

Triple-whipped Strawberry Cream Cake

Supervision knew precisely when to dispense its hyaluronic coupons. Unlike disposition discounts which were provided to the populace at large, these were assessed on an individual basis. Calixa had just received such a coupon. It unfurled in her mind with a blurt of tin canned fanfare, obstructing the dynamic columns representing what the masses were eating and doing and thinking and feeling.

“Thirty percent off a sachet of 3D Jello!”

Calixa was young for an analyst, only twenty-five. She dressed the part of the consummate professional to make up for it, though, wearing low heeled shoes and dutifully pulling limp, blonde hair into a chignon at the base of her skull.

Her position made her feel alchemical, like an invisible comptroller correcting the current of thought below with coupons, censures, citations, and curfews. Numbers fed into the huge processors that took up the first thirteen floors of the data center. Those numbers were tumbled like reusables in a dryer, until they repackaged, and shot upstairs for Calixa and others like her to make sense of. Everything ran correctly. The way was smooth.

She blinked deliberately and the coupon swept aside, stored away by her Cerebral Access Chip until such time that it was needed.

Four people were meeting in the park. This wasn't necessarily cause for concern, but these same four had been meeting at irregular intervals for no apparent reason. They belonged to no movie club, didn't support the same sports team, weren't grandfathered into any religious organization. There was no reason they should meet, always the four of them, always outside where there was minimal surveillance.

Triple-whipped Strawberry Cream Cake 2

Supervision, in the glorious synapses of its algorithmic brain, had already flagged this behaviour as worthy of review, but it was up to Calixa to send it on or mark it [complete - pending further incidence]. The review went whizzing on to compliance. Calixa worked dutifully and efficiently, as was correct, so the day passed in its usual pleasant stream of data, the occasional anomaly surfacing from the depths like the thorny back of a crocodile.

Usually Calixa took private transport as was the right of her social ranking, but it was a nice day. The sky was a lovely gray-white and the air quality was exceptional, clear enough for a long walk. As she passed the supermercado, the coupon flashed in front of her eyes. She stopped, a habit everyone formed by early adulthood.

"35% off a sachet of 3D Jello!"

Most people wouldn't notice the change, but Calixa was wise to the behavioral modifications at play. After all, she used them herself every day. Based on some unknown calibration of the last few days' facial expressions or sexual habits or music tastes, Supervision, or maybe even another analyst, had decided that Calixa needed to stop here. Sometimes, it made her feel vaguely self-conscious that someone else was privy to everything about her from her pant size to the frequency with which she moved her bowel.

But she knew such feelings were silly. Supervision looked after everyone, thus coupons could only ever be used for good. Maybe this coupon was intended to cheer her up, or stop her from going to the bar as usual after a long walk. Perhaps it was employed to prevent too many pedestrians from clogging Market Street with after-work foot traffic. Even before securing her position as an analyst, she'd always wondered what was in her file, but that mystery was destined to remain so. She couldn't look it up any more than she could send herself coupons. It just wouldn't be correct.

Triple-whipped Strawberry Cream Cake 3

The doors admitted her in a woosh of decompression, the hermetic seal suctioning closed behind her. This store was a small one, filled rank and file with transparent refrigerated units and slick metal shelves. To her right were the vegetables: carrot loaves and pea pellets, frozen cubes of Idaho White. In front were plantmeats and the entire back wall bore host to a bevy of delectable milks, kefir, margarines, and creams all pressed from the irreplaceable soy bean. The far side of the store was reserved for essential disposables like personal paper, beauty treatments for women and men, and the synthetics necessary for the sanitation of one's domicile.

A recipe unfurled across her vision. She stopped dead, another shopper flowing around her without pause.

Be an instant hit! Serve Proctor's 7Up Lime Jello Salad!

She wrinkled her nose. Last Christmas Calixa had bought herself a gift, an elegant slice of ephemera so old it was actually made of printed paper. The pages were what entranced her, so smooth and glossy they felt cool to the touch. The magazine was for homemakers (although the word meant nothing to Calixa) each page dedicated to attractive food shot with the same precise sensuality as runway models.

One image in particular distinguished itself from the rest. The entire page was a photograph of a cake on a silver plinth. It was stupendous, a huge tower of cream, pink as a pile of unchewed bubble gum. Her favorite part was the top, the crown of cheery red berries the likes of which she'd never seen in person. Calixa didn't want some sickly soda salad, she wanted page twenty three. She wanted a triple-whipped strawberry cream cake.

