



THEY EAT PUPPIES, DON'T THEY?

A NOVEL

CHRISTOPHER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF BOOMSDAY

BUCKLEY

THEY EAT PUPPIES, DON'T THEY?

A N O V E L

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY



T W E L V E

N E W Y O R K • B O S T O N



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For Katy

PLAYERS

WASHINGTON

Walter “Bird” McIntyre, defense lobbyist, would-be novelist

Myndi, his wife, an equestrienne

Bewks, his brother, feckless but amiable Civil War “living historian”

Chick Devlin, CEO, aerospace giant Groepping-Sprunt

Angel Templeton, directrix, Institute for Continuing Conflict, Washington, D.C., headquarters of interventionist Oreo-Con movement

Rogers P. Fancock, exhausted, put-upon director, National Security Council, the White House

Barney Strecker, profane, risk-taking deputy director for operations, CIA

President, United States of America

Winnie Chang, chair, U.S.-China Co-Dependency Council

Lev Melnikov, founder, chairman, and CEO, Internet giant EPIC

Chris Matthews, taciturn TV-talk-show host

BEIJING

Fa Mengyao, mild-mannered, tormented president, People’s Republic of China; general secretary, Chinese Communist Party

Gang, his loyal longtime aide

Lo Guowei, scary, sexually aggressive minister of state security, PRC

Han, constipated, bellicose general; minister of national defense, PRC

Politburo Standing Committee, CCP, various members, names too complicated to list

Zhang, retired admiral, People’s Liberation Navy; former minister of state security; mentor to Fa

Sun-tzu, long-dead but very much alive military theoretician and strategist

As to the escape of the Dalai Lama from Tibet, if we had been in your place, we would not have let him escape. It would be better if he were in a coffin.

—Nikita Khrushchev to Mao Zedong, 1959

Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.

—Sun-tzu

Om mani padme hum.

—Chenrezig

DUMBO

The senator from the great state of New York had been droning on for over five minutes; droning about drones.

Bird McIntyre sat in the first row behind his boss, the recipient of the senatorial cataract of words. He scribbled a note on a piece of paper and passed it forward.

Chick Devlin glanced at the note. He let the senator continue for several more mind-numbing minutes so as not to appear prompted by Bird's note. Finally, seizing on an ellipsis, he leaned forward into the microphone across the green-baize-covered table and said, "Senator, pardon my French, but isn't the whole *point* to scare the shit out of them?"

The committee collectively stiffened. One senator laughed. Several smiled or suppressed smiles; some pretended not to be amused; some were actually not amused. Not that it mattered: This was a closed hearing, no cameras or media in attendance.

"If I may, Senator," continued Devlin, chief executive officer of the aerospace giant Groepping-Sprunt, "the idea that a predator drone should be unobtrusive, some speck in the sky, so as not to alarm the general public..." He smiled and shook his head. "Forgive my asking, but who the heck wrote the specs for *that* paradigm? Look here, we're talking about a part of the world where one-third of the so-called general public are in their kitchens making IEDs to kill American soldiers. Another third are on the Internet recruiting suicide bombers. And the last third are on cell phones planning the next 9/11. These are the people we don't want to *alarm*?" He sat back in his chair, shaking his head in puzzlement. "Or am I missing something here?"

"Mr. *Dev lin*," said the senator, straining a bit obviously for the satanic homonym, "we are talking about a predator drone the size of a commercial airliner. Of a jumbo jet. A drone, by the way, that *may or may not*"—she jabbed an accusatory finger in the direction of the neat, blue-uniformed air force general sitting beside Devlin—"be nuclear-capable. I say 'may or may not' because I can't seem to get a straight answer from the air force."

The general leaned into his microphone to protest but was waved away by the senator before he could achieve takeoff.

"So I'm asking *you*, Mr. Devlin: What kind of signal does this send to the world? That the United States would launch these huge, unpiloted—"

"Sentinels."

"Sentinels? *Sentinels*? Come on, Mr. Devlin, these are killing machines. Not even H. G. Wells could have come up with something like this. Read your own specs. No, on second thought, allow me

The senator put on her bifocals and read aloud: "'Hellfire missiles, Beelzebub Gatling gun. Seven thousand rounds per second. Depleted-uranium armor-piercing projectiles. CBU's.' CBU's—that would be cluster bombs—"

"Senator," Devlin cut in, "Groepping-Sprunt did not make the world we live in. Groepping-Sprunt—if I may, *ma'am*—does not make U.S. foreign policy. That we leave to such distinguished public servants as yourself. What we do make are systems to help America cope with the challenges of the

world we inhabit.”

“Please don’t interrupt me, Mr. Devlin,” the senator shot back, returning to her reading material. “What about this so-called Adaptable Payload Package? ‘Adaptable Payload Package.’ There’s an ambiguous term if ever I heard one. No wonder it’s got General Wheary there talking out of both sides of his mouth.”

“Senator, if I might—” General Wheary tried again.

“No, General. You had your chance. Now I’m asking Mr. Devlin—for the last time—what kind of signal does it send to the world that we would deploy such an awful symbol, such a device—a device by the way you have the gall to designate ‘Dumbo.’ Dumbo!” she snorted. “Dumbo! This, sir, is a creature from hell.”

“Senator, with respect,” Devlin said, “the platform is designated MQ-9B. Dumbo is merely a…”

Bird McIntyre nodded thoughtfully, as if he were hearing the name Dumbo for the first time. In fact, the name was his suggestion. If the idea is to make a breathtakingly large and lethal killing machine (as the senator would say) sound less lethal, what better name than Disney’s cuddly pachyderm? Bird had considered “Cuddles,” but that seemed a bit much.

“... a nickname,” Devlin continued, “like, say, ‘Dragon Lady’ for the U-2 spy plane or BUFF, ‘Big Ugly Fat Fellow,’ for the B-52 bomber. Military vehicles all have nicknames. But as to your question—what kind of signal does it send? I would say the answer is—a serious signal. A very serious signal. If I for one were a member of the Taliban or Al-Qaeda or some other sworn enemy of freedom and the American Way, and I looked up from the table in my IED lab and saw Dumbo—if you prefer, the MQ-9B—blotting out the sun and preparing to obliterate me and introduce me to Allah, I believe I might just consider taking up another line of work.”

