

Lowstander

“Every single moment is a coincidence.” -Doug Coupland

Fifteen miles west of Roswell is an electric fence. Behind this electric fence is a small well house, except it's not really a well house, it's an elevator disguised as a well house. There's also an electrocuted rattlesnake, but that's beside the point. If you take the elevator thirty stories down (which is about three hundred feet below sea level) it opens into a hallway. The only thing in this hallway- besides the aluminum coating on the walls and ceiling designed to foil radars- is a titanium vault at the end. Behind this titanium vault is another titanium vault, and behind the second titanium vault is Karl.

Karl has a headache. It's probably his allergies acting up again. He squints at the ballet of figures cavorting across monitors mounted on every available surface, except, of course, for the surfaces occupied by levers and buttons and one contraption that looks suspiciously like an egg beater.

In the center of the room is something resembling an alkaloid dream catcher. Toothy sparks bounce around the interior of the four-foot wide metal ring like it's playing host to a Pong tournament for meth heads. It's an interdimensional portal, or at least, that's what it's supposed to be. For years the government has been dumping more federal funds into this project than Exxon dumps oil into the Pacific, with mixed results. 'Mixed' meaning failure mixed with a considerable degree of

bad judgment. In theory, the machine should work; but the thing about theories is that they haven't been proven yet.

Karl presses a button and what happens next is unprecedented: the portal actually does something. Octaves of blue and yellow discharge writhe around the rim, flicking through a kaleidoscope of contorted horrors. At one point he's pretty sure he sees his mother. She's offering him eggplant casserole, too, which makes it even worse than the octopus that got its intestines mixed up with its limbs. Then, just as soon as it had come and with just as little comprehension on Karl's part, the licorice strands of electrons recoil to the rim of the device. The seam in space sews itself shut with perfect tidiness.

Or at least, almost perfect.

Karl catches his breath and retrieves his glasses from the tile floor where they fell during the...incident. He's already imagining Dr. Christopherson lecturing him about failure for the umpteenth time this week. And then he's bowled over by an entire armory condensed into a rather small slab of space. There is a lot of cursing- on the armory's part, not Karl's, because cursing irritates his ulcers- and then he feels himself peeling off of his assailant like a low-fat pancake off a cast iron skillet.

The portal sews shut its final seam and closes for good.

Karl squints through his now broken glasses and sees that there's a man buried somewhere under all the weaponry. He's about three feet tall (the same length as his beard) and covered in a sort of orangish plasma that reminds Karl of the slime from Nickelodeon. What had Dr. Christopherson called it?

Interdimensional afterbirth. A placenta of information that would provide the specimen with basic survival skills tailored to their new environment. This could be a new set of lungs, fluency in the *lingua franca*, or the ability to put up with overbearing waitresses at IHOP.

“Is this not Valhalla? Where is Odin?”

Karl isn't any more surprised that the guy is asking for a Norse deity than the fact that he's doing it in perfect English. Psychic energy has a way of seeping through the cracks between dimensions, often resulting in miraculous coincidences that can actually be explained away with a protractor and a rudimentary grasp of the law of averages. “Sorry, this isn't Valhalla. But would you mind if I got a blood sample and took your vitals?”

He throws his beard over his shoulder and charges at the door, and somehow the door winds up on the losing end of the conflict. Karl takes this as a 'no'.

“Wait?” He calls after him. He has the vague sense that someone's going to get into a lot of trouble for this.

Dick hates himself and everything that he stands for. He's thirty-four (which means he's an eighties kid. He *despises* the eighties), childless (fertility is directly correlated with manhood), and living off welfare (he's a Republican, so you can pretty much figure that one out yourself).

Dick also hates his neighbor's dog, which, by some malign twist of fate, is also named Dick. Dick- the dog, not the man- is a six-year-old pug that's show quality,

which means to say that his owners bought him from a breeder in Connecticut with a sweater vest and a stay-at-home life partner named Hugh.

