

### A Piece of Toast on Every Plate

Grandpa had been demanding bacon and eggs for the past two weeks, which indicated to David that he was somewhere in the early quarter of the century when you could still buy that sort of thing in a grocery store. He wasn't in the habit of indulging the old man's fantasies the way Olivia often would, frying up some flavored tempeh and starch and serving it with toast and coffee. But Olivia was not around anymore. They couldn't afford her once Grandpa's money had run out. David's own monthly entitlement was enough to cover food and shelter for the two of them, but he could barely pay for Grandpa's medications with his surplus income, let alone a caregiver. The situation was no longer sustainable. The day of reckoning had finally come. So, David simulated the closest approximation to bacon and eggs he could manage and served it with a piece of white toast and black coffee in Grandpa's favorite red mug. He placed it before the old man, who was snoring loudly, his chin resting against his chest.

"Grandpa," David said, touching his shoulder and wiping the drool from his lip, "your breakfast."

The old man lifted his head, his eyes darting around the room.

"What," he said with a grunt, followed by a string of unintelligible syllables.

"You breakfast, Grandpa. Bacon and eggs as you requested."

He stared at the plate with bewildered indignance.

"What is this?"

"Bacon and eggs," David said, as he took the seat across from him, "your favorite."

David swiped his hand across the surface of the table, illuminating his newsfeed. One appointment today. Only one. He didn't want to think about it, but it was staring him right in the face.

“This is not bacon and eggs.”

“Yes, Grandpa, it is.”

“This is bullshit,” the old man said with cough and a fart, dropping his head again.

David scrolled through his feed without really reading it, sipping on a protein shake. Grandpa emitted a guttural snore as his food went lukewarm. David tapped his blog app and Grandpa's image appeared on the screen from two different angles – the wall cam and the table cam. David's own face appeared in the upper left corner and his customized title sequence played as the viewer count quickly rose, settling around two hundred thousand, a little higher than the usual audience.

“What is going on, everyone,” David said. “Those of you have been following my stream for the past eight months will recognize Grandpa, and big thanks to everyone who has donated to his cause – I trust you have valued the exclusive content. Unfortunately, even with your generous donations, I simply cannot afford to keep him here anymore. We'll be heading to the Paradise Medical Center today at noon. As many of you are already aware, Grandpa did poorly on the cognitive portion of his annual medical evaluation for the third consecutive year. Now, you all know how I feel about government mandated health exams, so I'll spare you the diatribe. Suffice it to say that Grandpa has become more of a liability than an asset to society and with the tax rate on surplus income approaching 90% even a community of individuals as large and magnanimous as this one cannot afford to be his benefactors indefinitely. I hope I can rely on your continued support, as Grandpa's pharmaceutical debt is nearly five digits.

“If you’re new to this channel and interested in becoming a sustaining member, I’ll drop all of the applicable links in the comments. Your contribution will get you behind-the-scenes access to all the new content I’ll be releasing as well as the Candid Grandpa Archives. And now, without further ado, I give you Grandpa himself in what will be his final live broadcast.”

Heart reacts flooded the chat as he expanded the table cam and Grandpa’s sleeping, drooling face filled the screen.

“Grandpa, wake up.”

“Huh? What?” Grandpa sat up with a jolt.

“We’re live. Is there anything you would like to say to all your fans?”

He eyed the plate in front of him with suspicion.

“What the hell is this?”

“That’s your breakfast, Grandpa.”

“This isn’t bacon and eggs.” He pushed the plate away from him and lifted his coffee to his lips with shaking hands. “Do I look like an idiot?”

“No, Grandpa, you don’t look like an idiot.”

“You push this powdered shit on me and try to pass it off as bacon and eggs, you must think I’m an idiot. I know what bacon and eggs look like, and this ain’t it.”

“They don’t sell the kind of bacon and eggs you’re talking about anymore, Grandpa. That sort of thing hasn’t been available in decades.”

“Bullshit,” he said, spitting the coffee back into the mug and slamming it down, “and this coffee is cold.”

He leaned forward, stabbing a liver-spotted finger at the young man. David tightened the shot.

“Listen, just because a bunch of pussy-ass, bleeding heart liberals think that cow farts are going to cause the end of the goddamn world in twelve years is no reason to try and bankrupt a billion-dollar industry that employs millions of hardworking Americans.”

He leaned back in his chair, throwing his arms up in frustration, slapping the palm of his left hand with the back of his right for occasional emphasis.

“They want to herd us all into the cities, that’s what they want to do. Sit back and watch rural America dry up and die. Oh, we’ll see how much they care about the poor then, won’t we? Meanwhile, they’re putting up these phone towers disguised as trees everywhere, constantly pinging your location, transmitting mind control waves to keep the populace calm, pumping our kids full of chemicals—they drop the chemicals from the sky in the fly-over states. Different chemicals though. It’s eugenics, Mikey. It’s flat out genocide. They want to eliminate the ones they don’t need, the inconvenient ones. You think they care about the poor? They don’t care about the poor unless it’s their poor. And they’ve got no interest in saving them either. Just keep ‘em alive. Give ‘em just enough to survive. And keep ‘em plugged in and addicted to that biased media they use to brainwash everybody. They’re trying to indoctrinate us with government-funded science that comes out of government-funded institutions to push an agenda that expands the government, Mikey. Can’t you see that? Why can’t you all see what they’re trying to do?”

Grandpa grabbed his mug with great fervor and took a long, hard drink. He spit the liquid out immediately, slamming it down. Some of the coffee splashed out onto his hand and he wiped it on his shirt before picking the mug back up and taking another drink. He held the liquid in his mouth for a moment this time, his face contorting in disgust, and then spit it back into the mug.

