

RULES OF REALITY



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Prologue

America in 2050 was no longer about freedom. Americans had willingly traded freedom for constant surveillance and fear. What began immediately following 9/11 as a war on terror, quickly became a war on everyday decent citizens.

Why focus on terrorists when it would be just as easy to focus on everyone. Between the horror of 9/11, massacres on college campuses and the murder of the President's son, Americans were ready, at any costs, to feel safe. If it meant a bit of government interference here and there it was worth it.

If a large, faceless corporation constantly offered you an opportunity to keep your children and the children of your community safe, there was no arguing about it. This is what started the introduction of a new drug, Reality, designed to eliminate violence in children and lessen its probability among post adolescent consumers. Save your children or watch them die.

Reality was the beginning of America's rejection of democracy, free speech and, most importantly, free thought. More addictive than heroin, it was also community sanctioned by celebrities and politicians alike. We were all made to believe that although it was not the best or a perfect solution, at the moment it was good enough.

At rallies across the country, the positive effects of consuming Reality were shared. Rallies were renamed parties and offered as a place to meet and greet friends, find out more about Reality and of course, determine the best way to allow the government to do its job (protecting citizens).

While many people joyfully entered the parties that were enclosed by a large steel, lifeless gate, there were historians among the masses who knew and understood this level of manipulation and governmental control. They had names like Griefer, trouble makers, mavericks. This group of people were considered radical but would have been known as thinking, average citizens twenty years before.

A simple question or a public disagreement could get you taken care of. No one noticed people not being at the parties, the assumption was that people had forgotten, had other things to

do and maybe just weren't up to all the noise and interruption of their day. Human beings have an incredible ability to convince themselves of almost anything.

My family was told that I was causing concerns within our community and my afternoon of questioning was simple a safety precaution. My family was told that it was a random choice and that periodically everyone was brought in to discuss anything that might be a danger to the community.

The definition of "danger" in the community constantly changed. Constant change means we should expect more interference not less.

As a history professor and writer it was important that I teach young people to question authority and not assume that because rallies were now being named parties that anybody was gonna have a good time. Be careful what you name things and who gets to do the naming.

My biggest regret is that my young nephew Christopher was taught how to rebel and not maneuver. My nephew never learned to rename the truth and it costs me my life. I'm glad he never learned to recast the truth.

Truth manipulators always have a good reason for their behavior and love to think that this is the best way to deal with life. Those of us labeled as trouble makers are the only ones who have ever made a difference. We are also the ones who have been watched the most.

Fear kept good people quiet and average people uninvolved. Rallies, parties, political removal, resorts. To a rational mind, none of this made sense, people didn't want rationale, they wanted security and guarantees of safety.

Christopher Mitchell

Since the “incident”, I’ve structured my world with very few surprises or upset. Sunday is the day for rest and reflection. On Mondays I shop for food and cook meals for the week. Tuesday means lots of reading and organizing thoughts on paper.

Wednesday is the day to check in with mother and the family, if they allow it. Thursdays I see a therapist. Fridays are the worst — two days of loneliness. Saturdays are the most difficult. My family always avoids me on Saturdays.

For one year I carried on like this. One day I saw a commercial urging young people to save the country, be good patriots and redeem their social clout.

The instructions were simple: put yourself on a disc discussing your likes, dislikes and family ties and whether you thought this country could turn itself around and take back its former glory and rule the planet.

There was no way the government was asking for something this simple in an effort to restore America to its former glory. Whenever I heard that familiar Reality jingle, I’d race to the television.

Mother called today. She saw the ads and thought it would be great if I stopped moping and got out of the house. She left a message because it was Monday and I was doing my weekly shopping.

“Hi Chris, it’s Mother. Just wanted to say hello and ask if you had decided what to do for work. I’ve been seeing these ads and I think you’d make a fine civil servant. Your uncle, wherever he is, always felt that civil engagement was extremely important. Ok. Love you. Bye.”

The one phrase “wherever he is” made me wince and retch. No matter what I did or how many times I apologized, my family would not let me forget that I was the reason my uncle was removed. Perhaps this new gig will allow my family to love and accept me and help me return my uncle to our family.

After listening to this message twice, I decided to apply for this new civil servant position (Joyman) and support the government in launching a new program.

Two Sundays after I applied for a Joyman's position I was left a message via a mechanical voice.

Cold and sterile it stated:

"Dear Christopher Mitchell, Congratulations. You've been selected for the initial interview process. We will see you Tuesday." End of message.

I got a serious case of the "willies" after the last word, Tuesday. Is it too late to retract my application? Would this raise too many suspicions? The fact that a nonhuman recording voice left a message made me feel there was no way I could "change my mind." Would I be interviewed by a computer as well?

"This is ridiculous," Christopher heard himself say aloud. "How can a computer interview anyone?" Had America gone that mad? Was this the price for protection and liberty?

There was nothing to do but prepare, show up for the interview and hope for the best.

