Some silliness.”

David smiled meekly. “I’ve added the three spoonfuls of sugar that you like.”

“You still remember.”

“Of course. Such disregard for carb content, how could I forget it?”. David hoped that the comment had come out as the joke he had intended.

Raúl gave out an almost-hysterical joyless laughter, the river having been subsided and faded to the footprint of a ghostly soakness. Raúl’s chocolate skin tingled under the dry rivulets. David handed him one of the glasses. They were so hot! The glasses were not adequate for the chamomile teas.

“The mugs are in one of the drawers close to the oven.”

“Sorry.”

“You couldn’t have known.” And then he added a “never mind” with a slightly collected smile in the corner of his mouth.

Both saucers were placed on top of the sitting-room tea-table in silence. Raúl stared at them.

“I had such hopes that this would happen: Carrie would drive me mad. I would nag her day and night because she would leave her stuff all over the place, bringing school friends for sleepovers instead of doing her homework. I would be telling her off because she was spending too much time in front of the computer. I would take her phone away when she started texting during dinnertimes.... Sometimes it drives me mad, remembering that one time that I sent her back to her room... I told her off because she had drawn a rainbow and left open her soft-point pens on top of the dining table and I had noticed a scratch. Can you imagine it? I would give anything to be able to come back and give her another piece of paper and let her paint some more and fuck the dining table! She could paint fucking graffitis on the walls for how much I care about it right now.”

“I know... I feel the same...”

There were moments, and moments, and moments, and moments and moments of silence. The teas were cooling off little by little.

“I spoke with my parents.”

“Oh” Then David added: “That’s why I wanted to see you to begin with. I fucked the conversation the other day and never really got down to ask...”

Raúl interrupted: “I guessed what you wanted. It was so obvious... They offered to pay the whole amount. We don’t even have to give it back. Apparently, they had already considered the idea – they just didn’t mention it because they thought I would reject their intrusion from the get-go. They didn’t want more discussions...”

“That’s what I thought as well. I tried... I thought that you would be so against it. You are... you were always so involved in charities, human rights and all that...”

“I just think that it would not solve anything... It doesn't matter what we do to Stephanie Gianna Fiorentino, it won't bring our Carrie back. What's your objective, Dave? You used to be all about ambitions, goals and the whole picture... I'm so tired out... I don't want to fight. I'm so done fighting. I... I just... I want... I want to try and understand...”

“I want to make that bitch suffer. When she took our little girl I'm sure that Carrie didn't even know what was happening... That bitch took her, killed her and our little girl must have died crying out for her parents. I bet she didn't understand why we were not there to save her.”

“I'm so done repeating this. I'm so done feeling guilty about it. I wasn't there, Dave. I abandoned our little girl by herself in the playground while I went to get our ice-creams...”

“It was not your fault. I blame myself. I was going to meet you both at home afterwards... I was making sure that the big deal got closed... Can you remember that? I should have been but I wasn't....I know it makes no rational sense and that it won't solve a thing... It won't bring Carrie back, as you say... But I want that bitch to suffer as much as possible. I want her to feel lost, and confused, and terrified, and when it is over, I want her to feel it all again. Such the pity that it could not be for all eternity!”

“My psychologist thinks that there is risk for me, for ourselves. There are studies that say that witnessing executions may leave the relatives traumatized...”

“I cannot be more traumatized. Nothing can be worse, Raúl, nothing at all... Anyway, I see that you have guessed what I wanted to ask you. Sign the court application and help me pay for it. Your money, your parents' money, for once I don't

care where the credits come from. I promise I'll return every single NewCoin."

"Dave, if you ask my parents for the money, they will give you the whole amount, no refund expected. However, I will never sign the papers."

"Why? Why won't you sign the petition?"

"I am so against it."

"It doesn't make any sense! You can't let your ideology prevent you from getting some closure."

"Torturing somebody won't give me any closure!"

"It's not torture! It is not more cruel than what she did..."

"Yes, it is. We should know better."

"Fine, it is torture. Call it whatever you want. But, why would you not want to make her suffer the way our daughter suffered?"

"There is not going to be any satisfaction on it for me."

"There will be. I promise it."

"Not for me. And not for you either. You've changed, but I know that you will not get peace from... that. This is what I want to say about it; I wanted to tell you to your face and I am only gonna say it once. This is my decision: I won't prevent you from doing whatever you want to do. As I said, you ask my parents for the money, fine, you deal with them. But I'm having no part on this..."

"The lawyer was quite adamant: we both need to sign. The money without your signature is good for nothing..."

"I'm sorry, Dave."

Raúl stood up and went to the wall and stood in front of the big studio photograph, framed as though it were a museum painting. The three of them were on it together, the three of them dressed to the nines; the three of them posing off for their first picture after the adoption was finished; the three of them with shining bright smiles; the three of them happy as happy can be. Carrie was almost five in that picture right after her adoption, a moment frozen in time.

David said: "You could have told me this by text message."

"This is the last brave thing I'm going to do. I know it's incredibly unfair on you, but it's also unfair on me. I wanted to tell you face to face for some reason I can't explain to myself. So I'll say it now. I want you to know that you have my permission to speak to my parents if you want.. But I don't want to have anything to do with it. I'm going away for a while. I'll leave this country and I'll be out of reach. On Monday I will sign a contract with a real estate company – they will take care of this house. My parents are really enthusiastic about the Right to Enlengthen, and I can't fight all of you at the same time – I..., I am not strong enough against a mob."

"You are just running away."

"I know."

"You are a coward."

"I know. But let me finish."

"You are, you are... I have no words."

