

Make Alice Famous

When Filbert Brownstone finally got arrested, he was so fat that the cops couldn't fit the handcuffs around his wrists and had to use two pairs at once, opposite sides locked together like mating chromium insects, segmented and radiant in the streetlights. "Fat" was word, not mine—the self-identification he preferred versus "overweight," etc., because it reflected more clearly his mission statement and the effort it took to accumulate all that adipose tissue. Earlier that night Filbert had emerged from his bomb shelter and we'd shared a meal again for the first time in a long while. We sat at the battle-scarred folding table observing the utter non-motion of his supersized soda cup, inert beside a pile of crumpled burger wrappers. Filbert said, "I think it moved."

"I didn't see anything."

"Well, is it glowing? It's supposed to glow."

I suggested telekinesis might be easier if he'd try a small sized soda instead, but Filbert insisted mass didn't matter.

"Even a millimeter would be nice," he said. "Just a vibration to let me know I'm on track."

"I didn't realized you'd passed the BMI Threshold yet," I said.

"There may be some uncertainty in my bathroom scale. I think it's maxed out."

Which is to say that everything seemed to be going perfectly. But maybe this is too fast. Let me start from the beginning.

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This happened back in the aughts, back when I dropped out of college. It wasn't long after 9/11 and I guess I needed to believe in I'd find something more in life than researching new vanadium alloys

for corrosion-plating NAVY battleships. I'd been researching under of my professors on this big Defense Department grant, and when I quit he said, "Think of your résumé." Pretty soon, Clarissa dumped me and moved her stuff out of our apartment. I scavenged a mattress off the curb and lay pressing my nose into the unfamiliar sheets, their smell vaguely chemical. I had no plan for how to pay rent. Unable to sleep, I went out buy some pills. In the parking lot of the Uncle Sam was an enormous man stapling pink flyers to a telephone pole. He was substantial in every direction, as if he'd started out chubby and then been magnified. I approached timidly, as one might approach a rhinoceros.

His flyer featured a Xeroxed image of a girl in a bathtub, nude save for strategically placed bubbles. Her eyelashes were preposterous and giant mascara tubes were superimposed at her feet. The original ad copy said *Available in Chocolate and Midnite* but below this, the man had written STOP STARVATION IMAGERY in black marker. Indeed, the model's body was basically skin shrink-wrapped around bones. The bottom of the poster had those little tear-off fringes with the phone-number.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you hiring?"

So at 9:00 a.m. the next day I found myself reporting for duty at a featureless brick building tucked in behind the Nature's Bagels factory. The air smelled like yeast. I couldn't see anything through the frosted-glass windows and had the feeling that no one would answer, but Filbert opened at the first knock. A computer desk rested anemically against the far wall, in the company of a sizable stack of the STOP STARVATION IMAGERY flyers. Filbert handed me a box wrapped in colorful paper, like a birthday present.

"Go ahead," Filbert said.

I opened it. Inside was a staple gun.

"Thanks," I said.

"Do you like it?"

"Sure."

"Huzzah!" Filbert said. "Let's go make Alice famous!"

The best parts of flyer-ing were the crack of the staples as they drove into the wood, and the feelings of progress I felt walking the maze of city blocks and leaving bright squares hanging in my wake, like Pac-Man in reverse. Filbert's supply was endless and I did my damndest to post one on every telephone pole, billboard, tree, or otherwise staple-able surface in the entire city. A map hung on our office corkboard, and whenever I finished a street, I would mark it with a highlighter. When my hands blistered from the staple gun, I tore a rag from my shirt for a bandage. Even as young and fit as I was back then, my efforts paled compared to Filbert's. He was a machine. He'd go all day without a break, munching Cheetos from a hip pouch in his carpenter's belt, horizontal lines of sweat spanning his globular belly like meridians. Our day ended early, around 3:00, when Filbert grew hungry for his second lunch.

When I wasn't flyer-ing, Filbert had me doing other manual labor—scraping the crackled avocado paint off the office walls, pulling trim, hauling in sheets of drywall to a partition off a separate room in back. I stenciled "Brownstone Nutritional Consulting" across the front door and set up a PO Box in the same name.

One morning I arrived to find the office crammed with pallets of bulk food—Trinkets, Wingers, buffalo sticks, RealMeat, instant gravy powder, 2-liter jugs of habanero salsa. I helped Filbert load it all into an illegally-parked white van, and he drove off without further explanation. Another time, he said, "I need you to go to Unkle Sam and get as much orange juice as you can fit inside the van." He handed me the keys and \$600 cash. I never knew what I'd be doing next. I'd simply show up to work and Filbert would say, "Use this crowbar to rip out the floorboards," or "We're going microwave shopping." The only guarantee was lunch. We'd be sweating and hacking away, and then he'd drop his paintbrush or turn away from his computer and say, "Are you hungry, Peter?"