It's absurd because this is the projects, and Dick's (the man's, not the dog's) neighbors spent more on their pug than they did on their car, which, by the way, they ALWAYS PARK IN HIS FRONT LAWN. Who the hell has that kind of nerve? It's not even subtle. The whole fucking Sedan is just sitting there when he gets home from Fat Daddy's, waiting for him like Charles Manson is waiting to get his hands on another batch of granola eating college dropouts.

Fat Daddy's is the bar where Dick plays pool. He's a hustler, except the only part he's mastered so far is the crappy playing to lure people in. When it's time to actually beat them he comes up emptier than a bowl of low fat chicken parmesan at a sorority meet-and-greet, which makes him more hustle-ee than hustl-er. It's the same prefix, though, so he figures that he's headed in the right direction.

It's Wednesday night and Dick is in a bad spot. Specifically, the alley behind Fat Daddy's known as 'mug alley.' He's visiting mug alley because he owes money to Sharkey, an orthodontically challenged bookie who has trouble understanding the concept of rhyming. If you ever find yourself in the right Detroit pool hall, you might be lucky enough to hear the whispered story of one intrepid scholar who ventured to tell Sharkey that his name did not, in fact, rhyme with 'bookie.'

He got his arms chopped off.

That's the end of the story.

"Stop!" Dick manages to gasp between knees to the stomach, except the sound he makes is actually more like 'blegh'. The thugs don't stop. In fact, they

redouble their efforts. One pulls out a stapler that he says he can find *very* creative uses for.

“You think Sharkey lets people get away with not paying up?”

“No! I’ll pay, I swear!”

“Yeah? Well...” The guy with the stapler pauses, searching for the wisp of a thought that floated through his skull only moments before, but comes up empty handed. “...Never mind, okay? Me and Buster here are just gonna keep on hitting you for a while, to teach you a lesson. But no hard feelings, okay?”

“Taste steel, you filthy Christians!” An axe blade slices clean through his stomach, splattering Dick’s face with blood and severed intestinal tract. Buster takes this as a signal that things are heading south and runs away. At least, he runs until another axe lodges in his back. After that he does a kind of backwards belly flop and makes an awful gurgling noise.

Dick looks at his savior- all three feet of him- and sees a whole lot of metal, and a beard, and yeah, that’s a nose, but there’s not much else. His progression of thought goes somewhat like this, and since he’s in a panic he voices all of it:

“What...who...no! Some kind of...and then...um, thanks?”

“Oh hi there.” The upper portion of his beard angles towards Dick, who realizes that this guy had no intention of saving him. He scrambles for something to prevent him from ending up on the wrong end of the axe.

“Can I buy you a beer?”

Dick's new friend sniffs the air; his nose has the same dimensions as a potato.

"Are we in a mine?"

"Um, no, but we're underground."

"Very good! Only trust a man who's lower than dirt, my father always said."

He pounds back his fifth pint of Yuengling. The entire pint. In one gulp.

They've been here for five minutes.

After seeing two thugs chopped apart by a pocket sized Hercules, Dick decided it would be best to make friends instead of enemies. Besides, all that cleaving might come in handy the next time Sharkey shows up.

He thought it would be best to lay low for a while so they walked five blocks over to McCheesie's Irish Pubbe, which is in the basement of Cheezini's Pizza, which is next door to El Cheezo's Burritos. The bar is small, dark, and probably a hotspot for asbestos. There's a jukebox in the corner that only plays 'Mrs. Robinson' on repeat.

"So I gotta ask you," Dick says, tracing a figure eight in the condensation on his beer mug, "what's up with the axes?"

"They're for fighting."

"Why do you carry them around?"

He pulls an axe out of one of the holsters on his left leg and chucks it, end over end, at the tubby Marlon Brando looking guy hunched in a corner booth. It splits his head in two with a satisfying Kit-Kat 'crunch'. He slumps forward and the blood pools around the coasters like a mob surrounding Versailles.

