

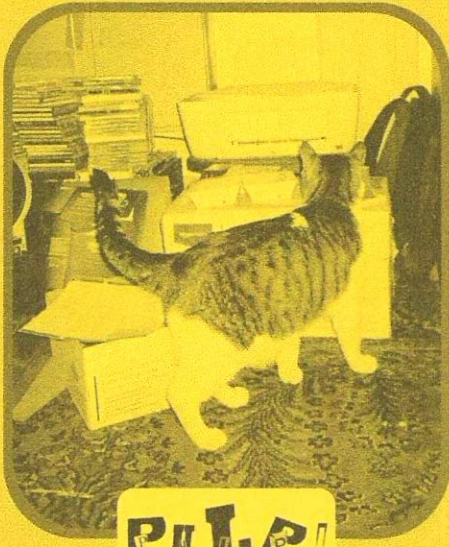
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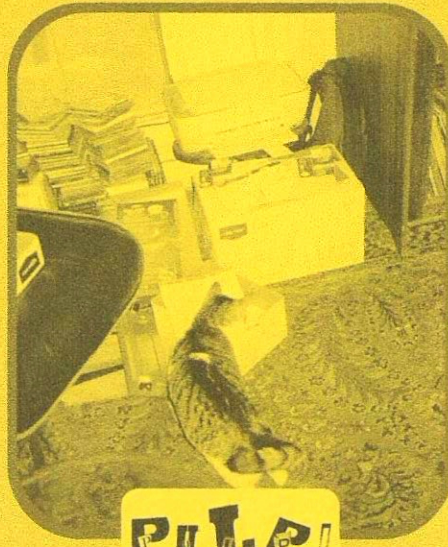


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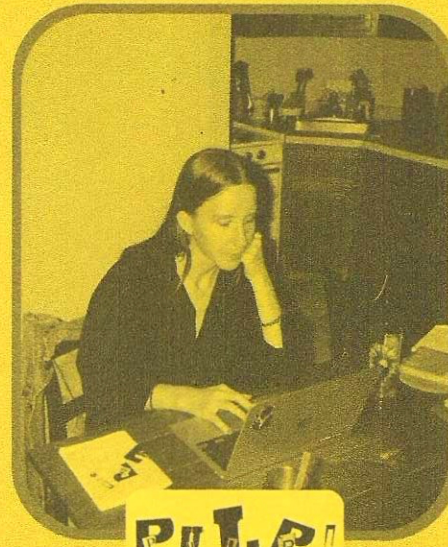


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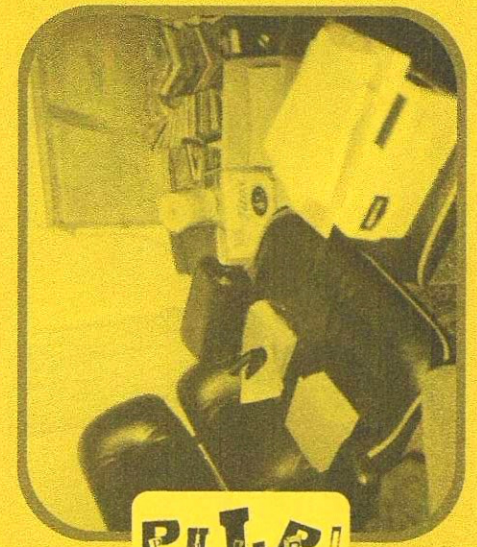


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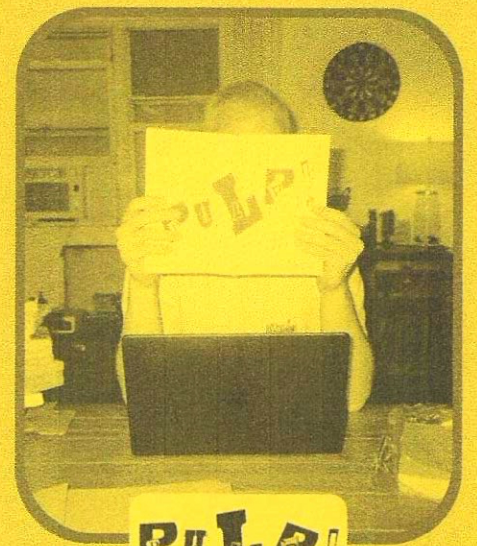


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Collect All Eight!