An ad for 7Up presented itself as she navigated the snack aisle. She ignored it. An ad for Proctor's faux maraschino cherries (six to a jar) was ignored as well. Supplies in hand, she

Triple-whipped Strawberry Cream Cake 4

left, knowing Supervision would deduct the appropriate amount from her bank balance less the 35% coupon and the 3% awarded, always, for good social standing.

Her apartment home was a testament to modern efficiency and dedication to the pleasurable passing of time. Restaurants occupied one floor of the highrise while those not allocated to residences were dedicated to the essentialities of city living: the gymnasium, the salon, and the nightclub. Even better than the convenience was the timing. The building had gone up the past spring, so everything was still in good working order. The decorative fountains jetted water, the plumbing was well maintained, and the walls were flat and crackless. She would have to move in a few years, but for now the unit was fresh, a collection of shell pink rectangles joined in a gestalt that meant efficiency as much as home.

Her table doubled as a counter, rising and falling as needed. It sat opposite the incineration unit which sheltered under the cooking array, sketching across the wall perfectly, not a centimeter spent in waste. The other side was dedicated to an attractive, real-glass window looking out over a tap-on sink. On weekdays the sunlight came through the window exactly, touching the table but never shining in her eyes. She ate her breakfast here every morning, over a cup of ultra caf and a hearty breakfast.

She set down her inflatable shopping bag and got to work. Agar Agar bloomed in warm water as the cake mix puffed up in the insta-oven. At first the aquafaba slime was resistant to whipping, but the mixing machine eventually convinced both bean water and 3D gelatin to emulsify into a lovely pink cream. Integration was a slow process, but it was worth it.

She turned on her wall screen, and flipped through the channels. The war was being won, the comedy shows pantomimed their homilies, a documentary on the science channel showed attempts to clone gallus domesticus from a bone unearthed in an ancient landfill. Nothing caught her interest, the wall screen went dark. But no matter, the magazine served as

distraction enough as the cake cooled on the counter. She had just finished frosting it when the doorbell chimed.

Because her building was Supervised she had no need of peep hole, door lock, nor any other means of preventing malentry. She answered the door for two compliance men in their full complement. Each wore black ultra-plastic from helmet to boots, bare faces the only indication they had any human skin at all. At their hips crouched a weapon with full repression capabilities from brain melting pain to simple death.

Calixa was calm like a cow might be calm, surely these men needed her help in finding some criminal.

“Calixa Cole, social ID ending in 4517?” One of them asked.

“That’s me.” She held the door partly closed with one hand, a spot of strawberry cream still dotting the thumb.

“Come with us, please.” One officer stepped back to make room in the hallway.

“Why?” Calixa was baffled.

“Move your ass!” She jumped. Their faces had been blank before, but now they drew down into mask-like harshness.

“Alright. Just let me get my shoes.”

She made to close the door, fully intending to obey once she’d slipped on her mules, but the latch never made it to the jamb. The closest compliance man pounded the door open with his gauntlet. He grabbed her by the veal-soft flesh of her upper arm and dragged her away. Her feet left fleeting perspiration prints against the aggressively clean hallway as she was hurried along.

She was certain that she had no cause to worry. She was a citizen, she had recourse, she had a lawyer. Calixa accessed her CAC messaging app.

This function is not available to those with a social standing score lower than fifty (50).

Please contact the Department of Societal Harmony for further information.

It was then fear truly gripped her, the same thoughts recycling in her brain like the fusty air of an airplane. This had to be a mistake. Supervision, or some analyst, had made a mistake. She had a first tier social ranking. She obeyed metrics. She made the correct IWU donations. This was simply a mistake.

It was not yet curfew for everyone, so there were still people on the street as Calixa was loaded into the compliance van. She searched them out but could not catch a single pair of eyes.

Inside there were others chained to the transport's unforgiving metal bench. A disheveled man with an inadequate combover and coke bottle glasses huddled in the far corner. A young woman slumped directly across from Calixa. Her high, purple mohawk and tattooed neck made her out to be a tough sort, still, she sat with her head tipped back tears running down the angular peaks of her face. Besides the occasional snuffle and the gunning rumble of the engine, the ride passed in silence.

She'd waited in the cell so long her bladder was now a tender, painful weight pressing against the front of her abdomen. The aching was such that when they finally came to get her she felt more relief than fear.

"I need a bathroom."

There was no response. A visored compliance officer, a woman by stature, grabbed Calixa in a now familiar hold and marched her to a room guarded by a windowless, metal door. This room was sparse. A small table with three chairs, only one of which was occupied, stood opposite a large metal construction that looked like nothing so much as an overgrown high chair.

Triple-whipped Strawberry Cream Cake 7

Calixa sat, feet confined in metal stirrups, her hands bolted to the scooped metal tray. The rest of her body was locked in unforgiving steel rings. At full extension, she could only move her torso a few inches. The Compliance officer stood in front of the door, hands folded.