A murmur went through the committee.

Bird nodded, well pleased by his ventriloquism. Devlin’s speech was almost word for word from Bird’s briefing book—Tab “R.”

Groepping-Sprunt was Bird McIntyre’s largest account. And the Dumbo contract was a biggie—\$3.4 billion worth of appropriations. Bird had worked furiously on the public-awareness campaign. For the past several weeks, every TV watcher in the Greater Washington, D.C., Area, every newspaper or magazine reader, bus-stop passerby, Internet browser, sports spectator, and subway rider—all their eyeballs and ears had been assailed by messages showing Dumbo—MQ-9B—aloft, soaring through serene blue air high above the piney mountains of the California Sierra Nevada, looking for all the world like a great big friendly flying toy that might have dropped out of Santa’s sleigh. Bird had proposed painting the fuselage in a soothing shade of teal. Beneath the photo were these words:

DUMBO: CAN AMERICA AFFORD NOT TO DEPLOY HER?

The problem was money. The appropriations climate on Capitol Hill these days was brutal. The Pentagon was drowning in health-care costs, administration costs, war costs. Cutback time. They were even pensioning off admirals and generals. Not since the end of the Cold War had so many military been given the heave-ho: an aggregate of over three hundred stars so far.

Meanwhile, defense lobbyists were scrambling. In happier times, getting approval for a Dumbo-type program would have consisted of a couple of meetings, a few pro forma committee hearings, handshakes all round, and off to an early lunch. Now? Sisyphus had it easier.

On top of the “funding factor” (Washington-speak for “appalling cost overruns”), Bird and

Groeping-Sprunt were up against a bit of a “perception problem” (Washington-speak for “reality”). Dumbo, MQ-9B, Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse—whatever—was stark evidence that somewhere along the line Uncle Sam had quietly morphed into Global Big Brother. With wings. The proud American eagle now clutched in one talon the traditional martial arrows, in the other a remote control.

Perhaps, Senator, you’d prefer that we conduct war the old-fashioned way—having our boys blow up by roadside bombs while trying to instill Jeffersonian democracy door-to-door. “Hello? Excuse us, sorry to bust in on you like this, but we’re the United States military, and we’re here to read you the Bill of Rights. You wouldn’t be harboring any terrorists in here, would you? You’re not? Fantastic! Would you care for some sugarless gum?”

Bird jerked himself out of the reverie. He was exhausted. He told himself sternly, *Do not fall asleep in a Senate hearing!*

Uh-oh. The senator from the great state of—*damn*—Wisconsin, where approximately zero Dumbo components were manufactured, was now preparing to fire his own Hellfire missiles at Chick.

“What has it come to...” he began.

Bird suppressed a groan. He’d begged—begged—Chick to buy some Wisconsin-made component—anything—for Dumbo. *Tell him you’ll install an on-board Wisconsin dairy cow. Or dead cows. Why not? Didn’t they catapult diseased animals over the walls during sieges back in the Middle Ages?*

“... that the United States should resort to such”—he was shaking his head—“dreadful weapons as these?”

Bird thought, *What has it come to, Senator? You really want to know? I’ll tell you: This. It has come to—this. Our country is going broke. No, is already broke. And you know what? Everyone out there in this big, wide, nasty world is still trying to kill us. Or maybe word of this hasn’t yet reached Wisconsin? By the way, do you use oil in Wisconsin? You know, the kind we get from all those horrible countries in the Middle East? Or are you getting all your electricity from some other source? Wind? Solar? Methane from flatulent cows?*

Bird had anticipated this and had provided a primed hand grenade for Chick to toss back into the senator’s lap. It was in Tab “S,” highlighted in orange. Unlike some clients, Chick did his homework and it blessed him.

“Well, Senator,” Devlin said with just the right air of embarrassment, “frankly, when it comes to protecting our country, I for one would rather spend a dollar than an American life.”

Bird mentally high-fived. *Yesss.*

The committee voted 12–7 against funding the MQ-9B.

THAT NIGHT, AFTER AN epic number of drinks with Chick at the Bomb Bay Club, a favorite Washington haunt of defense contractors, Bird managed to crawl into a cab and make it back to his apartment across the river. Instead of collapsing into bed, he drunkenly banged out a highly misspelled, indignant statement on behalf of Groeping-Sprunt, wishing Wisconsin National Guard units serving in Iraq and Afghanistan “good luck over there—because your [sic] sure going to need it.”

Bird awoke the next morning with a Hiroshima-level hangover and the cold, prickly-sweat fear that he had hit Send before collapsing into the arms of Morpheus.

He dragged himself to his computer and with pounding heart checked the Sent folder.

Not there.

It was in the Drafts folder. *Thank you, God.*

He deleted it, swallowed a heroic quantity of ibuprofen—kidney damage was an acceptable risk—

and, like a mortally wounded raccoon, crawled back to bed, where he lay with poached tongue and throbbing skull, staring at the ceiling.

Somewhere above in the empyrean, Dumbo, answer to America's twenty-first-century security needs, flapped his wings one last time and tumbled, Icarus-like, from the sky.

BIRD

An unearthly sound—clarions, shrieking—summoned Bird from the land of the undead.

Gummily, his eyes opened.

The hellish sound continued.

As his wounded brain clawed its way back to consciousness, it dawned on him that it was his cell phone. The ringtone—opening bars of “Ride of the Valkyries”—announced his wife.

“Unh.” Valkyrie hooves pounded on his cerebellum.

“Well, *you* sound good.”

Myndi’s voice was an unhappy fusion of Gidget and marine drill sergeant. He looked at his watch. Not yet 7:00 a.m.; she’d have been up since four-thirty, training.

“Went out with... Chick... after... the...” It emerged a croak, the words forming letter by letter, syllable by syllable, Morse tappings from the radio room of a sinking vessel. “... vote. We... lost.”

“I saw,” she said in a scoldy tone, as if to suggest that Bird obviously hadn’t put his all into it. She added, “I suppose this is going to have an effect on the stock price?”