"I need to make sure that whoever interviews me understands that I am as frightened as any good American and willing to do whatever I can to protect the country. Uncle Allen refused to keep his trap shut and go unnoticed. With this new job, I should be able to find Uncle Allen and even leave the country for a short time."

"So tell us Mr. Mitchell, why would a bright young man like you be interested in working in a place like this and for the government?"

Interviews always started like this. A deadly dance that reeked of desperation, arrogance and ill preparation. Who would put themselves through this voluntarily? No sane person would eagerly take this on hoping to get anything out of it but grief.

"I've always been one for government involvement, civic duty and ongoing community involvement. It seemed like the next thing to do and well . . ."

"That's nice but what we're looking for is someone dedicated to making change and who is unafraid of making people uncom-

fortable.”

The ominous voice slithered from the small cordless square grey box. In the year 2050, humans didn't bother to interview with people face to face. Who had the time, patience or where-withal? Instead, you entered a sparsely decorated room and hoped for the best.

Most of the time you didn't get it. What you got was a voice activated, heat sensitive interview box. Christopher had heard about these contraptions and was unsure whether or not he should believe this urban tale. Ten minutes into the interview he wished he'd believed the tales and prepared more thoroughly.

“Being uncomfortable is my middle name.” Christopher's response was weak and predictable.

His computer generated foe picked up the rise in heart rate and blood pressure then immediately shot out a question that would make Christopher sweat and stumble just a bit.

“Give me an example of confronting uncomfortability and your immediate community including your blood relatives.”

The machine released a small human like sigh followed by a throat clearing that startled the ill prepared interviewee.

“I set up my uncle by playing a disc in public where he criticized the use of Reality, in particular as it relates to small children.”

Christopher was banking on the assumption that no one, not even a dumb computer, would believe that any human would willingly and knowingly sacrifice a loved one. A dim bulb came on and off three times in a row.

Three days later he received a Congratulations letter and a new hire information packet.

Sixty days after he began his work with the government, Christopher knew it was time to indict a close friend or risk being seen as ineffective. With both eyes on the large gate and a sense of what might happen if he looked away, he began questioning who could be sacrificed without causing much harm.

Ms. Atkins, an acquaintance of his uncle's had become very comfortable offering her opinions. “A full out interrogation

wouldn't really get you much. She'd fold up like a cheap suitcase and refuse to answer any questions no matter how much you threatened her." Christopher was impatient. "When do you suggest is a good time of day? What have you heard?"

He listened very closely and decided a five minute visit to the Stewart household would allow him to speak with Mrs. Stewart and discuss Julian which could easily become a conversation about Uncle Allen.

Ms. Atkins continued. "I've heard that they keep the adults in one place and the young people in another."

Christopher thought maybe the casket crawler had more information to share than he realised. Sixty days into a new job is no time to challenge the government's ties to Reality. I know what happens when you question the use of Reality. Young children and uncles disappear. All citizens and especially government officials are constantly monitored. What if I'm going to have to defend my small talk with a known psycho?

Christopher excused himself and went to the rest room. He secured a stall and locked the door, he opened a letter that his uncle had left and read it.

Dear Nephew,

If you're reading this it means that I'm already dead or at this point wish that I was.

For several years, I tried my best to coach, mentor, guide and most importantly love you. We now live in a world that has even less concern for our emotional well being than it did when I was your age. The world keeps getting scarier so I chose to keep getting braver.

Bravery and courage has a price. Remember me saying you choose the action and not the consequences? I should have listened to my own advice and maybe you would never have to read this letter. I choose bravery and clarity. The folks who believe it's their birthright to run the world wanted me to choose delusion.

When they came to get me I still refused to accept their bullshit and am now paying the price. Lifetime imprisonment disguised as isolation and the reality that I will never see you or my family again.

Was it worth it? I'm not sure. How much change can I achieve under house arrest and the understanding that my life stopped being my own the minute they got ahold of that recording and asked your moma if she knew anything about it. She claimed that she didn't and that her brother was always going on about something.

That was all the information they needed. One hour later, I was being told that I could pack one bag and would need to come into the office to clear up a few things.

This letter is the last thing I can give to you. Remember be smart and live to fight another day. Ask yourself everyday is this worth it and what is this gonna cost me. If I had known what might happen maybe I would have kept my mouth shut. We'll never know.

Much Love,

Uncle A

Two days later Christopher and Joyman1 were officially assigned the Stewart household as a place to visit.

Isabella Atkins

Nobody should be given the name Isabella. It's a Queen's name and people expect you to do great things. Command armies. Crush enemies.

On my last day of first grade, we had a celebration. I brought in a huge box of vanilla cupcakes with pink buttercream frosting and enough that if each kid wanted to eat four of these treats there would still be leftovers. After we ate all we could hold, there was a dance off. I came in third and won a pencil sharpener shaped like an old red schoolhouse. After setting aside my sharpener, it was time for the foot race. I was excited because I could beat all the girls and most of the boys. Today, I was set up to race against the fastest boy. We lined up to start our race and the other kids went crazy.