“This is cold,” he said, settling back into his chair and staring at his lap. The viewer count rose as the time bar advanced.

David widened the shot and checked the comments.

“Okay, let’s take a question from the live chat. FreezePeach42 wants to know why you didn’t join the Southeastern Emancipation movement before the border was sealed and trade sanctions imposed. After all, there are many places in that region where bacon and eggs are still a thing.”

Grandpa’s hand went to his coffee mug again, but he hesitated, his eyes becoming glass. When he spoke, the fire in his belly was gone and his voice was thin as paper. David zoomed in to catch the tears as they formed.

“Lizzie couldn’t go,” the old man said. “She wanted to, but she was so sick. I had to take care of her.” A tear rolled down his cheek and he wiped it away. He stared at the back of his hand for a moment until his plate caught his attention once again. He picked up the fork and poked at it.

“Powdered shit. Doesn’t even look like what it’s pretending to be. Just like the trees and the goddamn birds.”

“Tell us about the birds, Grandpa.”

He tossed the fork onto his uneaten plate of food where it landed with a plop and slammed his hand on the table. His fire was back as quickly as it had vanished.

“You think they aren’t watching our every move with surveillance drones? Listening to us through the television? Controlling the water, controlling the food, controlling everything? It’s always been about control, about teaching us what we should and shouldn’t be offended by,

about making us believe the world is going to end if we don't implement these large-scale solutions that increase the powers of the Fed."

He picked up his mug and lifted it to his mouth but stopped before it touched his lips. He gazed into the black liquid, his jaw going slack.

"There are a lot of questions in the chat about Lizzie," David said. "People want to know more about her. Is there anything you would like to say to your fans about Lizzie?"

He set the mug down and looked nervously around the room.

"What?" he said.

"People want to know more about Lizzie, Grandpa."

He squinted and curled his lip.

"Who?" he said. "What the hell are you talking about?"

He coughed up a mouthful of phlegm, swallowed it again, and let his chin fall to chest. After a few seconds he began to snore. David hit play on the Grandpa montage and prerecorded closing monologue he had queued up and disabled the cams. The notification that their car had arrived came across every device in the house at once, causing Grandpa to sit up abruptly and ask what was happening.

"Our car's here, Grandpa. It's time to go."

# # #

David had ordered a two-passenger car, so when a four-passenger car showed up at the curb, he was incensed, having little doubt that they were going to charge him the full price for the larger vehicle. After strapping Grandpa into the front right seat and taken the front left for himself, David immediately opened the dash screen and pulled up Public Transit to file a complaint. His furious typing was enough to convince Grandpa that he was the one operating

the vehicle, which helped avoid the always inevitable *who's driving* question. Grandpa remained so transfixed by walls of foliage on either side of the road and the looming skyscraper ahead that David took the opportunity to make a transfer from the charity earnings to the looming medical debt. He tried to diversify his surplus income as much as possible to avoid taxes, but as soon as the amount was applied to anything run by the government, they skimmed off an automatic 75% anyway. The dent it made was minuscule. It was going to take two years to pay it off at the rate things were going. There was less than a week's worth of Candid Grandpa Archives to keep the audience engaged with the original theme, so while his hands were busy David activated the right seat dash cam and hit record for one last addition that he could utilize as a carrot and stick tease to get people to view the new material.

“Grandpa,” David said. “Do you know where we are going?”

“I know what that building is,” he said, staring straight ahead and wiping the drool off his own lip this time. His voice was almost a whisper and David had to activate the headrest mic to pick him up better. “It’s where I took my Lizzie when she got too sick to live at home. We did everything we could, but it just wasn’t enough.”

David watched on the dash screen as Grandpa’s eyes went to the hedges, the fire rising in him again.

“They’re transmitting from the trees, Mikey,” he said, putting his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “They’re watching us from the skies. Look at me, Mikey. Look at me.”

Tears streamed down both sides of his wrinkled face.

“Get out of this city, Mikey. Go to Texas. I’ll take care of your mother. You take care of yourself. Get to Texas at least—go further if you can. There’s not much time left, Mikey. You listen to me, you hear? I’ll be with you as soon as I can.”

David wanted to remind him that Michael was his father. They hadn't heard from him in nearly a decade. He wanted to say, "*He made it, Grandpa. We're not even sure if he's still alive. But he did make it to Texas.*" But more than that, he just wanted this day to be over, so he promised him that he would heed the admonition.

Grandpa seemed to take comfort in this and sat back in his seat, becoming quiet as they passed the Art District, where the hedges were carved into creatures and intermingled with abstract sculptures of every color.

"Your mother loves this place. It's her favorite place in the city."

He was smiling as they pulled up to the Paradise Medical Center, which helped David smile a little, too. They were greeted at the entrance by a man in khaki scrubs with a wheelchair. Grandpa fell asleep in the elevator on the way to the 21st floor. His snores filled the lobby of the Retirement Level as two nurses approached to collect David's signature.

"Is there anything else you would like to say to him at this time?" one of them asked.

David nodded and knelt before the old man and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Grandpa," he said.

"What? Huh?"

"Grandpa, you're going to be with Grandma now. I'll miss you more than you know."

"Who?"

"You're going to be with Lizzie, Grandpa. You're going to see your wife now."

He blinked a few times and scrunched his face.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he said.



David kissed his forehead, wiped the corners of his mouth and nodded to the nurses who wheeled him down the pale blue corridor. He was already snoring before they reached the swinging doors at the end.

The sun was not yet coming through the window next to the coffee station, but it cast the world it overlooked in magnificent relief. The University, the Library, the Art District, each framed by tall green hedges and luscious trees full of birds.

And beyond that the Suburban Tenements.

And beyond that the sprawling tent cities of the Pacific Coast Refugees.

And beyond that the desert.