Collect All Eight!



Collect All Eight!



Collect All Eight!



Collect All Eight!



Collect All Eight!



Collect All Eight!



Collect All Eight!



Chapter Nineteen

“Slow” and “steady” were not concepts deeply ingrained in Barry’s mind, so much so that it was not until he reached America that he thought it would be a good idea to gain a solid, usable understanding of the words. Specifically, once he brought Magnus in on the operation and his own role stumbled drunkenly to the backburner, he figured he could use all his spare time to round out his vocabulary a bit. Slow: gradual, leisurely, lethargic—or, his favorite, dumb. Steady: constant, durable, reliable—or, perhaps, boring. Though a description of the past few weeks’ events from Dilbert or Magnus—not including those from that night, of course—may have included terms like the former in each grouping—gradual, reliable, so on and so forth—Barry’s description would by no means reflect such tolerance. To him, the task was dumb and the days were boring—interminably so. Why else would he need to drink so much? (He conveniently overlooked the fact that this argument failed to explain why the habit had persisted for his entire life, not just his sojourn in America.)

However, it was not a drunken Barry that stood with his co-conspirators in Dilbert’s office that night, and it was no longer a slow and steady operation that the Norwegian found himself, as he saw it, overseeing.

“It is time for action,” he said. Flakes of dried blood fell off his cheek and top lip as he spoke—something that had dismayed the fellow passengers on their late-night train ride into Queens. He stamped his foot on the ground without rising from his chair.

Dilbert gave him a short look, almost familial in how much discontent it managed to show and consume, hide away from both the audience and Dilbert himself, before he spoke. “Okay, cowboy. Slow down—”

“No!” Barry exclaimed, rising. “I have been slow for a long time!”

"It's only been like ten days. That shouldn't feel like too long for a man who looks like he's seen as much as you." Magnus had yet to find forgiveness for the Norwegian's outburst back at his apartment. A quiver in Barry's hand made him thankful Dilbert was present, though it also made him wonder if the alcohol hadn't served the secondary purpose of protecting everyone around the Norwegian by dulling his more aggressive impulses.

"I don't think—," Dilbert started.

"No, I do not think!" Barry exclaimed. "That is my job here—doing. And what have I done? Connected two thinkers and put them out to pasture!"

Magnus and Dilbert acknowledged the error—errors, really—with brief eye contact before both deciding it would likely be better to move on.

"I am back in charge," Barry continued. "This is silly. Stupid. We went the slow route, and the enemy was on us from the beginning! All we did was give him time to watch. To catch up. To understand! So much for the element of surprise." He threw his hands in the air and stomped over to the water cooler, downing one of the tiny cones of water like a shot, which apparently replenished him so much that he released a staccato puff of air.

"Perhaps we don't need surprise," Dilbert said.

"We are not super agents!" Barry again yelled. "We do not swing in on wires!"

Magnus continued his muttering from his slumped position in the office's other chair. "Some could say that would be mighty surprising."

A ball of waxed paper hit Magnus in the back of the head. Apparently, this was not enough, as the open side of a hand

smacked him in the same spot a few seconds later.

"Jesus," he said, rubbing the sore spot and turning to grimace at his tormentor. "Where do you get this attitude from, as if we've been holding you back and you're here to save us? What exactly have you been doing recently? Getting drunk and fucking everything up?" He got up to face Barry and, without much thought, pushed the older man square in the chest, sending him staggering backward a few paces. "Don't forget we wouldn't even be in this situation if your pathetic ass hadn't had the genius idea to try to break into the unbreakable building."

"I was working on a hunch," Barry growled, stepping toward Magnus.

"A hunch that could've gotten us killed, you, you, you—God! Fuck! Fuck you!" He pushed the Norwegian again, who this time stumbled backward, bumping into his own chair. Magnus's pulse raced; he could tell from the wildness in Barry's eyes that the few slaps he'd gotten in his apartment would pale in comparison to what the man was cooking up for him now. However, he was surprised to find he did not care. Rafferty had lost it, and now so had Barry. Why shouldn't he join the fun? He cocked his head at Barry, as if to say *Come and get me*—a call the Norwegian would've obeyed if it hadn't been for their host's round, resonant voice filling the office.