He thought, *Yes, darling. It will in all likelihood have an effect on the stock price.*

“Walter,” she said—Myndi refused to call him “Bird,” hated the name—“we need to talk.” Surely the unhappiest words in any marriage. *We need to talk.*

“We are,” Bird observed.

“Why don’t you have some coffee, darling. I need you to process.”

Process. How she loved that word.

“I’m processing. What?”

“I’ll call you back in ten minutes. Make it fifteen. That’ll give you time for a nice hot shower.” She hung up, doubtless having activated her stopwatch.

Walter “Bird” McIntyre blinked his eyelids at the ceiling. It looked down on him with disdain.

He rose unsteadily and confronted the full, blazing glare of the morning sun through the floor-to-ceiling glass panels. He shrank like a vampire caught out past the dawn.

Bird called his condo the “Military-Industrial Duplex.” A flip-pant nickname, to be sure. It was in Rosslyn, Virginia, on the once-Confederate side of the Potomac River. The compensation for the unfashionable zip code was a truly spectacular view of the nation’s capital. This time of year, the sun rose directly behind the great dome of the Capitol Building, casting a long, patriotic shadow across the Mall—America’s front yard. Myndi, seeing the view for the first time, sniffed, “It’s nice, darling, but a bit of a cliché.”

Coffee. Must. Have.

At least, he reflected with what little self-congratulation he could muster in his debased state, he hadn’t yet reached the point where he needed a snort of booze to get himself going again in the morning.

His computer screen was on. He remembered the (thankfully) unsent e-mail with a shudder of relief and mechanically went about the rituals of caffeination, acting as his own combo barista/EMT.

The Valkyries shrieked anew. Apparently his fifteen minutes had elapsed. *For God's sake...*

Myndi had been unamused to learn the ringtone he'd chosen to announce her calls. *Really, darling*

Passive-aggressive, are we?

He decided—manfully, mutinously—not to answer. He smiled defiantly. Whatever she had in store for him this morning, it could wait until his system had been injected with piping-hot Kenyan stimulant.

He wondered idly, what could it be this time? Another termite-rotted column? Peckfuss the caretaker drunk again?

He didn't care. He would call back. Yes. *Muahahaha!* He would... pretend he'd been in the show

He poured his coffee and sat before the laptop, pressed the buttons to launch the cybergenies of news.

Post: SENATE KILLS DUMBO

Times: SUPERDRONE DIES IN SENATE COMMITTEE

Bird wondered how Chick's hangover was coming along. Or whether he had even made it back to his hotel. Was he lying facedown in the Reflecting Pool across from the Lincoln Memorial, dead, another casualty of the appropriations process? It was a distinct possibility. Chick had defiantly switched to tequila at some point after 1:00 a.m. Always a smart move at the tail end of a long evening of drinking.

Bird maneuvered the cursor to the desktop folder marked ARM.EXFIL. He clicked open CHAP.17 and read a few paragraphs as the Valkyries shrieked anew.

"Brace for impact!" Turk shouted above the high-pitched scream of the failing engines.

Bird considered. He inserted *through gritted teeth* after *shouted*. Yes. Better. But then he wondered: can one in fact shout through gritted teeth? Bird gritted his teeth and tried to shout "Brace for impact!" but it came out sounding vaguely autistic.

The ARM.EXFIL folder contained the latest in the McIntyre oeuvre, his current novel in progress titled *The Armageddon Exfiltration*. This was the third in his Armageddon trilogy. The first two novels—which had not succeeded in finding a publisher—were *The Armageddon Infiltration* and *The Armageddon Immolation*.

It was the literary output of nearly a decade now. He'd started when he went to work right out of college at a Washington public-relations firm specializing in the defense industry. During the day he wrote copy and press releases urging Congress to pony up for the latest and shiniest military hardware. But the nights belonged to him. He banged away on novels full of manly men with names like Turk and Rufus, of terrible yet really cool weapons, of beautiful but deadly women with names like Tatiana and Jade, who could be neither trusted nor resisted. Heady stuff.

He treated his girlfriends to readings over glasses of wine.

The mushroom cloud rose like an evil plume of mycological smoke over the Mall in Washington. The presidential helicopter, Marine One, yawed frantically as its pilot, Major Buck "Turk" McMaster, grappled furiously with the collective stick—

"'Yawed frantically?'" the girlfriend interrupted. "What's that?"

Bird would smile. Women just didn't get the technology, did they? But then Bird had to admit that he didn't get the women writers. Danielle Steel, Jane Austen, that sort.

"It's when a plane does like this." Bird demonstrated, rotating a flat palm around an imaginary

vertical axis.

“Isn’t it a helicopter?”

“Same principle.”

“ ‘Yawed frantically.’ Okay, but it sounds weird.”

“It’s a technical term, Claire.”

“What’s ‘mycological smoke’?”

“A mushroom cloud. ‘Mycological’? Adjective from mushroom?”

Claire shrugged. “Okay.”

“What’s the matter with it?”

“No, it’s fine. It’s lovely.”

Bird put down the manuscript. “Claire. It’s not supposed to be ‘lovely.’ There’s nothing ‘lovely’ about a twenty-five-kiloton thermonuclear device that’s just detonated in the Jefferson Memorial.”

“No, I guess not.”

“They have to get the president to the airborne command center. Every second is—”

Claire yawned, frantically. “I could go for sushi.”

Again the Valkyries shrieked.

“Hello, Myn.”

“*Walter*. I’ve been *calling*.”

“Sorry. Just vomiting up blood.”

“What?”

“I was in the shower. You said you needed my brain to work. So it can process. Okay. We are go for neuron function. On one. Three, two, one. Initiate neuron function. Whazzup?”

“It’s Lucky Strike.”

Oh, God...

Myndi launched into what Bird estimated would be a three-, maybe four-minute disquisition. He didn’t want to listen to any of it, but he understood that to interrupt an equine medical diagnosis would open him to a charge of indifference in the first degree. He let his head tilt back at a stoical angle.

“So Dr. Dickerson said I absolutely have to stay off her until the tendon is fully healed. *Walter*? *Walter*, are you listening to any of this?”