Filbert's parents had died in a tragic car crash, leaving him the sole heir to the EasyOpen™ processed cheese fortune. His father had invented the very *idea* of individually-wrapped slices. When I expressed how much I was impressed by this, Filbert just shrugged and said, "Someone had to."

That afternoon, we were at the office, finishing a to-go lunch from Burger Militia while installing a complex filtration system for the faucet in the back room. Filbert wanted us to have clean drinking water.

“Do you know what the biggest lie of our lifetimes is?” he asked, tiny globules of Rocket-Sauce launching from his lips. “The food pyramid.”

“You think the food pyramid is worse than invading the Middle East on false pretenses?” I asked, my voice an echo around me inside the plumbing cabinet.

“It affects more people.”

I pondered this as I rotated a transparent filter canister, trying to picture the direction in which water would flow through its coral reef innards. “No way,” I said. “Even if that were true, what exactly is wrong with the food pyramid?”

“It’s propaganda.” Filbert submerged a fistful of fries in mayonnaise, salted it thoroughly, and injected the entire construction into his mouth. We did not yet, in those days, have the term “Fake News” in common parlance but I suspect it’s one Filbert would approve of. “Everything about the pyramid—which, also note the shape, Illuminati, eye, Masonic hand of God—everything about it is designed not to promote wellness, but to scare you into submission. For example, do you know how the Center for Disease Control defines obesity? Body Mass Index, right? Weight divided by height squared, times ten thousand square centimeters per kilo.”

After some mental math, I estimated my BMI as 29, which is to say overweight but not quite categorically obese, which I already knew. I dumped out the cardboard boxes that the filter system had come in, looking for a missing part. Nothing but molded plastic tubes, O-rings, and form-fitting Styrofoam.

“The CDC isn’t the government’s health initiative, it’s their propaganda arm. All this fearmongering about obesity-induced hypertension, coronary disease, strokes, gallstones, gout, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, incontinence, depression, diabetes, blah blah blah, as if none of them wouldn’t ever happen otherwise, like the only contributing factor is diet. The subtext is: eat what we say, or die. But I’m a red-blooded American. Don’t tread on me.”

“You’re taking it too seriously.”

“You can’t take Freedom too seriously, it’s impossible.”

“*Eat what we say or die?* Come on, why would anyone want that messaging, who benefits?” I fitted a valve onto the water line at the base of the wall but still had no connection to match the filter.

Filbert raised himself up and used the four-footed tip of his cane to flick through the disheveled parts in front of me. “Eat what we say, or die,” he repeated. “Next comes: drink what we say, breathe when we say, sleep when we say. Vote for Dear Leader, if you have a vote at all.”

“You’re saying it’s a form of discipline?”

Filbert eased his bulk down beside me.

“Not mere discipline.” He took the filter from my hands, inverted it, and screwed it into place. “It’s slavery.”

It was sometime after we finished remodeling the office that Filbert started training seriously. He no longer came into the office every day. At first he’d call with instructions: “Take these biscuits to the food pantry,” or “Call the school board before they vote on the hot lunch referendum,” or “Go to the pet store and buy a traveling dog crate large enough for several live chickens.” But after a while he stopped with the small potatoes and left me with a big ongoing project converting the basement into a bomb-shelter-like survival bunker. I spent a lot of time stocking its shelves with non-perishables, or if things got slow, I could always make more copies of the STOP STARVATION IMAGERY flyer and hang them around town. I guess this was the part of the cause easiest to believe in. My ex-, Clarissa, had had some body-image issues, as had many of my past girlfriends and girl friends. It was easier to overlook Filbert’s weirder side if I told myself there was goodness at the core of it all. So I hung fliers upon fliers. By now, the posters were making an impression. “What exactly does ‘starvation imagery’ mean?” callers would ask, and I would take down their addresses in a binder to mail them Filbert’s informational packet, complete with vivisected food pyramid graphic and annotated bibliography. I hired temp workers and paid them cash per diem to blanket the city,

while I coordinated. In this manner, I'd passed two or three weeks without seeing Filbert when suddenly he burst into the office like a shoehorned balloon, expanding out of a doorway that seemed hardly wide enough to squeeze through.