"I can hear your contempt loud and clear, but... will you let me finish?"

"Go on."

“You don’t have any mementos from her as I’ve kept all her... things... I can put them in storage, leave enough money with you to pay for the upkeep. My parents have offered their house, or you can take them, if you have space. It is up to you.”

“I have no space in my room.”

“So that means my parents’ or storage. You don’t have to tell me right now. You will have until Monday to think about it. You could keep any earnings from the real estate, put them back in your company. With my granpa’s trust fund, I will have more than enough to live on.”

“So everything is as good as done.”

“I’m sorry. This conversation has once again come full circle, and I’m sick and tired of it.” And then, seeing David forlorn and hunched down, Raúl took pity and repeated: “Sorry again.” And approached to touch his cheek.

David didn’t bother to reply and didn’t let him to touch his face. He turned around and went to the door. When it closed after him, he could hear the crying once again inside. His heart closed off, the same as his fists. The dam of his emotions held still but held out nonetheless, all feelings finally dried out, misspent, derelict, in ruins, in a tattered heap in front of him.



The procedure is about to begin. David checks out his freckles in the digital mirror in the bathroom. They have become bigger: they don’t look like freckles anymore, they are more like cancerous skin stains. In his brand new mobile phone – an unnecessary present from Raúl’s parents for his birthday, a date he hadn’t even noticed himself until he got the parcel on the mail–, a text message reassures him that

they don't need to see the thing, they might as well take David's word for it; that after all the years of litigation and money thrown to the winds all the effort and expense has been worth it. In the bathroom he rearranges the few weak strands of white hair remaining at the sides of his head. He has become his father, no, his grandfather. Raúl's parents have paid everything off with careless disregard, recommended the attorney. The money came truly with no strings attached: they have shown as little interest in meeting David as David has shown in meeting them, a complete departure from the parental meddling during his relationship with Raúl. The NewCoins which appeared magically in his bank account have been spent in getting the thing done. Once in a while they have responded to David's updates with information about Raúl, what country he was in, his health –as much as they knew–, Raúl's last fling –as much as he'd bothered to mention–, Raúl's failed attempts to settle down. David could have invested some part of Raúl's parents' money in his company, but he doesn't care about expansion, improvement, marketing, the bottom line, online presence, all those things that mattered to him once upon a time. Raúl's refusal to sign should have been the end of it all; but there were precedents in other states, not everything was lost. In that hope David had no qualms, it was money well spent. His financial contribution was just a drop in the ocean of hemorrhaging money but he compensated with time, effort, intelligence, relentless determination, and the right amount of public relations and political connections. He survived in his non-stop energy, caffeine shots, lack of sleep, exhaustion, and unstoppable instigation of legislators.

Several gentle taps on the door.

David had expected the consultant to attend the event, but no; it was a middle-aged executive from the company whose name was Li Jie. He says to him: "I'm ready."

David sits down in a comfortable but functional waiting room. He will be watching the whole thing in flat screens that occupy the whole wall.

She is pushed inside the room in a hospital trolley by nursing-looking staff and armed security personnel. She looks like she is sleeping, looking calm, looking undrugged, looking like a rescue victim, looking innocent. David will be posting comments throughout but neither Raúl or Raúl's parents will be reading. Others, all of them strangers, will read, and take envy, courage, ideas, gossip, inspiration from it all.

She is left alone on the floor of the LethalReservoir™.

He will be left alone to the intimacy of this long thing that is going to happen. Five guaranteed times. He had fought so much. He had longed for so long for this moment...

She is starting to wake up. She looks cold in her hospital gown and is shivering.

He will be spending his holidays watching it, forgetting about his life elsewhere, making sure that close ups are recorded properly, feeling detached somehow.

She is looking confused but not worried. She is looking around, the first time that she sees herself in this situation. She braces herself because of her shivering.

David will forget to blink in his obsession for not losing a second of it all.

She is finally standing up. She still feels calm and has not noticed the cameras and microphones. She tries to picture herself inside this room and realizes that she doesn't know why she is here. She looks at her blurry reflection in the shiny walls. For the first time she realizes that she is wearing a hospital gown and that she doesn't know who she is.

He will witness it until he feels drunk with it. He will see it to the end, and the

world outside the room, the screens, the waiting room, the warehouse and Deserv'dCo can go to the devil afterwards for what he cares.

She looks for a door, trying to figure it all out.

He will quench his thirst, he will become unshaved and unkempt. It will have been the seventh time that he will have seen the process. This last time he will say goodbye for good in his quiet and polite way. He will give the maximum satisfaction rate electronically on his way out. He will be feeling rejuvenated and his stoop will have disappeared. He will go to the parking lot.

Not one, not two, not three, not four, not five, not six, but seven times she will have endured the process.

He will drive out. He may cry for once, opening the dykes of his emotions and letting it all out. The tide will be flowing and ebbing in crashing waves. He will be allowing himself this final useless weakness. He will let out a wail but nobody will hear. He will not bother to palm away the wild stream waterfalling down his cheeks. He will compose himself like a sodden soggy symphony getting in tune. When he regains control of himself, he will keep on driving. His eyelids will have become the windscreen wipers of his soul. By this point, he will have become the typical satisfied customer of Deserv'dCo. The typical satisfied customer drives back from Deserv'dCo for half an hour in the new road which surrounds the old Mercury River dam. The draught has killed off all the trees that could have beautified the landscape on his way back. Those trees could have damped the impact, but as it is, the car will precipitate into the remaining muddy water. As it is, David Galligan will take his decision and stand by it, and he will not cry out or try to leave the car when the vehicle dives down at last, little by little.