Tendon. That word. How Bird hated that word. It had cost him tens—perhaps even hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years. There were other equine anatomical terms that made him shudder: *scapulohumeral joint*, *fetlock joint*, *coffin bone*— but he reserved a special odium for *tendon*.

“Really, it comes down to a moral issue.”

Bird had been fantasizing about dog-food factories and the excellent work they do.

“Whoa, Myn. Did you say ‘moral issue’?”

“Yes. If I keep riding her instead of giving the tendon time to heal... *Walter*, am I not getting through to you? If the tendon goes...” Was that a *gasp* he heard? “... I don’t even want to think about that.”

“Myn.” Bird sighed. “This is not a good time.”

“Do you want me to call you back?”

“No, sweetheart. I’m talking about... You saw the news this morning?”

“*Walter*. The speed competitions are six weeks away.” Pause. “All right—so what do *you* think I should do?”

Bird massaged his left temple. “I take it you’ve already priced a... replacement... animal?”

“It’s a *horse*, *Walter*. *Sam*”—another word that always induced a shudder: her trainer; or rather

enabler—“says there’s a superb nine-year-old filly over at Dollarsmith.”

“Don’t tell me. Is this one related to Seabiscuit, too?”

“If she were, Walter, she certainly wouldn’t be going for such a bargain price. The bloodlines are stunning. The House of Windsor doesn’t have bloodlines like this.”

Bloodlines. Noun, plural: 1. qualities likely to bankrupt. 2. hideously expensive genetic tendencies.

“Myn.”

“Yes, darling?”

“How much is this nag going to cost me?”

“Well, as I say, with those bloodlines—”

“Myn.”

“Two twenty-five?”

A new pain presented—as doctors would say—behind Bird’s eyeballs.

“But we’ll need to move fast,” Myn added. “Sam says the Kuwaiti ambassador was over there the other day sniffing around.”

Despite his pain, Bird found the image of a Kuwaiti ambassador “sniffing around stables” grimly amusing.

“Baby. Mercy. Please.”

“Walter,” she said sternly, “I assure you I’m not any happier than you about this.”

“But surely it’s possible I’m more unhappy about it than you.”

“What? Oh, never mind. Look—we agreed when I decided to try out for the team that we were going to do this together.”

This, it occurred to him, was Myn’s concept of ‘together’: She’d compete for a place on the U.S. Equestrian Team and he would write checks.

“I know we did, darling. But what *we* didn’t know when *we* embarked, *together*, on *our* quest for equestrian excellence was that the stock market would dive like a submarine, taking the economy with it, and defense spending. Defense spending? You remember, the thing that makes our standard of living possible? I am looking out the window. I see defense lobbyists all over town, leaping from buildings. Myn? Oh, Myn-di?”

Silence. He knew it well. Betokening The Gathering Storm.

Finally, “So your answer is no?”

He could see her now: pacing back and forth across the tack room in jodhpurs, mice and other small animals scurrying in terror, sawdust flying. In the distance a whinny of tendinitis-related pain coming from the stricken Lucky Strike. “Lucky”? Ha. Myndi would have unbanned her honey-colored hair, causing it to tumble over her shoulders. She was beautiful. A figure unruined by parturition. Didn’t want children—“not just yet, darling,” a demurrer now in its, what, eighth year? Pregnancy would mean months out of the saddle. Bird was okay with the arrangement. He had to grant: the sex *was* pretty great. One day in the dentist’s office, browsing the latest unnecessary bulletin about Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles, Bird read that the Duchess of Cornwall—“like many women who love to ride”—was great in the sack. Who knew?

What point was there in struggling?

“Have Sam call me,” Bird said. The left side of his brain immediately signaled, *Dude. You’re already broke, and you just okayed a quarter million dollars’ worth of new hoof? Are you out of your*

mind? Wimp! Pussy! Fool!

“Thank you,” Myn said, a bit formally, Bird thought. Maybe she didn’t want to sound too appreciative when really all he was doing was living up to his side of the bargain. Right?

It was a bit late to try to salvage the remains of his manhood, so he said, “I don’t know if the bank’s going to go for it. I wouldn’t if I were the bank.”

“Things will turn around, darling,” Myn said. “They always do. And you’re brilliant at what you do.”

“All right. But I get Lucky Strike.”

“Why would you want Lucky Strike?” she asked suspiciously.

“For the barbecue this weekend.”

“What?”

“Aren’t we having Blake and Lou Ann over on Saturday for a barbecue? At this rate, we can’t afford beef. They say horse meat’s tasty, but you have to cook it slowly.”

“Really, Walter. That’s in appalling taste.”

But her tone was playful, frisky. And why not—she’d just scored a new horse.

“Call Sam, darling,” she said. “I have to go deal with Peckfuss. There’s an awful smell coming from the woods. And you have to do something about his teeth. I just can’t bear to look at him anymore. It’s revolting.”

“Whoa. Choose: new horse or Peckfuss’s dentition.”

“See you Friday. Oh—don’t forget the sump pump. They’re holding it for me at Strosnidors.”

So now Bird had his to-do list for the rest of the week: (1) Borrow \$225,000. (2) Pick up sump pump for the basement, which had now been flooding since, oh, 1845. (3) Peckfuss’s dentition. All the elements of a terrific weekend.

Myn had always wanted a place in the country. The real estate agent who’d sold it to them had said perhaps even truthfully, that Sheridan’s troops had looted it and tried to burn it down.

“And do you know, it was the *slaves* who saved it!”

Bird thought, *Oh, really?* This was the third house in the area they’d been shown that had allegedly been saved by devoted darkies. He wondered—it was surely a logical question: Why would slaves risk their lives to save the Massa’s house? *Oh, never mind.* The agents also delighted in pointing out score marks, supposedly mementos of General Sheridan’s slave-thwarted arsons.

It was a lovely old house, though, on 110 acres and at the end of a long, winding oak-lined driveway. Stables, barn, willow trees, trout stream—source of much of the flooding.

The original name was Upton. After a few years of paying bills, Bird renamed it Upkeep. When his mother’s Alzheimer’s progressed to the critical point, he moved her in—not in the least to Myndi’s liking. One night Mother was found wandering the hallways in her peignoir, holding a lit candelabra.