“Calixa Cole, Social ID 3-231-61-4517?” asked Mr. Hill. He looked middle aged with more salt than pepper in his oiled hair. His bland smile sat oddly over the severity of his compliance department suit.

“Yes, that’s me.” Calixa’s throat clicked with dryness.

“Mother, Xenia Phillips? Father, Elias Cole?”

“Yes.” Inside she was very stern with herself. Panic was the enemy of reason. It was only a misunderstanding.

“You work in the big data center in Shreveport?”

“That’s right.”

“When was the last time you bought reusable socks?”

The world abruptly veered into unreality. What in the hell did reusable socks have to do with anything?

“I don’t know. I get single use most times. Less laundry.”

“Very good,” he said. His eyes flicked this way and that as he accessed his CAC to record his analysis.

“About how many media programs do you purchase in a month?”

She sucked in her dry upper lip. “I bought a cooking show a few months ago. Mostly, I just get the package. World TV 1.”

“I see. And on average, how much do you watch WTV1?”

Triple-whipped Strawberry Cream Cake 8

“This is ridiculous! I’m a citizen in good standing.” Her voice began to rise with urgency. “I’ve never been called to court for anything. Never been cited or even censured. I’ve always made donations to the Immutable Union. You can check my file!”

Through her outburst, Mr. Hill remained impassive, if anything his smile stretched slightly wider.

“I have reviewed your file, Ms. Cole. It’s very interesting indeed. For instance, you only engage with programming for an average of thirty minutes per day.” He retreated inward to review the necessary documents, leaving his face oddly hollow for a beat before it jerked with animus once again.

“When observing a compliance vehicle, you frown 80% of the time,” he said.

Calixa choked on indignation. “That could mean anything! I’m an analyst. I know when something is something and that is nothing. I’m a good citizen!”

He continued in the same measured tone. “You are resistant to Supervision guidance.”

“Sir, with all due respect I am not resistant. I work for the government.”

It felt like a nightmare. She kept saying the same things, but was not heard. How could she make him understand, if he wouldn’t listen?

“Not a few hours ago you refused the items selected for you at the Market Street supermercado. And it wasn’t just today,” he said, speaking over the objection she had opened her mouth to make.

“Supervision has flagged many incidences of resistance, not to mention the disturbed sleep, odd purchases, and failure to engage with government media.”

He stood, eyes flattening into blankness once more. “You purchased an antique paperbook. Why do you have such an interest in pre-Union propaganda?”

“I don’t have an interest,” she pleaded. “It’s only for the pictures. I just liked the pictures, that’s all.”

“Hm,” he loomed over her, blocking the light with his greased head. “I wish I could believe that. But you see, there’s something rather more serious than anything we’ve discussed as of yet.” He placed his hands on the tray, so close she could feel the heat leaping off his body. “When confronted with anti-Union, anti-Supervision graffiti you chose to observe it for forty six seconds longer than the average citizen.”

Her denial was reflexive, but died before she gave it voice. She had looked. She’d seen it on one of her walks, spray painted on the side of a compliance substation: a bloated, beef-faced Santa Claus with camera lenses for eyes. Sprayed underneath in runny black letters: **They see you when you’re sleeping, they know when you’re a fake.**

She floundered. “I looked. I’m sorry. But I don’t believe it. I was just shocked.” She struggled to swallow. “Shocked that someone could be so misguided.”

He leaned further over her, “Have you ever thought about, researched, or pursued illegal activity such as disabling your Cerebral Access Chip?”

Calixa moaned at the question, body thrashing like a netted shark. There was no mistake. This was truly a compliance review.

Mr. Hill smiled, nostrils flaring as he observed her distress. “Shall I take that as a yes?”

“No!” The word burst out. “I’ve never even thought of such a thing!”

“Are you dissatisfied with our glorious and immutable Union? Do you wish to choose things for yourself?”

“No! Of course not.” Even though he had never reacted, she was compelled to bring up her good works yet again. “I work for the government, I understand more than anyone how important Supervision is. The world would be chaos without it.”

“Hm,” He went to the table. “Have you ever met with someone calling himself ‘Liber’?”

“No,” sweat ran down her face despite her frozen feet.

“Perhaps you’ve just received a phone call, or left illicit messages in public places?”

“No, no.” Tears poured out of her eyes and soaked her professional work blouse.

“Have you ever seen this man?” He held up an 8X10 photograph of a nondescript man with burning brown eyes. The figure had been caught in an instant of agitated motion, looking over his shoulder as he traversed a crossway.