"Enough!"

Both men—Magnus with his chest and head pumped forward, eyes wide open and demanding, and Barry with his right fist half-raised for a cross the younger man, clearly, would not have been able to handle—stopped.

"I'm not going to explain to the cleaning crew in the morning why there's blood in my office, you goddamn idiots. I had my outburst earlier. I have since calmed down. I suggest you two do the same."

With this, he nestled himself a little further into his chair, clasping his hands across his belly. Without saying much, the other men straightened and set themselves back in their chairs.

"Outburst?" Barry asked after a few moments of silence.

Dilbert glanced at Magnus and raised an eyebrow. After Magnus offered no response, he continued. "Nothing for you to worry about. Especially now. I am not open to commentary on moments of weakness from the likes of you."

Barry coughed and put a cigarette in his mouth but did not light it, an apparent apology. He nodded for their host to continue.

"It is time to move quickly," Dilbert continued. "Barry is right." He cleared his throat. "We will break into the McKinley building and steal the files. Enough to accomplish our task."

The two looked at him blankly, eyebrows raised, as if awaiting a punchline. Out of everything they'd done so far, Barry thought, this very well might have been, by his definition, the slowest.

The round man continued. "I know. I know it has never been done before. But Magnus still has business in the building--."

"You want me to run out with all the files?" Magnus exclaimed.

Dilbert closed his eyes, taking a deep breath to settle his frustration. "*We* are going to run out with all the files." He rose and crossed to a large metal locker in the corner, swinging it open to reveal a row of coveralls hanging from a solitary bar. He took one and threw it at Barry, who caught it and looked at Magnus.

"We could both fit in this thing," he said. After a second, they laughed. A patch on the front read Dilbert; a two-foot wide Shredex logo swallowed the back.

Dilbert regarded him and smiled. "Coveralls, hard hats and a clipboard: the universal ticket." He nodded to Magnus. "You go to work tomorrow. Stay late. At 8:00, come let us in at the loading dock. We'll come upstairs, grab as many files as we can take, and go. All three of us."

"I--," Magnus started. "I--. I don't think this is going to work. There's cameras everywhere--"

"Do you really think this Rafferty character will let those cameras stay functional now that he's got you working for him--really working for him? The only person they benefit is the man he's ripping off."

Magnus shook his head and swallowed. Could he be serious?

"Well, it's a risk I'm willing to take," Dilbert said. "If he's trying to be the new Wilson McKinley, then I already understand how to play him. And we don't have any better options, as far as I'm aware." He raised his eyebrows. The other two men remained silent. "It's settled then."

"Not quite." Barry withdrew the unlit cigarette from his mouth and exhaled out of muscle memory. "I will get this Rafferty."

"About that," Magnus said, grinning. "I've got an idea. He introduced me to one of his friends tonight. She took a bit of a liking to me." Barry rolled his eyes. "He bragged about how little money it takes to shut her up. I'd be interested to find out how much it takes to get her talking."

Dilbert plopped himself back down in his awe-inspiringly strong chair and laughed. His hands bounced on his belly. "Well, I'll be damned, kid. Now you're thinking like a real crook."

Chapter Twenty

"Jesus Christ, it's humid in here." Dilbert walked a few steps farther into the document room, angling toward one of the rows of shelves, which he touched tenderly with the palm of his hand as if it were a great beast. "We're easily ten degrees above proper storage temperature for papers like this. And the humidity?" He exhaled loudly. "Unbelievable. They're lucky these files aren't covered in mold."

"We're lucky," Magnus said, sitting himself in his desk chair and spinning around to face the other two. Dilbert slowly made his way down one of the aisles, periodically pulling out boxes and clucking his tongue disapprovingly. Barry leaned against the wall by the door and put a cigarette in his mouth. He raised his eyebrow at Magnus, who shrugged and shook his head. It didn't matter whether the place smelled like smoke the next day; it's not like he would be back. The Norwegian smiled, winked at him, and pulled out his neon lighter. Even after nearly two weeks, the contrast between the lighter and the rest of him—short-cropped blond hair, head-to-toe black with his old jeans and another in the endless stream of worn-in concert t-shirts—leapt out at Magnus just as much. For the first time, he considered the possibility that Barry liked the contrast, the visual insult to the predictability of his appearance. Drink just enough that the fact you have your wits about you stands out; be brash, unkind, consistently enough that your moments of tolerance, even pity, seem charitable; carry around a neon lighter to make a joke out of your otherwise militantly bleak sartorialism—these were the tactics Magnus imagined coursing in the Norwegian's head.