"You can do it Isabella!"

"You're just a girl! You can't beat a boy!"

"Don't listen to them Isabella, keep your eyes straight ahead!"

The girl who told me to keep my eyes straight ahead was my only friend. Lisa had told me the first day we met that my name meant something and that she was gonna help me take over the world. I glanced over to see her arms reaching toward me and two tiny fists clenched. Those fists meant the world to me. It meant we were gonna win this together.

"Go!!!!" The teacher told us to tear out, so we did.

I won the race that day and all the kids went berserk. It is easy to think all your troubles are over when you get a bit of success. But every success brings other challenges. I got caught up in finally having a reason to have the name Isabella and forgot about all of the lemonade I drank and wet my pants. The boy I'd flat outrun (Nelson Fitzpatrick) was the worst.

"Need a towel? Hey, Issy want a diaper for your bottom? You're a big dumb baby."

When that wasn't enough he started a chant: "Smelly Belly Belly Smelly."

All the kids joined in: "Smelly Belly Belly Smelly."

Lisa jumped into the crowd and said: "Stop it. That's

enough.”

Nelson was having too good a time and told Lisa, “I’ll say when it’s enough, and what are you gonna . . .”

He never finished that sentence or saw Lisa’s dusty fist meet his jaw before he hit the ground.

“I said that’s enough.”

Lisa grabbed my arm and lead me away from the crowd and to a small chair. We became best buddies that day.

As I sat with Lisa, I silently wished I’d had the guts to slug Nelson one good time. Even if he had beaten the cream cheese out of me, I would know I could take on things, lose with dignity, and come back with another approach later.

I was both excited and embarrassed because of what had happened a few minutes earlier. I could either break down here or go share all my hurt with the one person who would listen, my grandfather.

My grandfather, Paw Paw, didn’t give a crap about the sucka who got knocked out for shooting off his big fat mouth. Paw Paw’s main most concern was that I got to be somebody.

“Sista Baby, your parents are kind but very ignorant people. Don’t pay ‘em a bit of attention. You and me are different. I waited through four of your momma’s pregnancies to get to you. And I’m glad I did. Them damn doctors kept telling me I had six months to live and I told them shut your gravy hole. I got a special granddaughter on her way and she needs me to tell her how to run this camp.”

Paw Paw often told me “Sista Baby, I’ve lived through the depression so there ain’t much that can rattle this old cage.”

He told my parents, “If I even think you are saying anything unkind to Sista Baby, I’ll beat you with a shovel like you owe me money and burn your house to the ground with you in it.”

Whenever Paw Paw mentioned burning down a building folks got real quiet. All of my family agreed to never discuss the hospital Paw Paw destroyed when its staff refused to see a colored woman. The family also never discussed Paw Paw’s propensity for shooting his shotgun from the porch (once a week) to let the white folks know they didn’t run shit and that no man scared him.

In June, after my first year of college, I packed my bags and made the decision that I would return in a semester or two once I got Paw Paw on his feet. June 8th, I arrived on the porch of my parent's home. They were expecting me. My grandfather was not. I walked into my old bedroom and put down my bag. Glanced at all I'd left behind and then headed down the hall to Paw Paw's room. Slightly pushing the door open and respectfully knocking and entering the room, I gasped at what I saw.

What kind of people allow a man to dwindle down to nothing but a flesh sack wheezing and courting death?

"Paw Paw, you gone sleep the day away we got things to do." I whispered to him the way he used to wake me up on Saturdays when we'd pull out for a day of adventure.

He began to stir and blink his eyes.

"Is that you Sista Baby or is my mind playing tricks on me?"

"It's me. I'm back. I couldn't let nothing happen to you."

"These mother suckers are trying to kill me around here. They don't stand a chance."

"You should probably rest. I will be back in a bit."

At the end of Paw Paw's funeral, no one could find Isabella because she had curled up in the casket refusing to accept death (Isabella spent twenty minutes in her grandfather's casket before anyone realized she was missing).

Twenty minutes after the service when the minister was having his third helping of potato salad, Issy's mother realized that her daughter was not around. Thinking that the grief and Issy's inability to hold anything in her stomach the last four days, had caused her to wander off, her mother assumed Isabella would turn up. When the plastic spoons ran out, everyone panicked knowing that Isabella had made all the arrangements and was the only one who knew where the extra utensils were kept.

While the guests ate downstairs, Issy's mother excused herself and began looking for her daughter. Walking into the somber room where they kept Paw Paw, her mother could not believe

her daughter was carrying on like this and risking the family name with these pointless and gossip inducing hijinks.

“What are you doing in here? Have you lost what’s left of your mind? You could have been buried alive. Come out of there and stop all this nonsense.”

Whenever Issy wanted to feel special she’d refer to herself as Sista baby. When she noticed she had left a pile of tears on that left lapel and her mother was more concerned with finding spoons than her dead father or a grief riddled daughter she consoled herself.

“Sista baby pull yourself together, leave this place now. You are on your own,” she heard her PawPaw’s words whisper in her ears.