“Sort of perfect, in a Southern-gothic kind of way, don’t you think?” Bird said, trying to put a good face on it. When Myndi didn’t bite, he added, “Or is it just another cliché?”

“Walter. She’s going to burn the place down. With us in it. You have to do something.”

The caretaker, Peckfuss, volunteered his daughter, Belle, to keep nocturnal vigil over Mother. Bird felt sorry for Belle. She had five children, each of whom, insofar as he could tell, had been sired by a different migrant worker. Belle’s amplitude—she weighed in at about three hundred pounds—put a strain on the ancient staircase. At night Bird and Myndi would listen, holding their breath, as the staircase groaned beneath Belle’s *avoirdupois*. Bird playfully proposed to Myndi an arrangement whereby Belle could be winched up to the third floor with block and tackle. But dear, sweet, kind Belle was an ideal companion. She’d sit by Mother’s bed through the night, consuming frozen cakes,

watching reality-TV shows. Her favorite was a showcase piece of American programming imbecility called *1,000 Stupid Ways to Die*. One night Bird found them both watching an episode that re-created the demise of a man who had sought to conceal from the police a canister of pepper gas—in his lower colon. Mother was riveted. Bird thought sadly of the days when Mother read to him and his younger brother, Bewks, from *The Wind in the Willows*. When her condition deteriorated further, the impecunious Bewks moved in to help. Bird loved Bewks. Bewks's great passion was "living history," the term preferred by its practitioners to "reenacting" or "dressing up in period military costumes and playing war."

As it happened, Bewks's period was the Civil War. His specific adopted persona was that of a Confederate colonel of cavalry. Nutty as it all was, Bird conceded that Bewks cut a neat, dashing figure as he clumped along the porch in his cavalry boots, tunic, and saber. He styled his hair long, after the windblown look of George Armstrong Custer, hero of Gettysburg and Little Big Horn.

How Mother's brain processed Bewks's 19th-century appearance, Bird could only guess. For her part, Myn found him "odd." But Bewks knew his way around a stable and was a bit of a horse whisperer himself, so he and Myn could talk about tendons. Myndi was far too smart to let condescension get in the way of convenience.

Sitting on the porch of a summer evening with an old-fashioned in hand, watching the sun set over the Shenandoah and turn the fields purple, Bird reflected on his fortune: a trophy wife, candelabra-wielding mother, staircase-threatening caregiver, saber-wielding brother, dentally and mentally challenged caretaker, crumbling house, money-sucking mortgage, dwindling bank account.

If he was not from these parts himself, Bird felt at such halcyon moments that he was at least a reasonable facsimile of a Southern gentleman. He smiled at the thought that just the other day an impersonal letter had arrived notifying him that Upkeep's mortgage was now held by a bank in Shanghai. So if he wasn't an authentic Southerner, he was at least an authentic American, which is to say, in hock up to his eyeballs to the Chinese.

TAURUS

Bird emerged from the chill interior of Groepping-Sprunt's corporate jet into the Turkish-steam-bath heat of Alabama.

For the umpteenth time, he wished Al Groepping and Willard Sprunt had built their first rockets in a more temperate clime. Years of visits to corporate headquarters in Missile Gap had taught Bird to limit his outdoor exposure to sprints between air-conditioned spaces. But it wasn't the heat that was troubling him most just now.

Yesterday there had arrived from Chick Devlin a terse e-mail summons slugged URGENT. Bird knew that layoffs would follow the Dumbo shoot-down. Was his own head on the chopping block? Losing Groepping as a client would be... well, disastrous.

Chick was not his usual grinning self. He barely looked up from his desk when Bird entered. Bird braced to hear, *Sorry, pal, but this isn't going to be easy...*

"Coffee?" Chick said, mustering a brief, perfunctory grin. "I swear I'm still hungover from last week. Why in the name of all that is holy and good did you let me start drinking tequila at that time of night?"

"I tried to stop you," Bird said, "but you seemed intent on suicide."

"Felt like roadkill. So guess who I just got off the phone with? Lev Melnikov. Man, oh, man, is he one pissed-off Russian."

Melnikov was chief executive officer and chairman of the Internet giant EPIC. And he had recently thrown a tantrum of (indeed) epic proportions over China's censorship and hacking of his operations there. In a retaliatory snit, he'd pulled EPIC out of the country.

"I imagine he would be a tad displeased," Bird said. "It's not every day you lose two or three hundred million customers."

"Weird thing is how personally he's taking it. That's unlike him. Lev's a nerd. Nerds don't get emotional."

"You're a nerd," Bird said. "You get emotional."

Chick grinned. "Only about our stock price. Hell, Lev Melnikov's got more money than God. But you got to remember about Lev—he grew up in Soviet Russia. He doesn't like getting jerked around by a bunch of Commies."

"Commies." Bird smiled. "Ah, for the good old days of the Cold War. Course, I'm way too young to remember all that. More your era."

"Lev was about thirteen or fourteen when he and his folks got out. But he remembers what it was like, growing up scared, waiting to hear that three a.m. knock on the door, KGB hauling your daddy off to the gulag."

"And now he's an American citizen worth twenty billion dollars. The only midnight knock on his door he needs to worry about is the IRS. Tell him to chill. Buy a football team. That'll take his mind off Chinese *Commies*." Bird set his coffee cup down on the glass with a clunk. "Okay, I guess that's enough small talk. So, why did you drag my sorry ass down here to this swamp? Give it to me straight."

up. Am I getting the boot?"

Chick sighed. "Bird, I had to lay off three hundred people this morning."

"I don't like to hear that, Chick."

"Three hundred people. Three hundred, times all their families. So many lives. You run the nums. may be an engineer, but let me tell you, today my heart is hurting."

"I know it is," Bird said. *Chick, pull the trigger. Put me out of my misery here.*

"Dumbo," Chick mused. "What a beautiful weapons platform. Want to talk about lives? How many lives would Dumbo have saved?"

"Don't go there, Chick. Don't. We did what we could. There wasn't one thing more we could've done. Short of getting up from that table and strangling a few key senators."