"What the hell! What makes you think it's okay to do that?"

“I mean, you asked me what the axe was for...”

“You can’t just *kill* someone!” He looks around, trying to see if anyone’s noticed. The bartender is the only other person in the room, and at the moment he appears absolutely enthralled with the glass he’s polishing. (This is a survival habit that most bartenders pick up sooner or later, ‘later’ usually implying that it’s too late). “There’s, there’s *rules* against that!”

“You mean, like, I gotta give him an axe before I kill him?”

“No. Well, not exactly. Look, we just need to get out of here! That’s the third person you’ve split apart in the past hour!”

“Where will we go?”

Dick pauses in his scramble for the door. Where can you hide a homicidal dwarf these days? He remembers his cousin Ricky. He’s one of those quiet types who stays up until two a.m. playing video games and who believes in alternative healing practices involving ice cream and a gerbil wheel, but you pretend not to know that because you’re still trying *really* hard to forget last year’s Thanksgiving dinner...Yeah. What was that thing Ricky went to last summer?

He looks down at his hirsute companion and decides, what the hell, it’s worth a try.

“Somewhere you can blend in.”

Karl needs to relax. He normally wouldn’t do this kind of thing because, between work and Mother and the drama in his Dungeons and Dragons league, there’s too much to worry about. But Dr. Hatfield assured him that a break would be

good for the nerves. Karl doesn't trust nerves; they're too feely. But he relents nonetheless.

So here he is, dressed in his best elf costume (he almost wore his third best, but decided he should live a little, by golly), pulling up to the curb of the Coastline Convention Center for a date with Destiny. Destiny, of course, is the escort he hired to accompany him to the comic book convention. It took a while to explain that he just wanted her to wear the matching outfit, and that he wasn't expecting any hanky-panky, but she finally got the message and agreed to come along as Legolas's girlfriend. Platonically, of course.

The convention center is a Jackson Pollock painting of fantasy worlds, constructed and inhabited by people brave enough to admit that they'd prefer to avoid the nasty business of reality altogether, thank you very much. Everyone's dressed like somebody else. Karl sees a pudgy guy with a neck beard and a farmer's tan gallivanting around in a loincloth, and knows that he's at home.

"Oh my God," Destiny says, still managing to lisp despite the absence of 's's, "this place is SO ratchet!"

"What?" She glares at him and puts her finger over her electric pink lips. He realizes that she's talking on the phone.

"What? Yeah. He's SO cute. Wait? He did *what?* With *who?* Just because I'm not dating him doesn't mean he can make out with other girls! What a bitch! Oh my God, I hate her SO much!"

Karl realizes that the room has fallen silent. He's on the receiving end of a thousand nerd glares, and now he doesn't feel so relaxed, after all. He pokes Destiny

in the shoulder. “Um, hey, do you think you could maybe turn off your phone? Because, like, it kind of ruins the authenticity of the environment.”

The silence that follows is ripe enough to ferment and distill, and Karl very much expects to fall victim to assault by a prostitute. But what happens instead is that he hears a familiar voice from over by the door. “You didn’t tell me there’d be *elves* here! I HATE elves!”

And then there’s a whole lot of screaming and crying and people running everywhere, except for the ones that are getting their legs chopped off by Karl’s escaped science experiment. He grabs Destiny’s phone and dials the special number, the one that Dr. Christopherson told him he should only use when the shit doesn’t just hit the fan, it downright beats it up.

“Hello? Yes, this is Karl. From the lab? You know, *the* lab? Yes, Dr. Christopherson. That one. I’ve located the, uh, specimen.”

Agent Black is perturbed. He flicks his cigarette at the stray kitten rubbing up against his leg. It sizzles a nicotine brand right between its mangy shoulders, but this only makes it purr louder. He kicks it. “I’ve killed men for less than that.”