She gave the corpse she loved a hug and whispered in his left ear “I’m glad you waited for me. I’m gonna make you so proud”.

She scrambled out of the casket and headed towards the kitchen.

“Let me get those spoons. I don’t want anybody to not get all the free food they can hold.”

Issy’s mother would have given her only daughter a fresh smack in the mouth if she had not worked so unrelentingly on being properly bred. Upstanding, educated, middle class black folks didn’t hit their children and they certainly didn’t allow sarcasm and cheekiness. In a moment of rage, she forgot these well honed social skills.

Clutching her daughter’s arm, she offered her a supportive and no nonsense statement.

“Don’t start with me little girl. Your grandfather wouldn’t approve and neither do I.”

She released Issy’s arm and took a step back and with a smirk stated: Are we clear?

“Crystal,” Issy shot back.

Making her way through that pack of free loading weasels, Issy was reminded of her grandfather no matter where she looked. Grabbing a fistful of spoons for the potato salad reminded her how this was one of his favorite dishes. She snatched up a pile of napkins and recalled spilling things as a child and while her parents grumbled about her lack of grace and disregard for

money, Paw Paw would say why don't you grown people find a better use of your time than picking on Sista Baby.

With her grandfather gone, she would have no one to fight her battles and no one to think she was worth fighting a battle over and for. This thought brought additional tears. She would pull herself together when she refilled the sweaty pitchers with sweet tea. Gathering three fluted pitchers she filled one and then another, but stopped when she got to the third.

Paw Paw will never have sweet tea again.

This thought made her sad and then supremely angry. She filled the third pitcher then pressed the swinging kitchen door open with her right foot. She heard the laughter; she heard the imitations of her grandfather threatening people. She heard three different people tell a small crowd that they would "beat them with a shovel."

If Lisa Stewart had bothered to show up she would have been right in the middle holding court and demanding attention as always. She would probably have launched into the time she was called uppity by Paw Paw and he took it upon himself to let her know that nobody in our house liked her.

Backing into the kitchen, she hung up her apron, adjusted each pitcher so that the handles faced East at a perfect 45 degree angle, and left out the back door. She would only see most of these people when she began the career that would allow her to make good on the promise she made to her grandfather. In less than one month, she would be responsible for these people and their callous treatment of her Paw Paw's legacy.

The ad was simple: low pay, benefits and community respect. When the ads were placed, a handful of desperate people applied. Each of them possessing one of the qualities needed to become a facilitator.

One applicant had the cold-heartedness needed, but lacked subtlety and stealth. Another was so concerned with the welfare of others that the interview team knew that would ask too many questions and ultimately leave when he felt that the community was being ill informed. Too many of them asked questions and

began discussing pay and promotions immediately.

Anyone who was that clear and morally solid would be difficult to control. What those in charge wanted was someone with an unsettled emotional debt. What they wanted was someone who needed to do something to belong.

The day they received Isabella's application they silently rejoiced. She was perfect. She had a slew of incompletes in her life, had bounced from one awful job to another and most importantly she was a loner. Her grandfather had died a while back and she had very little contact with her parents.

Like most folks with something to prove who are also insecure, Issy arrived for her initial interview a respectable twenty minutes early. She walked down the street with the address in hand, 19355 Conley, and realized this was a part of town she never came to.

Issy thought to herself "Who the hell would have an interview before sunrise?"

Either this involved some weird night crawler creepy cult people or it was some colossal joke.

Giving her navy blue suit a stabilizing and reassuring tug, she pressed onward thinking early a.m. homicide or a life changing career, either way she was dressed for it.

Walking an additional three blocks South, she came across a pack of homeless people warming themselves around a large tin bin. Normally, she would have tensed up, clutched her purse a little closer and began scanning the area for a quick exit. But this group of vagrants smiled, offered a thumbs up and one tipped his shabby cap in her direction.

This Reality really was the best idea ever. Isabella silently congratulated herself on making the "cut". She felt proud of herself for getting this far in the hiring process. She knew her grandfather would be proud of her for making a decision and doing something that would alter the culture and uplift the community. She thought these things while entering and then waiting for someone in a room cold enough to hang a side of beef in.

The receptionist entered her stark cage and began addressing

Issy immediately.

“You must be Isabella. Welcome. I hope you didn’t have any trouble finding us.”

Isabella was slightly stunned.

The receptionist looked a lot like her. Not enough to be creepy but enough for Isabella to feel that she belonged here because someone who looked like her was already here. The receptionist wore her hair pulled back with a smart ponytail dangling over her left shoulder onto her breast. She was dressed in a dark skirt and wearing sensible nude, kitten heeled pumps. She wore a pair of simple hoop earrings.

Issy sent up a gratitude smirk to her grandfather and then immediately began planning for what she would say about herself once she began the interview.

What she had no way of knowing was that she was being watched for five minutes.

And then another five.

The people watching her wanted to see who this person really was, in particular, under pressure.