"How goes the good fight?" he asked, pulling papers from his briefcase. He hung clippings all around the office. One was a scientific paper casting doubt cancer-preventing potential of broccoli, and a second was a newspaper article featuring a picture of a jack-knifed semi-trailer surrounded by smashed organic produce, pulpy bodies strewn across the pavement like blood-soaked vestigial organs torn out in some back alley surgery. Over the computer, Filbert hung a dispatch from the scene of a structure-fire at the WholeFoods Warehouse with "KARMIC JUSTICE" penned in red across the margin. The effort of walking around the room winded him, and he sunk into the computer chair, huffing, cheeks flushed.

"How you feeling?" I asked.

"I'm great!" Filbert said. "Thanks for noticing. I've been pushing myself this week, trying to speed up progress. My goal is four hundred."

"Pounds?"

"By the end of the week. Not total, obviously. The finish line is closer to five and a half, but Rome wasn't built in a day." His neck fat quivered as he spoke.

"Look," I said, "I applaud your ability to live your ideals, and I get why you reject the pervading culture of thin-obsession, but could it be you're taking it too far? Think those negative health effects you told me about."

"Peter, Peter, Peter," he said sadly, "you're a good disciple, but you've still got so much to learn." Filbert rocked gently in the office chair, which emitted a sort of metal-on-metal screech, which he ignored.

"I show up every day and work my butt off," I said. "What else do you want from me?"

"I want you to be ready. To be *capable* of believing what I am going to tell you."

I followed him out to his van, where he unloaded five or six grocery bags of papers and library books. “Xerox all the articles I’ve bookmarked. Make two copies—one for me, and one for yourself. A little bedtime reading.”

Inside, Filbert microwaved a half dozen Hot Pockets while I got to work. The papers’ contents ranged from research papers in Nutritional Science journals to the obituaries of former FDA directors and building permits for local grocery stores. There was a whole section on “banned foods,” ortolan bunting and foie gras and the like, over which Filbert had scrawled a note to self: “FIRST AMENDMENT VIOLATION? CONTACT ACLU / HARBER HARBER & DAVIS FIRM?” I was already exhausted just looking at it.

“Filbert,” I said, “there’s like five billion pages here.”

“Great,” he said. “I’ll pick them up tomorrow.”

It wasn’t Filbert’s fault that I got evicted, not really. I was the one who neglected to cut my own rent check. But during his long absences from the office, Filbert had grown increasingly forgetful, so in my anger I called him and said, “Goddamn it, Filbert, why haven’t you paid me this month?”

“What’s going on?”

“I’m being evicted. I’ll need a few days off work to figure it out.”

“Stay there.” Fifteen minutes later he showed up in his massive white van, parking it with two wheels across the sidewalk. He helped me pack. I didn’t have much. The living room was still bare from when Clarissa moved out. We carried my mattress down the stairs and strapped it to the roof of the van. Filbert was surprisingly able-bodied. He moved slowly but had no problem lifting three boxes at a time, while I struggled to heft one. He had a huge power underneath all his girth and watching him work made me think of how gravity has a greater effect on elephants and dinosaurs, but their stout bones evolved to handle it perfectly. Maybe he lifted weights or exercised on his own time, and/or maybe my surprise was simply an indication that I’d bought into to baseless societal prejudices about bigger people, like everyone else.

As we waddled past a telephone pole with my dresser, I locked eyes with the girl's familiar smiling face and her street-sweeper eyelashes—I'd done a lot of flyering recently, and even my neighborhood was saturated with pictures of her.

"Why'd you decide to call her Alice?" I asked.

"I didn't," Filbert said, "our parents did."

"She's your sister!?"

"After our parents died, I became guardian of the cheese money. It fell to me to take care of her, at least until she ran off to LA at sixteen and started modeling."

"So where is Alice now? Off in Hollywood? What's she think of you using her picture to demonize the fashion industry?"

Filbert set down his end of the dresser beside the telephone pole. He looked long and hard at the emaciated figure on the poster.

"Too late for her to feel a damn thing about it, anymore."

It took a moment for me to grasp what he meant. We finished moving in silence. Everything fit in the van, with the exception of a motorized tie rack that Clarissa had given me for my birthday, which I left sitting beside the dumpster. I got into the passenger seat, unsure of where we were going next.

"Filbert," I said, "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," he said. "You're part of the solution now."