Chick leaned forward across the glass coffee table. "You know, it's too bad *they* weren't in charge of Union army appropriations during the War of Northern Aggression. We'd have won."

"Chick," Bird said, "you grew up in Pennsylvania. You went to MIT. You're not Southern any more than I am. You explained to me some time ago why you do the Southern-patois thing, to get along down here and all that. But is it really necessary to call it the 'War of Northern Aggression' when you're talking to me?"

Chick shrugged. "Habit, I guess. Sort of seeps into the wetware. Marcia's always getting on me about it."

"Whatever. Long as you don't start telling me what a great actor John Wilkes Booth was." *Meanwhile, Bird thought, please get to the point? Am I being fired?*

"At the rate we're going, we'll be fighting our enemies with slingshots. Rocks. Clubs. God almighty."

"I know," Bird said sympathetically. "Makes you want to curl up in the fetal position."

Chick said, "Got something for you, Birdman."

Bird's buttock muscles unclenched. Had the moment of danger passed? "I'm right here."

"It's big."

"I love big."

"Can't tell you a whole hell of a lot about it."

Bird made a face. "Don't tell me that, Chick. Don't tell me that."

"No, listen to me, now. This thing's more sensitive than a stripper's nipple. As of right now, there aren't more than a half dozen people on the planet know about it. Including you-know-who." You-know-who was Chick-speak for the president of the United States.

"What am I going to do?" Bird said. "Post it on Facebook? Tweet? How long have I been working for you?"

The answer was six years, ever since Bird got Chick's attention with his campaign for Groepping's HX-72 stealth helicopter: "Under the Radar but on Top of the Situation."

"I can tell you this much," Chick said. "Once this baby's up and running and online, the American people are going to sleep a lot more soundly."

Bird waited for more.

"Really?" he said finally. "A new sleeping pill. I had no idea Groepping was in the pharmaceutical business. Why didn't I get that memo?"

Chick sighed. "All right." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "It's about China."

Bird stared.

"That's all you're going to get out of me," Chick said. "Waterboard me. Go ahead. You won't get any more out of me."

“China,” Bird said. “Americans will sleep better. Well, that narrows it. Okay. So, what exactly is it you want me to do with this cornucopia of information? Want me to get cranking on a press release? ‘Groeping-Sprunt Announces Top Secret Initiative to Help Americans Sleep Better. Has Something to Do with China’ ”?

“Damn it, Bird. Okay, but this is all you’re going to get out of me. Don’t you dare ask me for more. The project’s code name is Taurus.”

“Taurus. Taurus as in bull?”

Chick looked at him earnestly. “This is the real deal, Birdman. I’m talking Manhattan Project stuff. Twenty-second century. This thing’d give the Lord himself a case of the shits.”

Bird was impressed by Chick’s intensity. “Guess I’ll have to take it on faith. But could you give me some guidance here?”

“I was getting to that. We’ve got to loosen things up with Appropriations. But if you so much as say the word *China* on Capitol Hill, they start running for cover. They’re more nervous about China than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.”

“Well,” Bird said, “China *is* more or less financing our economy. Not that I don’t hate them much as the next person. Commie swine.”

“I’m thinking,” Chick said, “that maybe it’s time to put the ‘Red’ back in Red China.”

“Red China,” Bird mused aloud. “It’s been a while since we called it that, hasn’t it?”

“Last time I checked, their flag was flaming Communist red. Yes, I believe the time has come to educate the great big dumb American public—God love them—to educate them about the...”—Chick paused, as if searching for just the right word—“the peril we as a nation face from a nation of one point three billion foreigners.”

Bird stared.

Chick said, “Wasn’t it Charles de Gaulle who said, ‘China is a big country, full of Chinese’?”

“If he didn’t, he should have,” Bird said, not entirely sure where this was going.

“Bird, we need to educate the American people as to the true nature of the threat we face. If we can do that, then those limp dicks and fainting hearts and imbeciles in the United States Congress—God love *them*— will follow.”

Bird nodded thoughtfully. *What the hell was Chick talking about?* He said, “Is there a particular threat that you had in mind? Or is it more just... the principle of the thing?”

Chick shrugged. “That’s where you come in, Bird. You’ve always had a genius for putting your finger on the nub of a situation. What about world domination? I don’t suppose I want to live in a world dominated by the heirs of Mao Zedong.”

“World domination,” Bird said. “Yes, that is sort of a grim prospect, isn’t it?”

Chick patted Bird on the knee. “There. We’re on the same page.”

“Chick,” Bird said. “Just so’s I’m clear here—are you wanting me to go rustle you up some anti-China sentiment?”

Chick smiled. “You have a way with words, my friend. Guess that’s why we pay you so damn much.” He rose. “I like you, Birdman. With you I never feel like I have to dance around a thing. The way I do with so many of you Washington types.”

You Washington types. Bird thought, *What a compliment.*

“That’s nice of you to say, Chick. Nice of you to say.”

“A practical matter,” Chick said. “I’m thinking it might look better if you weren’t on our payroll.”

Bird said, “Not sure if I’m still with you there, General.”

“Once you start spraying ‘China Sucks!’ graffiti on that Great Wall of theirs, it might look funny

we're still your client. Helen Keller could connect those dots."

"Not that I don't love our military-industrial complex on its merits," Bird said, "but are you proposing that I whip up all this anti-Chinese fervor for you pro bono? Because those are the saddest two words in the English language."

"Pro bono is Latin." Chick smiled.

"So is 'Et tu, Brute.' "

"*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. You know what that means? 'How sweet it is to die for one's country.' "

"A fine sentiment," Bird said. "Now, don't get me wrong. I love my country. I love Groepping-Sprunt. I love you—in a heterosexual way. If I were of the gay persuasion, I have no doubt that I would be attracted to you physically. I would want you to be my civil partner and for us to adopt an African orphan. But I have a roof that leaks, a barn that leaks, and mouths to feed. Oh, and did I mention the new horse that my wife informs me she cannot live without? Do you know anything about tendons? Has Groepping considered getting into *that* market? Because never mind drones—there is a real killing waiting to be made in horse tendons."