After twelve minutes of watching her they released an offensive odor into the air. She appeared to notice it but continued to self preserve for the interview she had been called in for.

The interviewers were slightly impressed but not shocked.

At exactly seven o’clock, they sent a crying woman into the lobby to pass through on her way to the elevator and out of the building.

Isabella noticed the obviously upset woman but remained seated. She made no attempt to comfort or inquire as to the source of this women’s upset. This one act now had the interviewers attention.

Each of them typed into their hand held devices: not swayed by emotions or hysterics.

The final test was an effort to see how long she was willing to wait and to attempt to discover if she would endure the pain of another because her goal was more important.

Isabella received a congratulations letter and new hire information three days later.

Isabella knew that if she was going to make it in her new position, she would have to make sure that the government knew who the trouble makers were.

When she was told that she would be responsible for crushing a rebellion and making sure that people knew she was in charge she made a decision.

Every Tuesday Isabella was in charge of site visits (uncomfortable time spent observing small children in classrooms).

All the children and teachers knew to expect her and no one felt comfortable until she left.

She knew that Lisa Stewart's first born was in the class and at some point would do something (like his mother) that he had no business doing.

Five minutes after her arrival, the docile children offered her a proper morning salutation then stoically walked to the creativity sessions to begin that days work. Each child was given a sketched animal and instructed in what should be done and in what color.

Julian Stewart was already not listening and silently arguing with the teacher.

He would, like his mother, do what he thought best which usually meant doing it his way. Julian was already working during the time when the other children were deliberating which color they were allowed to use.

With only three choices the decision making was simple.

They all began coloring and just at the point when it seemed this day was identical to all the other visits Julian did it.

He produced and began furiously creating with a purple crayon and making himself a perfect target.

Was he being clueless or defiant?

She circled the classroom once and then a second time before approaching Julian's table.

Issy, wanting to make Julian comfortable, spoke first.

"Hey mind if I sit with you?"

Julian already in his own world was taken aback when he heard a familiar voice and looked up.

"Sure Aunt Issy, it's a free country . . . It used to be."

“It’s not so bad a place to live is it?”

“Grown ups don’t want us to have any fun. Who can draw anything awesome with these dumb colors?”

“There’s a lot you can do with these crayons.”

“All the good ones are taken away. There’s not much fun you can have with beige and puke green. Aunt Issy I gotta get to work. My grandpa is expecting a purple rabbit for his birthday.”

Julian’s teacher noticed that Isabella had noticed the crayon and was having a discussion with him about it.

The teacher in an effort to not lose her job or attend a closed door meeting with the principal had to make a career altering decision. Pretend she had never seen the crayon or offer the explanation that she had tried to stop him but there was nothing she could do.

An instructor two years from retirement was in no mood to screw with a fat retirement package and ongoing healthcare.

She glanced at Isabella and said “I wonder where he got that? We haven’t had colors like that in this classroom for months.”

Issy’s plan worked. She knew where that stick of defiance had come from.

She watched young Julian draw a bit and then attempt to engage the other children at his table by offering to share his crayon.

All the children refused feeling very sated with their non disturbing and abundant tools for creativity.

Tapping her tablet and adding a second note. She checked with the anxious teacher regarding how contraband had entered her classroom without her knowledge.

“Probably a parenting thing. This is the first time this has happened, correct?”

The teacher looked away then nodded her head up and down.

High on the power that can only occur when you’ve made your first big power move on a new job, Isabella decided to take a stroll through the Distribution Party in hopes of topping her initial efforts. At the monthly gatherings, folks were always more

relaxed and willing to share pivotal and personal information.

Dressed in her interview clothes (a navy jacket with faux pearl buttons, matching pencil skirt, handsome nude stockings and sensible kitten-heeled shoes) she prowled through the crowd, plaid notebook in hand, with hopes of catching someone being outrageous enough to make the slightest comment about the government and the good it was doing in the community.

“Girl, please tell me they’re not making you wear that get up in all this heat. Lose the jacket and you might avoid heat stroke.”

Lisa Stewart, still refusing to see Isabella as a contemporary, was stupidly leaping right into Isabella’s conspiratory net.

She never knew when to shut the hell up.

“Nobody is making me wear anything. It is important to make an impression the first sixty days on a new job.”

“The only impression you’re making is somebody notice how important I am.” I’m just kidding you. You really shouldn’t do this.“

“You’re doing it again. When will you accept that it is now my day. You’ve had thirty years. It’s time to hand over the broomstick.”

“You keep that up and I’ll hand it to you across your skull.”

“Oh no Ms. Stewart, I really don’t think it’s wise to threaten a government official.”

“Official? You’ve been working two months. Employee.”

“Have it your way.”

Isabella methodically hit her tablet screen and began furiously entering data.

“So now you’re what? Writing a citation? Making me stay after school for detention? What has happened to you? We used to laugh and joke and now you’ve got a plaid notebook and a steady paycheck.

Isabella closed her tablet.

“You still don’t get it.”