It’s true. In boot camp he slit his bunkmate’s throat for snoring too loud, which earned him extra points when he applied for Officer Training School. Not that anyone knew that. It wasn’t on record or anything. He isn’t exactly in the line of work that keeps records; in fact, it actively destroys them. Federal intelligence agencies spend an awful lot of time getting rid of intelligence.

He wades through the broken remains of broken people, searching for a way to hush this up before the camera crews find a way past the hasty police barricade outside, and this *fucking cat is still following him*, damn it, what does a man have to do for some privacy these days?

He pieces together the story. A madman, yeah, some I.T. guy from Newark who drove all this way for the comic book convention and lost his shit. Everyone's heard it before, and anything violent is going to satisfy the press.

Next order of business: figuring out where the, um, specimen is now. Somewhere in this soufflé of mutilated corpses there's a clue, because there's always a clue, even if he has to make the fucking thing up. There's a whole section for clues on the reports he has to file, all of which get torched as soon as he sends them in. That's protocol for you.

He stops in front of a girl dressed like some kind of slutty sorceress, a costume that a lady of her girth had no business wearing. It seems like the dress fit her better after she got disemboweled, so maybe her soul could take comfort in that. But here's the crucial part: the flab of her face is stamped with the contours of a boot like a T-Rex footprint in a sixty billion year old hunk of mud. He finds another print three corpses over, and another, and now he's on to something and he follows the trail to the back door, and when he goes outside there's a bloody oval on the pavement from every step. They end at a parking space, but he's on a roll so he goes to the convenience mart across the road and 'appropriates' their security footage.

It takes an awful lot of zooming in and fiddling with the pause button, but Agent Black always gets his man. Or at least, he gets their license plate number.

And then he gets his man.

The Sedan is in Dick's lawn again. He's not sure why he expected anything different, but the way today has been going it just seemed like he was due for a lucky break. The man, or dwarf, or whatever he is, is still with him, because what are you going to do? He's not the kind of guy that you want to risk double crossing, even if it means harboring a homicidal alcoholic in your kitchen.

"Got any more beer?" He asks from behind the open fridge door.

"Nope!" Dick mops up the bloody footprints with a towel he stole from a Holiday Inn in Reno last year. Well, that's karma for you. The floors are hardwood, too. *Hardwood*. That means something these days, and what with the economy and everything his property value needs all the help it can get.

Someone knocks on the door and Dick gets the feeling that this isn't going to end well. He tosses the towel in the trashcan, washes his hands, dries them off, throws away that towel, too, just for good measure, and answers.

"Hi," says the man holding the gun pointed at Dick's face. "You're going to let me inside and tell me everything that's happened today."

"Sounds like a plan."

Dick does a sort of backwards, hands-up sidle into the living room and sits down. His guest, who has on a suit that he probably got in Italy, not Men's Warehouse, stays standing. He doesn't blame him.

"Are we alone?"

"No."

"Is *he* here?"

"Who?"

"You know damn well who. The guy with all the axes!"

He decides honesty would be safest. "Yes."

"Where?"

"In the kitchen."

"Lead the way."

Dick goes into the kitchen and tries to take comfort in the fact that soon the gun will be pointing at someone else's occipital lobe. The dwarf has dumped the entire contents of his pantry on the floor, creating a kind of starch mountain that he's standing on top of to better search the highest shelf. He turns around when he hears them come in.

"Who's your friend?"

Agent Black has this part down. He practiced it in the car on the way here. "I'm your worst nightmare, buddy. I'm what goes bump in the night. I'm the first thing you saw, and the last thing you'll ever see. I'm- uggh."

The axe sinks in right at his belly button and he folds over like a cub scout's flimsy portable tent. "I don't like him," the dwarf says to Dick, who makes another mental note not to piss this guy off. "Are you sure you don't have any more beer?"