"Bird. Re-lax. Wasn't suggesting that you work without compensation. I know how it is. I know you've got your own antebellum Tara out there in horse country. How is that fine-looking wife of yours? She *is* a stunner. She ought to be on the cover of one of those magazines like *Town & Country*. She really going for the gold? That is impressive, truly."

"She's going for my gold," Bird said. "What's left of it."

"You be sure to give her my best. That brother of yours—he still dressing up like Stonewall Jackson?"

"It's more of a modified Custer. But yes, Bewks is still doing his living history. And helping out with Mother. That would be the Mother with Alzheimer's? You're catching my subtle drift, here, Chief?"

"Loud and clear." Chick chuckled. "I read you five by five. Don't you worry. We will make you whole. More than whole."

"I was an English major," Bird said. "You being the science guy, tell me, is it mathematically possible to make someone more than whole? Isn't whole a hundred percent?"

Chick gave a dismissive wave. "We'll set up some foundation. That way you'll be technically working for it." He smiled. "Instead of the old military-industrial complex, God bless it."

"So long as it's kosher, legally," Bird said. "They're sending my type off to jail about every fifteen minutes now. 'Lobbyist Gets Five Years' doesn't even make the front page anymore. It's back there with the crossword puzzle and the certified-preowned-car ads."

"Legal is good." Chick slapped Bird on the shoulder. "I'm for legal. All right now, Birdman, you get yourself back to Gomorrah-on-the-Potomac and open me up a can of whoop-ass on Beijing. I want to see angry crowds outside their embassy. Flags burning. Signs. 'No more Tiananmens! Hands Off Taiwan!' 'Tibet for the Tibetans!' I want..." Chick's voice trailed off. His face had taken on a strange dreamy look.

"Nice speech," Bird said. "Reminds me of that Leni Riefenstahl movie about the Nuremberg rally. Good old fashioned patriotism."

"Okay. So I get a little carried away when it comes to our national security."

"Have you tried Xanax?"

"Your country is depending on you, Birdman."

A FEW DAYS LATER, back at his office in D.C., Bird sent out two press releases.

The first announced that after many excellent and productive years together, McIntyre Strategies and Groepping-Sprunt had amicably decided to “pursue exciting new challenges.” The second said that Bird was forming a foundation called Pan-Pacific Solutions, “focusing on national security and Far Eastern issues.” It seemed a vague enough description.

This done, Bird holed up in the Military-Industrial Duplex and immersed himself in a crash course on China. He bulldozed—and dozed—through books and periodicals, went online, read scholarly monographs by eminent Sinologists. Surely somewhere in all this he would find the key to the—what was the word Chick used?—*threat*. Yes. The unnerving specter that would cause America to snap-to out of its coma of complacency and tremble.

Surely there was something. But... what?

After days of eyeball-glazing study and Googling, the new Red Menace was proving elusive.

Not that China wasn't potentially scary. Or even already scary. The Communist Party controlled every aspect of life. It made Big Brother look like Beaver Cleaver. It was implacable, ruthless. The government lost no sleep driving tanks over students and Tibetan monks. It tortured and executed tens of thousands of “serious criminals” a year. It cozied up to and played patty-cake with some of the vilest regimes on earth—Zimbabwe, North Korea, Sudan, Iran, Venezuela; poured millions of tons of ozone-devouring chemicals into the atmosphere; guzzled oil by the billions of barrels, all while remaining serenely indifferent to world opinion. But apart from a few forlorn Falun Gong protesters outside Chinese embassies or self-immolating Tibetan monks, where was the outrage?

As for world domination? Well, to be sure, China was clearly intent on becoming *daguo* (a new word in Bird's vocabulary), a “great power.” But it was going about achieving this goal in a relatively quiet, deliberate, and businesslike way. It was hard, really, to put any kind of definite *face* on China. The old Soviet Union, with its squat, warty leaders banging their shoes on the UN podium and threatening thermonuclear extinction, all those vodka-swollen, porcine faces squinting from under sable hats atop Lenin's Tomb as nuclear missiles rolled by like floats in a parade from hell—those Commies at least *looked* scary. But on the rare occasion when the nine members of China's Politburo Standing Committee, the men who ruled 1.3 billion people—one-fifth of the world's population—lined up for a group photo, they looked like a delegation of identical, overpaid dentists. This was no reflexive racist stereotyping. Bird actually read that they all dyed their pompadours the identical shade of black. (Individual grooming statements were, apparently, not the rage among the party elite.) They *wanted* all to look alike; in a way, a statement of ultimate egalitarianism. After days of studying photographs of the individual Politburo members, Bird still could barely tell one from another; though the one in charge of state security did at least look like a malevolent overpaid dentist.

Further confounding Bird's attempt to locate the envenomed needle in this immense haystack was the fact that America had gotten itself a serious China habit. It couldn't buy enough Chinese goods, sell Chinese banks enough Treasury bills. Absent some really serious provocation, the U.S. government was in no position to tsk-tsk or wag its finger at Beijing over Taiwan or Tibet. As for human rights, forget it. A nonstarter.

ONE NIGHT TOWARD THE END of Bird's weeklong cram, eyes veinous with fatigue, central nervous system fizzing like a downed power line from caffeine and MSG (Chinese takeout—why not?), Bird laid down his books and decided—enough. He showered, went out and bought a juicy red New York steak and a seventy-five-dollar bottle of fat, fleshy burgundy, and took the night off.

He grilled his steak and drank his wine and turned on the TV. *Boring In* was on—Washington’s thoughtful weekly show about policy and policy makers, perfect to watch with one eye. On any given Friday, its guests consisted of a former member of the Council of Economic Advisers and a current assistant deputy undersecretary of something, mumbling knowledgeably at each other about Argentina wheat-import quotas. The show could just as well be called *Boring*, but Bird had a soft spot for it. He had been invited on once, and it had considerably raised his public profile. The guest opposite him that night was a formerly famous movie actor who had become virulently antimilitary after playing the role of a morally demented submarine captain who uses pods of innocent whales as targets for torpedo practice.