She was planning on making a show stopping exit Lisa Stewart style (nose in the air; one hand placed on the right hip with knuckles leaning on a waistband) but chose to create a new ritual that she would be proud of. Her days of mimicking and aping the behavior of Lisa the Great were now officially over.

Lisa, now realizing that things had changed was now slightly afraid and began placating her oldest friend with light, childhood dreams.

“No, I don’t get it. I thought we were gonna change the world. I thought we would make the scientific world safe and encouraging for young, bright, beautiful black girls. I thought we...”

“We never asked me if that’s what I wanted. We never gave my opinions any thought. Where we were we when I needed someone to discuss my grandfather’s death?”

“Have a pleasant day.” Issy turned on her heels and marched off.

While this heated and socially polite exchange was taking place, George, Lisa’s neighbor from across the street, was becoming more uncomfortable listening and not being able to respond.

He’d never cared for Isabella Atkins and thought this was a great opportunity to help Lisa dump that high and mighty, driftwood once and for all.

George approached Lisa.

“I wouldn’t eat anything she brings to the next party.”

Lisa Stewart

Many scientists say that the first five year of a child's life are the most important. My initial five were full of secrets and things we couldn't talk about.

My parents wanted their neighbors to look at their own racism and privilege. If they had relegated their well concerned and righteous rhetoric to people who visited them in their homes, things would have been different.

They started going into Black churches and demanding that people move out of forgiveness and into action and community responsibility.

One church would have been ok but by the time they hit church number ten and began to speak with government officials people started having some different responses. Basically: shut the hell up and let us wait for the government to fix this.

My parents were a lot of things. Patient was not one of them.

After I was born they continued to challenge the group consensus that being silent, nursing their wounds and waiting for elected officials to do something was the only solution.

My parents gave up and decided that home schooling was the best option. Four years of homeschooling and innumerable "visits" by concerned social workers convinced them that a move to a smaller and perhaps more progressive part of the country could change things for them and give me the opportunity to grow up with people who could think.

Being a child of displaced hippies is not all bad.

My parents were always going on about the way things used to be that many years ago black folks were more radical and far less willing to go with whatever people said was the truth.

They taught me early and often you better get some friends that sit on both sides of the table. I didn't understand this until all the hullabaloo happened with the terrorists and my parents who were against terrorism had friends who were anti- American and folks who were nursing all sorts of hatred for Arabs and Muslims.

Each side threatened them and told them to get rid of their "friends". My parents refused and paid a hefty price.

Our collective fear led us into the worst reaction you could have: silence.

Immigration was being attacked from all angles. It wasn't that people in this country hadn't seen or didn't know any immigrants it just became illegal to be one.

Once while watching the news with my dad I saw an angry white woman telling a group of people: "go back to your country! Stop taking our jobs! We don't need any illegals here!"

I asked my dad what an illegal was. He told me it was what some people called other people who weren't born in America.

While my father thought it was great that his baby girl could sniff out lies and stupidity at an early age, my mother was less optimistic. She often told me that people don't like smart brown girls and that I'd better figure out ways to survive.

"Survive what?"

"The world." She shot back.

In our new town, I landed at the perfect school – children could design their own curriculum; parents were encouraged to volunteer as classroom teachers to share any skills they had mastered during their lives.

My mother taught community organizing and critical thinking.

During her first month of teaching, a smart mouth kid with a flair for drama asked my mother a very personal and rude question: how much do you make? This kid wanted to know less about what it took to be self reliant and revolutions and more about the cold hard cash my mother was pulling down every week.

Nelson always had a smart comeback for any adult who dared to offer insight or knowledge. It's why as soon as I got a clean shot at that loud mouth Nelson Fitzpatrick I took it.

One right in the chops shut him up; knocked him on his ass and got me my first true friend, Isabella Atkins.

When it came time to pick a summer reading buddy we chose each other. We've maintained our 30 plus year friendship. No one could ever ask for a better ally.

My mother thought Issy was common and no way fit to be in the company of Stewarts. I could always count on her for the big and little things. She brought over my homework when I was sick. She lied to my parents when I met with college recruiters from institutions they disapproved of.

She offered me half her sandwich when I demanded that political prisoners be freed and refused to eat until it happened. At some point, I got the notion to start a newspaper. It was important that I share my ideas with a larger audience and gain greater exposure. Ol' Issy was right there editing, sending email blasts, updating our web page.

Even when her grades suffered and her mother threatened to pull her out of that stupid school she continued to help me.

My mother always said if a person is blessed with one true friend that they have truly hit the jackpot. Isabella Atkins was my jackpot until we completed high school.

Once we finished high school everything changed.

It wouldn't be long before she betrayed me for the first time. Our senior year, I came up one vote short and lost class president. Although it was never officially proven, I know she refused to vote and it cost me the election. It almost cost me my Harvard entrance.

Anybody who knows me knows that it would take more than that to stop me. After med school and some traveling and living overseas, I returned to a different America.

Reality was supposed to make everything better and keep us all safe from the "crazies". Initially, it was a suggestion for calming our children.