Once I was living in the office, I worked constantly. I spent whole days writing to government officials and mailing informational packets. Sometimes I would catch a movie by myself after work, but most nights I stayed in reading selections from Filbert's eclectic literature. It was all food-related, of course, but I was just as likely to come across an interview with a celebrity chef as encyclopedia articles on carrageenan and soy protein isolate. Surely the thread that unified all of these articles was

lucid in Filbert's mind, but I couldn't re-trace it. And on the day he finally explained it to me, I didn't believe him.

"Bullshit," I said, putting his white van into park. We'd just gotten drive-thru from FuelPit. Filbert descended the van's accessibility ramp, his new electric wheelchair humming along like a remote-controlled car.

"It's documented," Filbert said. "By Guinness World Record holder Darnell Johnson. He didn't get out of bed to fix meals. He would simply close his eyes and concentrate, and food would float out of the cabinets and prepare itself. Knives would saw through meat as if wielded by ghosts. Observers reported seeing a faint blue glow around his body."

"No way," I said.

"I knew you weren't ready to hear the truth."

"Where did you learn about this?"

"It's everywhere. Chophouse Radio, *The Star*, Facebook."

"Tabloids and social media? Filbert, be reasonable. If it were true, why is every couch potato in America still using a remote control to change the channels?" I hip-checked the bloated carryout bag, digging for my keys with my free hand. Filbert parked himself at the folding table and I dug food from the sack like Christmas presents. Filbert had a whole pile of DieselDogs. I was having a Green Energy Super Salad and for dessert we'd split a dozen Yellow Cake UraniYums.

"All humans are natural emitters, but only the extremely overweight can achieve Body Mass Resonance. The psychic energy accumulates in fat tissue, and a critical threshold must be overcome. Remember the Body Mass Index?"

"Sure," I said, "weight divided by height squared, etcetera."

"Insiders at the CDC suggest that BMI is a percentage. Body Mass Resonance begins to occur at the fifty percent threshold. Full potential is reached at one hundred."

"You can't honestly believe that?"

“It’s no coincidence. Believe me, they know. The CDC system is *designed* to use BMI as a warning sign. I am forty-three percent of my way to actualization, and they know they need to stop me before I reach fifty.”

“Why?”

“How many times do I have to tell you? Control.”

“And why would the government care if a few people can get the newspaper without walking outside?”

“It’s not just telekinesis, it’s telepathy as well.”

“So?” I unwrapped a straw and stuck it into my Texas Tea.

“So imagine going to the Pentagon and bathing in the flow of information. You stand outside the fence and learn by osmosis—how Kennedy died, who Castro *really* is, and the exact location of the Hollywood basement where the moon-landing footage was filmed. Which novelist is concocting the headlines this week, who is the man behind the throne, whispering in the president’s ear. You learn the methods by which nations are broken or made. Imagine having access to secrets no one in modern America has ever conceived of, way beyond rational comprehension, concepts so confidential they necessitated the removal of words from languages to remain hidden—burning books, narratives sinking with Atlantis to the ocean floor, this is what they’re afraid we’ll learn. They’re more afraid of the body mass revelation than they are of terrorism or dirty bombs or chemical warfare.” There was conviction in his voice. He truly believed it.

“And what does any of that do for *you*?” I asked.

“Not for me,” Filbert said. “For Alice. We’ve got to show the world the truth, to expose the lies they use to scare us into conformity. The lies that my sister ingested so completely that she starved herself into a heart murmur.”

“Filbert, you can’t do this for her sake. I know you’re grieving. I know you want things to be different for people like her. But listen to yourself, you’re not even making sense.”

“I’ve got to find out,” Filbert said. “And you’ve got help me. We’re arriving to the most crucial point in my training. I may reach a point where further growth becomes increasingly painful, where I

am immobilized. I'll need you to keep motivating me, keep bringing me food, keep me on track. Roll me so I don't get bedsores."

"No," I said. "I won't be complicit in your suicide by heart attack."

"I thought you were different, Peter. I thought you were smarter. But even after all this time, you're still brainwashed by the mainstream."

I looked down at Filbert's DieselDog. My mouth had been watering at the aroma only moments ago, but now I saw it for what it was: a greasy tube of meat slathered in chunky neon green sauce. I'd lost my appetite.

Filbert was not deterred. "To reach one hundred on the BMI is extremely rare, but it does happen. Those who achieve it tend not to survive for very long afterwards."

"For obvious reasons."

"No, not for the reasons you think. But I'll be ready when they come for me."

"You think someone will come after you?"

"Certainly. They know everyone's percentage. Via medial records for one thing. Plus they have their own psychics to detect your aura once you achieve resonance."