“No, I’ve never seen him.”

“Hm.” His hand swung back, knuckles snapping her face to the side.

“How do you contact him?!”

The pain was so sudden she couldn’t speak.

He slapped her again.

“Do you communicate through an intermediary?”

“No! I don’t, I don’t.” She tasted metal.

The questions came in cycles. About Liber and then banned reading materials and then the actions of everyone she knew. Had she ever read *Common Sense*? Did the antique store sell forbidden texts? Did her parents speak negatively about the government? Had she ever observed a close friend acting outside Supervision guidelines?

Her answers were always the same, unchanging as the hot pain radiating from her face. She wept without ceasing as she unraveled, underarms soaked, chignon unwinding to flop against her shoulders. Her upper lip grew slimy with snot.

“I wish you’d be honest with me, Ms. Cole.”

He wheeled over a petite medical cart she hadn't noticed before where appliances splayed themselves like cadavers on a blue surgical towel. He picked up a vicious set of vice-pliers and clamped the delicate nail adorning her right ring finger.

"Do you know anyone called 'Liber'?" asked Mr. Hill.

Calixa arched as far as she was able, flaying her wrist as she jerked against the metal cuff. She screamed denials, full volume, nearly inarticulate with fear. Every time he gave the nail a good, solid tug she shrieked. Eventually her screaming reached a crescendo unsustainable by the human voice. Pleading cracked into pieces, scraping her throat up like splintered jags of glass.

"Do you know the zealot, Liber?"

Her mind was consumed with pain, there was no room for anything else: not his questions, not her fear, not even the face he had shown her some undefinable time ago. She didn't even notice when her bladder released.

Mr. Hill also paid no attention, ignoring the malodorous fount, pulling, pulling until agony forked up her arm like lightning. A final jerk and the nail came free with a wet sound of separation.

"Here," said Mr. Hill "take a look." The nail plinked down on the metal tray. Calixa was gasping up at the ceiling, her body caught in the throws of tormented paroxysm, each muscle frozen in an unyielding rind.

"I said," the pliers pinched the middle nail, "look."

With great effort, she hung her head. The nail had come off in a single piece, creased where the pliers had dug in. Breathing slowing, she stared down at the streaming wound. Here was her meat, exposed, so blue with blood it nearly looked purple.

"Are you aware of any resistance to the Union?"

She shook her head, unable to speak.

He exerted pressure on the new nail, just enough to make her shriek like a steam kettle.

The pliers went back to their tray.

Left alone, she cursed her cold pants. If only she could sleep. But her exhaustion was no match for the wracking shivers that prevented her escape into blissful unconsciousness.

After an eternity, an officer appeared. Calixa stared at him with a dull acceptance, too tired to even wonder at his purpose. Had he unsheathed his weapon and shot her in the head, she would have welcomed it gladly.

He unlocked the metal stirrups, feet then hands, and slid the tray to the side. He reached for her right arm, but after the merest glance at her dribbling finger, gripped her left instead. Her muscles were frozen with exertion, so she slid to her feet with both arms stuck out as if they were still chained into position. Her numb feet did little but spike her legs with pins and needles, thus it was more the grip of her jackbooted escort than her own strength that kept her off the floor. He jostled her impatiently, down a stretching hallway, past rows and rows of identical metal doors. She thought she heard a moan of pain, but it could have been a figment of her own echoing mind. Into an elevator she went, and then inside a van. They left her standing on Crockett Street outside the Amtrak station.

It took her a long time to interpret the signs.

She squeezed past the turnstyle to board a seven am commuter back to the city center. Calixa hung from the pole as the compacted train began to sway forward. She started vertical enough, but each stop found her more slumped forward than the last, until she was nearly parallel with the floor, gripping the pole like an old person would a walking stick

A young man, she could tell by the stylishness of his sneakers, put one foot on the floor like he wanted to give up his seat. But what would such an action look like to the many round,

mechanical eyes on the train? He never moved a further inch, leg tensed for three stops until it was his turn to disembark.

Calixa threw herself down in his vacated plastic chair. No one looked her way, a fact that made her smile with her crusty, bruised face. Nobody wanted to notice the effects of compliance review for forty six seconds longer than average and be called to account themselves. I'm a coupon, she thought, here to produce a desired effect. I'm a censure to the public at large, a driving wind over the waters of thought.

Her kitchen felt strange and impersonal as a hotel room when she finally collapsed across from the pink monstrosity. She pierced its cream-skin with two dirty fingers, dug out a chunk of strawberry sponge, and scooped it into a mouth too sore to open properly. Once again she became that pitiful, keening creature sobbing in its cold restraints.

The cake had gone stale.