I resisted and almost lost my only son Julian. When the government stepped in and removed him, I knew that this Reality was nothing but bad news.

Reality was my new Nelson Fitzpatrick.

My husband Michael and I made several difficult decisions during the course of our marriage: I stayed home with Julian

until he attended school. I also refused to put Julian on Reality which meant I was directly challenging the government.

To directly take on the government, you need two things: a plan and good friends.

The first part of our plan involved testing our friendship with Bern and George. Having known Bern and George for twenty years, it seemed natural to assume they would be fierce and passionate allies.

Michael helped George get his first job in the public sector before things got ugly and George shot off his big fat mouth one time too many about bathroom breaks and logging in when he used the copier.

Things had changed in such a scary and unpredictable manner that it was stupid to assume anyone would risk anything for anyone they knew no matter the relationship or years building it.

Together, Mike and I made the decision that a dinner party would not only allow pivotal information to be shared, we could also find out how committed our friends were to social change.

Lisa called George, the braver of the two, to begin a friendly interrogation. In one phone call she would have to find out if her friend was committed to rebellion, and if he would rebel with them.

George and his husband Bern had decided to not have children but were quickly recruited to be “awesome” godparents as soon as Lisa found out she was pregnant and would bring a child into a world that was becoming stranger every day.

When it came time for George and Burn to add children, neither of them would check the box requiring their children to take Reality. The government was not amused and they were then added to the “list”.

She began the conversation with small talk: what time hors'doevers would appear; how soon dinner would be served; the time they would each say they left. Before stealthily launching into the real reason for the call and the dinner party.

Lisa shared her longing for more social contact with George. “I sure miss getting together daily. We had a great time just popping by unannounced for no reason.”

George echoed her sentiments.

“We had our best talks when you would just dart across the street to try out a recipe.”

“We loved babysitting with Julian. George would love seeing us all together between the monthly distributions.”

“Don’t get me started on the distributions. At the last one, you caused quite a stir.”

“Don’t put that on me, Miss Lisa. I simply said what any sane person would say about kids: they’re kids and are supposed to be emotional.”

When Lisa heard that her dear friend cared about her child as much as she did, she knew she had an ally.

“Well I know that and you know that.”

“But letting anyone within earshot know what you truly think is always asking to be lead to the slaughter. You saw that husband of mine make one ‘under his breath comment’ about not knowing the long term effects of Reality and it damn near cost him his job and a good chunk of our livelihood.”

George couldn’t resist teasing his friend. “Oh, I saw that interview. That camera work when he winced, sighed, turned his head and mumbled about the effects was pure genius. I have it looped and can’t stop watching it. Don’t ever let it be said that ol’ Mike don’t have a pair on him when it matters.”

They both laughed.

Lisa surmised that George was as committed to protecting her child and taking on the good fight.

Lisa now had one household committed to keeping her son drug free. She immediately felt sad that she was unsure of whether another long term friendship would also provide support. Right before the previous month’s distribution, Isabella had accused Lisa of being selfish and wanting to cause trouble. Still, it might be a wise move to invite Isabella to find out what she knew or more importantly what she did with what she knew.

Before Lisa could even suggest an additional dinner companion, George ripped into her other friend like she owed him

money.

“Oh yeah and don’t even think about that Isabella woman. What nerve. Telling you how to handle your affairs. Who does she think she is?”

“I mean she gets one job being a rat for the government and now she is an expert on children, husbands and the goodness of the government. I swear if she shows up I’ll put my head and hers in the oven.”

Lisa politely ended the conversation confident that she had at least one ally that lived outside her home.

Two days later, a dinner party would be the site of the small initial rebellion.

For a successful dinner party you need a few basic essentials: great food, great friends, interesting topics of conversation, and most importantly, no unexpected guests.

The Joyman promised Lisa they’d only stay five minutes. Lisa silently prayed. Please don’t let our guests arrive early. The problem was that guests would start arriving in twenty minutes.

Lisa would have five minutes to get through the questioning by the Joyman. Five minutes to determine why the Joyman had chosen this night to visit.

Had someone made a phone call? Five minutes to determine what she could and couldn’t say, and to find what these ominous beings had heard about her and her “plans”.

She knew to keep her lies simple and easy to remember. She knew gatherings of people beyond their monthly, overly publicized distribution party was illegal and could cost you family member and friends.

Lisa hated lying, but knew that this must be done if she wanted to protect Julian.

“Mrs. Stewart, we’re not here to cause you stress. We have a few questions.”

“No problem. I have all the time in the world to answer questions.”

Lisa Stewart knew that showing too much emotion or upset in any direction could cause suspicion and, in the worse cases, a

second visit.

“It seems that there has been a bit of radical action and ways of being here lately.

Is that true?”

The one on the left started in with the questions first.

“Radical.”

Lisa repeated this term in a thoughtful and deliberate fashion. Lisa was wise enough to not repeat the word in a manner that suggested she was unaware of its definition or that she was confused and upset that her home was under suspicion.