Barry's cigarette reached its end. He crossed to find Dilbert, and Magnus followed.

"Alright," Barry said, rounding the corner into the aisle and clapping his hands resoundingly. "What are we doing?"

Dilbert jumped, surprisingly nimble for a man his size, and knocked two boxes off the shelves. Papers, buoyed by the thick, humid air, spread out, covering the floor for three feet in both directions.

"Shit," Dilbert panted. "Great. Thanks. We're lucky I didn't drop, too."

"Calm down, big guy. It's not like we have to clean it up. They're going to know we've been here either way." Barry lit another cigarette, blowing the smoke across the moat of papers into Dilbert's face, who grimaced and wafted it away with his hands.

"Cut that out, you pig. God, have some decency."

Barry looked at Magnus and raised an eyebrow. Magnus was scared to find he was getting to know the man well enough to recognize his thinking; he had no doubt that Barry was currently surging with "pig" comments to throw back at his perennial victim—an impulse he thankfully overcame.

"What are you looking for," he asked instead, his tone flat. Magnus looked at the shelves. He hadn't made it this far. Starting at "A" and progressing through the alphabet, by this point he'd only reached "I." It didn't take a genius to guess why Dilbert was concerning himself near the middle of the last shelf, amid the "W"s.

"What do you think?" Dilbert spat. He reached up and pulled a box off the top shelf. He leered at Barry. "Found it."

"Found what," Barry asked, again his tone flat.

"God, will you let me talk?" Dilbert shoved the box into the Norwegian's chest, who caught it in a rush with his non-cigarette-bearing arm as Dilbert brushed past them to return to the open area at the center of the room. Once they rejoined him, he continued.

"Give me that," he said, gesturing for the box. Barry slid it across the table, and Dilbert began rifling through it eagerly. "I knew it. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it," he muttered. He pulled out a single piece of paper and held it up to Magnus and Barry as if they should know what it was. When he realized they did not, he sighed.

"Do you know what this is?" A breath. No guesses. "It's the record for my father's account."

Barry snatched the paper from Dilbert's hand. "It's a blank sheet of paper."

"Almost blank," Dilbert said. "Look at the top."

They did as they were told. Below the logo but above the ledger space was an area reserved for filing information: account owner, date of opening, account number, etc. Magnus knew it well, though he'd never looked at one so closely. Dilbert was right; the line for account owner read Conrad Willinck.

"This is your dad's?" Magnus asked. Dilbert nodded.

Barry turned the sheet over in his hand. "It's empty."

Dilbert rolled his eyes. "He didn't pay."

"He didn't pay for the digitank?" Magnus asked.

Dilbert smiled. "That's the important part. He did pay for his digitank. He didn't pay when McKinley tried to extort him."

Barry flipped the paper over again. "So—"

"So, McKinley must have set up a file for my dad here in his special document store expecting to start raking in the dough and just never gotten rid of it when my father turned out to be too good of a man to give in."

Barry handed the paper to Magnus, who flipped it around a bit himself before placing it on the table in front of them.

"Do you know what this means?" Dilbert asked. "This confirms what I thought. The records in this room, they aren't official. They're, I guess you could say, 'off the books'—the books that are off-the-books, if you will. This is where McKinley keeps a record of every penny he's extorted, blackmailed, or stolen from his clients. Maybe not even just that. Maybe from anyone."

"We got him," he said at last, smiling.

Barry exhaled a long push of smoke. "Darn ri—"

His Spaghetti Western assent was cut in half by a voice, old but strong, from the door. A figure hung there, hunched, silhouetted with cane in hand and a much larger man behind.

"Got who, fellas?"

A few labored steps brought the figure fully into the room—and into the light. Shortly after, the man behind stepped in as well.

"Damon?" Magnus asked. The guard nodded. "Who's—"

From the corner of his eye, Magnus saw Dilbert move to speak. His expression startled him; Dilbert's face, his posture now—the years in that chair, lamely managing a cut-rate shipping and handling depot, melted off quicker than Magnus could've imagined. He looked like a cuckold in the final moments before pulling the trigger on two lumps in his bed. He looked ready to kill the old man.