Objects attract other objects with a force proportional to their mass. Or their relevance to each other. Either one. The universe- or God, or a bearded guy in a bathrobe, whatever- circumvents problems in ways that can seem absurd, resolving glitches with an amalgamation of opposing forces that tie together loose ends better

than a sailor with four thumbs. Behind every coincidence is a greater intentionality, a force working towards something that we can't begin to guess at. We chalk it up to chance when we should be shaking our heads at the purposefulness of happenstance.

The fart of a V8 engine out front lets them know that the universe isn't done with them just yet. Dick's pretty sure who it is.

"Hey, get ready to throw another one of those axes, okay?"

He nods and follows him to the door just as Sharkey yells "Open up, Dick! You got a lot of explaining to do!"

Dick swings back the door, nearly getting knocked on the nose by Sharkey's fist. "Sharkey always collects his- what the hell?"

Dick turns around and sees a fiery vortex split open in the middle of his foyer. Tentacles of displaced atoms knot together around the edge of the fissure, and the screams of a thousand dying stars from a thousand different eons claw at their ears. Dick stares into the center of the chasm. It looks like someone threw a bucket of pig intestines in a dryer and hit the spin cycle.

For every action there must be an equal and opposite reaction.

He watches the dwarf walk toward the portal, arms outstretched as if trying to grasp at something that no one else can see, and it responds to his touch, reaching out to greet him with slimy ropes of bright red plasma. They swallow him, or maybe he swallows them, and the air in the room right now could curdle milk, and there's a tremendous, liver-shaking vacuum sensation-

And the portal closes, and everything goes back to normal.

“What the *fuck* was that?” Says Sharkey through a mouthful of misshapen molars.

“No clue.”

“Well in that case, where’s my money, bitch?”

“Right here!” Agent Black is slumped on the other side of the room, leaning against a doorpost. He’s pulled off his jacket and Dick can see that he’s wearing a Kevlar vest with a horizontal dent right across the stomach. “You’re coming with me, buddy!”

“Who’s this guy?” Sharkey whispers to Dick.

“Don’t get him started.”

Agent Black trains his gun at Sharkey. For a guy with three broken ribs, his hand is pretty damn steady. “Someone’s got to take the fall for all of this, and it looks like it’s your lucky day.” He nods at Dick. “Thank you for your cooperation, sir.”

And that was it. That’s how Dick became a free man. He didn’t even have to do anything. The fifty thousand dollar reward for helping capture the Comic Book Killer was a nice bonus. Sharkey looked the part, too. CNN got hold of a courtroom photo of him trying to bite the prosecutor, and in the eye of the American public there may as well have been an electric chair with his initials monogrammed on it.

On Thursday Dick got a visit from a laboratory type named Karl. Karl told him that he was sorry for all the trouble he’d caused him, and that he’d been

working too many hours lately and he hoped that this lemon merengue pie would make it up to him. The pie was good, and Dick had no complaints.

While they ate Karl tried his best to explain what happened. It all had to do with the physics of dimensional transfer, he said, and something about Newton's laws. Dick wondered if that was like Murphy's law, but didn't ask. Karl left halfway through his plate of pie and he hasn't seen him since.

Dick wipes the sweat off his hands and steps back to survey his work. The fence looks good. More importantly, it should keep the neighbors from parking in his front yard, and keep that damn dog from leaving steaming surprises for him to step in every morning.

In his pocket is a business card belonging to an old high school buddy he ran in to at Fat Daddy's last night. Turns out the guy manages a construction company and is looking for strong, quiet men who are willing to put their heads down and get the job done. Dick's no slouch. He's not much of a talker, either, but he figures that he'll give him a call and see if he can't get back on his feet. The universe has been good to him lately, but you can only lean on luck for so long. It's time for him to take control. At least, insofar as such a thing is possible.

It feels good to do stuff again, to lift and hammer and dig and build with his own two hands. There's something to be said for that. It's...*tangible*. And in that sense, Dick thinks, it's the most sacred thing a man can do.