The actor, a voluble sort of the type who refers to distinguished U.S. officials as “mass murderers” or “serial killers,” became so enraged by Bird’s well-reasoned defense of the defense industry that he called him “an evil pig” and expressed the hope that Bird would die from a “morphine-resistant form of cancer.” Bird merely smiled and replied, “I guess we’ll have to put you down as ‘Undecided, leaning against.’ ” This drove the actor into a spittle-flecked frenzy of four-letter invective. Lively stuff by the standards of *Boring In*, certainly. *Washingtonian* magazine included Bird that year in its annual list of “Washington’s Ten Least Despicable Lobbyists.”

He forked another lovely morsel of steak into his mouth.

So who was on *Boring* tonight? Angel Templeton. Well, now. She was worth watching with both eyes.

ANGEL

Tall, blond, buff, leggy, miniskirted: Angel Templeton was hardly your typical Washington think-tank policy wonk.

For the cover of her most recent book, *The Case for Preemptive War: Taking the “Re-” Out of Retaliation*, she posed in a red, white, and blue latex dominatrix outfit. With riding crop. But if readers purchased the book for this reason alone, then the joke was on them, for it itself was a thoughtfully-argued, well-researched, and extravagantly footnoted argument for vigorous, indeed, continuous, U.S. military intervention throughout the world.

Ms. Templeton held a Ph.D. from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, had worked on the staff of the National Security Council, and had served as deputy director of policy planning at the Pentagon. A lustrous résumé, to be sure. She was currently chair of the prestigious, if controversial, Institute for Continuing Conflict. If her flair for publicity raised eyebrows at the Council on Foreign Relations or among the Nobel laureates sipping bouillon at the Cosmos Club, it brought her regular appearances on TV, considerable sales, and five-figure speaking fees.

Tonight on *Boring In*, Angel’s opposite number was a Princeton professor famous for having written a book comparing America to Rome (as in “*Decline and Fall*”). He was not enjoying himself, for Angel was playfully tromping all over his elegant references to Livy and Tacitus with her Jimmy Choo shoes.

“You know,” she said with a coy, embarrassed smile, as if to suggest she was only being polite in not mentioning that the professor had been caught engaging in unnatural sex acts with manatees, “it’s nice you’ve found yourself a cushy penthouse apartment up there in the old ivory tower, where you can grind out books about what a crummy, second-rate nation our country is.”

The professor glared at Angel with owlish contempt. “That’s not what my book says. Not at *all* what my—”

“I see,” she interrupted, “that you decided to save money on a fact-checker.”

“What are you implying?”

“Not implying anything.” Angel smiled. “I’m stating for a fact—oops, the F-word again!—that the only thing you managed to get correct in the entire book was the semicolon on page four seventy-three.”

“This is—”

“But it doesn’t really matter. It’s not like anyone’s actually going to read it. It’s really a pseudointellectual coffee-table ornament. A way of telling your guests, ‘I hate America, too.’ ”

“I didn’t come on this show to listen to insults.”

“Oh, come on, Professor,” she said kittenishly. “I’m not insulting you. I’m simply pointing out the central message of your book is that America can no longer afford to defend itself against its enemies. So we might as well just throw in the towel.”

“That is a *complete* perversion of my argument.”

“Some would say that the real perversion is your idea that America is finito as a world power.

Look, I'm sure it may play with the dewy-eyed freshmen in the cushy groves of academe but here in the real world—and I'm sorry to be the one to break this to you—great nations don't just roll over and play dead. They fight.”

“You obviously didn't read my book.”

“No, I actually did,” Angel said with a laugh, “but I had to keep my feet in a bucket of ice water. I know that academic prose is supposed to be boring, but hats off to you. You've taken it to a whole new level.”

THE INSTITUTE FOR CONTINUING CONFLICT is on Massachusetts Avenue, off Dupont Circle in a house that appropriately enough was once the residence of Theodore Roosevelt, who as secretary of the navy did so much to usher in the dawn of American imperialism. The building's nickname among those who worked in it was “Casa Belli.”

Standing in the marble lobby, waiting for Angel's assistant to collect him, Bird studied the inscription above the gracefully curved grand staircase, chiseled into marble and leafed in bright gold.

Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice.

—Barry Goldwater

Bird felt nervous. He had met Angel Templeton a few times on the cocktail circuit. He found her intimidating. Well, she *was* intimidating. Angel's legend was well known around town. During her tour of duty at the Pentagon, she had been romantically involved with two generals and an admiral. The admiral was on the staff of the Joint Chiefs. Mrs. Admiral was less than thrilled to learn about the affair and made a scene that resulted in the admiral's being reassigned to sea duty. Angel had never married. She was the single mother of an eight-year-old son named—Barry. Despite her reputation as a man-eater, Angel was by all accounts a devoted mother, a regular at parent-teacher conferences.

Bird studied the contents of a glass case in the lobby, books by ICC resident scholars and fellows: *The Case For Permanent War. Retreat, Hell: Assertiveness in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1812 to 2003. Giving War a Chance. Pax Americana: You Got a Problem with That? Double Stuff: The Rise of the Oreo-Con Movement. How America Can Keep from Becoming France—and Why It Must.*

The Institute for Continuing Conflict was headquarters for the so-called Oreo-Cons—“Hard on the outside, soft on the inside.” Hard because they were unapologetic advocates of American military muscle. Soft because their domestic politics were for the most part laissez-faire; Oreo-Cons didn't really care what presidents and the Congress did so long as they kept the Pentagon and the armed forces well funded and engaged abroad, preferably in hand-to-hand combat.

Oreo-Con critics, of whom there were no small number, thought them a shifty and largely self-satisfied bunch. Oreo-Cons had the uncanny knack of distancing themselves from failure. When one of their foreign interventions backfired, it was always someone else's fault. *The idea was sound. It was the execution that was flawed.* For a group that had gotten America into one tar pit of a quagmire after another, Oreo-Cons were awfully blithe. Not for them, dwelling on disasters. No. Pass the ammo, pass the hors d'oeuvres, and on to the next calamity! Their current agitation was for a preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, preferably with nuclear weapons. Slam dunk!

“Mr. McIntyre?”

Bird turned.

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