"And then what?"

"Then you don't live through the night. You're out driving and your brakes mysteriously fail. Or they poison your water, and you have one of those quote unquote *heart attacks*."

I remembered all the time we'd spent installing the water filtration system.

"Seriously?"

Filbert seized my half-eaten salad and began shoveling it down his gaping maw. "The simple truth is that if you fail to conform for long enough, eventually you must be put to death. It's the American way."

Sure enough, a couple nights later, a cop showed up at the office. I was in the middle of doing laundry in the sink and was scared he might hit me with squatting charges or some sort of residential versus commercial zoning ordinance type thing. What he really wanted was Filbert.

“He’s not here,” I said, drying my hands on my jeans.

“May I come in?” asked the mustachioed officer, and he took a seat at the folding table.

“When was the last time you saw Mr. Brownstone?”

“Maybe Tuesday. We had lunch at SteakShake.”

“Down on Madison Street?”

“Yeah. They make a fine Ribeye Smoothie.” I joined the officer at the table. By muscle memory more than conscious choice I found I was stuffing informational packets into pre-addressed envelopes.

“And where were you between the hours of ten p.m. and one a.m. last night?” he asked.

“I was here, working late.”

“Anyone else present to verify that?”

“No,” I said, pausing to lick an envelope. “What’s this all about?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“Because I have no idea.” I went to the Xerox machine to run more copies. The cop watched me, twisting the corner of his mustache.

“You may be endangering yourself or others. Just cooperate and you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

The Paper Jam LED blinked and I opened the side panel to investigate, tore a crumpled paper from the copier’s guts. “I wish I could help you, I really do.”

The cop jammed his thumbs in his utility-belt. “I’ll leave you my card. It’ll be in your best interest to call us next time you see Filbert.”

In the wee hours of the night, Filbert snuck in. I awoke to the revving his motorized wheelchair and leaned out beyond the partition to see him, my eyes still sleepy and out of focus.

“I’m not here,” he said. He parked his wheelchair at the top of the stairs and more-or-less rolled down to the survival bunker. The vault door closed behind him with a lethal click like the sound of a knife snapping down on a butcher block. I lay awake long into the night listening to the hum of the electric can opener ringing up through the floorboards.

When next I awakened it was 4:00 a.m. Police sirens sounded outside and red and blue lights flashed on the frosted window glass. I flung open the front door and saw Filbert standing in the Nature’s Bagels parking lot with his hands in the air, a bright red gas can dangling above his head. There were three squad cars and a half-dozen officers on foot. Filbert could not run. Behind him, flames licked from a cracked window in the bakery and a furnace-like glow shone from the gaping back door.

“Peter,” he yelled, “I’ve made it! Body Mass Resonance is real!”

In that moment, I saw him as the authorities saw him. How had I been so blind? How had it taken me this long to realize Filbert’s true nature, to see that the newspaper articles hung around the office—the truck crashes and structure fires labeled KARMIC JUSTICE—were his trophies? He was not some bold philosophical revolutionary, but an extremist, a petty domestic terrorist.

It took several officers to wrestle Filbert to the ground. Two held each arm while a cadre of backups worked the handcuffs over his fat wrists. I started toward them. The officer who turned to face me was the mustachioed cop from yesterday. The flames reflected in his eyes as he flexed his nightstick in my direction, saying, “Easy now.”

The whole time I’d worked for Filbert, I’d never really believed him. Even now, looking back, I have my doubts. But in that instant, I felt it, a feeling halfway between dreaming and touching an electrified fence. Filbert spoke to me without words.

Tell the world about Alice, he was saying. Make her famous. It’s in your hands now.

“Let him up, you bastards!” I shouted. “He can’t breathe! He’s going to have a heart attack!”

I don't remember resisting the police. I only remember the pain of my arms wrenched behind my back and the cop's knee on my spine, and the close-up view of a rusty staple lying lifeless on the ground right before my eyes.

Filbert's mouth frothed and his body quivered, hands still bound by the doubly-linked handcuffs. But for the first time his expression did not seem hungry but satiated, and just before he died he locked eyes with me and smiled as if to say, *you've seen the truth*.

I guess I never went through the exact revelation that Filbert might've liked me to go through as he lay in the throes of death on the moist asphalt behind the bagel factory. But just for a moment—before the fire leapt improbably down from the factory windows and engulfed two squad cars in a squall of flame—for that single moment, the windless air felt electric and I was sure I saw a faint blue halo burning around his body.