"That's—," he started.

"You don't recognize the man you work for?" Damon asked him, grinning.

In the stacks, a box Dilbert had left teetering on the edge fell to the ground. The riled-up middle manager, who couldn't handle the crash on top of all the other stimuli, leapt at the sound and fell to the ground himself, unconscious.

Barry laughed. "That's Wilson McKinley."

Chapter Twenty-One

Wilson McKinley was born fifteen minutes before the doctor arrived at his family's wood frame house in rural, upstate New York in November of 1932. The way the family tells it, he got fed up with waiting for the professional to arrive and cut the damn cord himself. By the time the doctor got there, little Wilson was grown up enough to give *him* a smack on the ass. Needless to say, the siblings that followed came into this world without too much input from those healing hands. He'd been a self-starter ever since.

How many men can say they cut their own umbilical cord? Fittingly, he had little attachment to his parents, and the feeling was mutual. His siblings became like his kids, and his parents like their grandparents, him interceding to stop the line of tutelage from spreading. In this way, even though their parents had grown up in Ireland, Wilson and his siblings were all decidedly American. And, for a man of his age, coming home from the war to a land full of possibility cracked open by the GI Bill, what a wonderful thing that was to be.

The adult Wilson McKinley of the mid-century was just as austere and exacting as his miniature self. (Not his childhood self, as he never truly had a childhood; he was born thirty-two years old and was nearing retirement age by the time he graduated college.) So, he fell into the rule-heavy profession of banking. By the time he was actually thirty-two years old (which would have put him nigh on seventy by his internal clock), he ran the floor of

the Schenectady Deposit Banking Corporation like a U.S. Navy submarine. By fifty-five (well into his nineties), he drove into the city to help run Manhattan Bank every day from the cushy, six-bedroom house he'd bought his family in Great Neck, Long Island. (This meaning his new family—his wife and three children—not his parents or siblings. Interestingly, much like he'd raised his siblings and thrown his parents by the wayside, his wife became like his daughter and his children like his grandchildren. He never seemed to mind. In fact, he never seemed to notice.)

The problem with money, he found, was that he couldn't blackmail people with it, only for it, which meant information gathering ran up overtime. As a rule, Wilson McKinley never worked for free, so, naturally, when he read an account of the inner workings of Scientology (a 1985 *New York Times* article that engrossed him so much he missed two meetings), he hatched an idea: why not make people bring their secrets to him? Ten years later, Digitank was the most successful company that very few but its clients knew existed—that he made sure of.

Someone who makes their living installing trap doors would certainly avoid suspicious patches of floor; thus, Wilson McKinley decided to keep records of all his "business" transactions on paper—delightfully securable, unhackable paper. He found it much easier to see if someone was trying to enter a building than a hard drive, namely because no one could accomplish the former in pajamas from their couch. But, after years of finding no one but himself capable of entering and exiting his company's digital security deposit boxes, when spores of mold started popping up in the dankest corners of his document store, he figured a commensurate benefit of digital storage was the lack of mildew.

Naturally, security increased at this point—but who could have expected that outside security to swoop in and try to take a chunk out of his business? He counted himself lucky to have found such a misguidedly loyal watchdog as Damon; he only hoped the man would never realize his boss was the worst suit of them all.

McKinley eyed the three men before him: two in coveralls, one of whom was much too small for his while the other, sprawled on the floor, was much too big for anything else, and a dopey-looking twenty-something in dire need of a haircut; if this were his child-cum-grandchild, that hair would be lopped right off. Perhaps that neck could use a tie as well.

“Boys,” he croaked, speaking to their chests due to his hunched back. (At this point, he was ninety-four, which put him around one-hundred-fifty all-in-all.) “I’m getting too old for all this nonsense.” He pulled out a gun, slowly, from his jacket pocket.

Magnus gulped. Barry laughed. Dilbert snored. The hammer on the gun crawled back under an arthritic thumb. *If that box hadn’t knocked Dilbert out, this bang sure would*, Magnus thought. For his last thought, Magnus decided the temp agent didn’t deserve a thank you at all. In fact, she deserved a lot more; she deserved a funeral.