Karl is nervous. Nervousness is pretty much homeostasis for him, but this time it's...more serious. Sweat rolls off his palms like condensation on a Corona

bottle. He tries wiping them off, but this only leaves two sweaty handprints on the front of his lab coat. He pulls out his lunch bag, breathes into it to keep from hyperventilating. And then he knocks.

“Come in!” Dr. Christopherson yells from inside. He sounds irritated. Karl doesn’t like to make people irritated. He opens the door and steps into the conference room, where he’s horrified to find that the entire Review Board is glaring at him. “Please, Karl, take a seat.” Christopherson points to the plastic folding chair in the center of the room. All of the other tables are angled so their occupants are facing it. He sits down and thinks he’s going to throw up. He pulls the lunch bag back out.

“I believe you know why you’re here today?”

“Yes. The...um...specimen-“

“That was a rhetorical question.” Christopherson repositions his pen at the front of his desk. Karl can hear the scraping of other writing utensils as the Review Board brings swift judgment on his social ineptitude.

“I understand that this was entirely your fault?” The pause is pregnant enough to be featured on MTV’s *Teen Mom*. Karl clears his throat.

“Sorry, I thought that question was rhetorical, too.” More frantic scribbling. “But, um, I don’t know what you expected me to do. The vaults were sealed. He- I mean, it- I mean, the specimen- just ran through them.”

“And you expect us to believe that you aren’t to blame for this? That somehow you are a...” he searches for the right word, “*victim of circumstance?*”

“I wouldn’t say I’m a victim.” Christopherson stifles a laugh. The suppressed chuckle spreads around the room. “I just mean to say that technically, I did my job. I got the portal to work.”

“And where does that leave us?” Christopherson makes a vague sweeping gesture with his arms. “Fifty people dead, an innocent man in prison- Christ, Karl, we had to send in the disinformation agency! They haven’t gotten involved since, well, you know.” A murmur of acknowledgement indicates that yes, everyone here does know, except, of course, for Karl. Christopherson continues. “And what do we have to show for it? Not a single blood sample, no documentation, not even a fucking sketch!”

“I could sketch it for you-“

“No! Knowing you you’ll just find a way to mess that up, too!”

Christopherson is on his feet now, leaning over his desk and projecting flecks of angry spittle in Karl’s direction. He catches himself and straightens up. “Sorry about that,” he says to the rest of the review board, pulling out a handkerchief and wiping the sweat off his forehead. “I got a little worked up.”

“Understandably so,” says the woman to Karl’s left. Her face reminds him of a hawk with a viral infection that he saw at the zoo a few years back, which reminds him of his mother. He feels the bile rising.

Someone knocks at the door. Christopherson sits back down. “Yes?”

A man runs in holding a stack of papers. From what Karl can see, they’re covered in graphs and numbers. They look, well, scientific. This is a good sign. He

drops the files in front of Christopherson and doubles over to catch his breath.

“Doctor, we’ve recovered a DNA sample from the, um, specimen.”

“How?”

“Saliva on a beer glass. Some hole in the wall place. We only found it because there was a report of a guy getting his head split in two by an axe.”

“I see. You may leave now, Peter.”

“Yes sir, thank you, sir.” Peter stumbles out, recognizing that this is about the best kind of interaction you can hope to have with Christopherson.

He shuffles the papers and gets out his reading glasses. He scans the checkerboard of charts and figures, then goes back and does it again. Karl is sure that he’s doing this to prolong his agony.

“Well, it appears that I was mistaken. We do have something to show for your work. Maybe you didn’t ruin everything after all.” He slips his glasses back into his shirt pocket. “You are dismissed.”

Karl goes outside. He notices that it’s a beautiful day. This is not the kind of thing that he would typically focus on, but given the circumstances he deserves a reprieve from his troubles. He’s tired of being a victim of circumstance, of always worrying about everything. Maybe this is when he decides to take control of his own life. Seize the reins, so to speak. Maybe he can start to appreciate the little things. Stop and sniff the flowers, so to speak.

Probably not.

But hey, at least he’s thinking about it, and that’s a start.