“We follow the rules just like everyone else.

“Gatherings for distribution.

“Children in bed at Seven and adults at Eight. Nothing radical about that.”

Joyman2, dead center, cleared his throat and spoke .

“You seem to have forgotten the most important rule: Making sure prepubescent children take a daily dose of Reality. I would say that not doing this would definitely qualify as . . .

“Radical.”

The first Joyman on the right was now deliciously engaged in this ongoing game of cat and butterfly.

“SHIT. How could I have forgotten that mandate?” Lisa chastised herself before moving into defense mode.

“Yes,” said Joyman1. “Needlessly and deliberately defying the opportunity to keep you child and the community safe would be an act of Radicalism.”

“No one cares more about children and this community than I do.”

Lisa knew sharing an obsessive fixation on the correctness of government actions would convince her tormentors and buy her a bit of breathing space until her next great idea presented itself.

What she had not planned on was the way the questioning would continue for six additional brutal and dismissive minutes.

While the questions initially began left to right in an organized and civilized fashion, the Joyman, used to subtlety and manipulation to reduce and then remove individuals from jobs and their own homes, relied on a more random and drawn out pro-

cedure for discovering inconsistencies.

While Lisa Stewart silently congratulated herself for providing an effective and emotionally dead response to their barrage of questions, the attack continued.

“Do you get along with your neighbors? How often do you see them? Do you see them beyond the monthly scheduled gatherings?”

Lisa knew where this was headed. They were either gathering information to convict a neighbor or someone had sent them to her house to start conviction procedures. Quickly she realized that she needed to throw them off her trail and find out whether they suspected her or a neighbor and what their next step would be.

“My neighbors are some of the finest people I know. We offer a brief greeting when we see one another and under no circumstances socializing beyond the distribution parties.”

“Do you recognize this artwork?” Joyman1 held up a hand drawn animal and Lisa instantly recognized it as her son’s work done in his favorite color (purple) a hue that was not on the approved list and most importantly, a color that would force someone to make a call and the Joyman to make a visit.

Earth tones were the ones on the approved list. Purple was only allowed at the distribution parties after permission had been sought and approved. There was no way that her son could have saved a crayon for a month.

“It appears that Julian enjoys things other than the color beige. Wouldn’t you agree, Mrs. Stewart? Perhaps there are selections in his home that he practices with and prefers? Would you care to show us his sleeping room and what exactly he’s encouraged to do when in your care?”

Who knew what they would find or plant? It was too risky to have a pack of vile strangers plowing through your home.

“My home is a wreck. I had no idea that I would have guests. Perhaps some other time?”

“So you’d like us to return at some time? That can be arranged. It’s not everyday we’re extended an offer for additional visits.”

She couldn’t uninvite them or pretend that what she was doing was normal. Perhaps she could suggest they visit another

neighbor? Why would anyone suggest an additional visit from the Joyman for any reason?

There could be one more attempt to find out what they knew and who would have gained anything by suggesting that she get a “visit”.

Lisa was feeling proud of herself until she realized that only Joyman2 was looking in her direction.

Joyman1, deeming her chatter irrelevant, began recording observations into his grey plaid notebook. What was he documenting, wondered Lisa. Written secrets (thoughts and opinions) hidden away, were for private eyes. A way to share constantly and without input from those who disagree.

Lisa began. “Nobody is more concerned with keeping our children and community safe than I am. I was talking to Isabella about how our government always keeps its promises.” Lisa added a youthful smile of a young woman who still believes in what older, wiser grown-ups tell her.

Lisa noticed that Joyman2 shifted his weight when she mentioned Isabella’s name. She had to find out if it was Isabella who’d caused this much angst riddled interrogation. She would mention the name again. If Joyman2 so much as blinked she’d have her answer.

She created the next question and answer before her visitors could speak.

“Isabella and I agreed that at the next distribution we’d inquire as to whether we could increase the dosage of Reality and whether it would cost extra.”

Joyman2 offered a slight wince.

Christopher Mitchell was no good at being a tough guy. With his big heart and love of justice, this job would break him if Lisa Stewart didn’t do it first. Lisa was satisfied and knew two things - she could break Joyman2, and it was Isabella who had suggested that the Stewarts be investigated.

Joyman2 knew that he’d blown it and was angry that he could be read and manipulated so easily. He whipped out his book and immediately keyed in “visit weekly - suspicious!” He may have been the last Joyman selected but was by no means the least intelligent or cunning.

“When is the best time to return so that we can speak with you and your husband?” He saw his chance and took it.

“It would be nice to speak with him again.” He lied.

Lisa winced.

“He’s usually home by six so anytime after that would be great.”

“I think we have all we need for now. We’ll be in touch.”

They closed their note pads; straightened their jackets and adjusted their ties.

She saw the neighbors across the street step onto the porch. She let out a small gasp.

The Joyman noticed. “Is there a problem?”

“Not at all. “May I offer you some coffee?”

“You have enough for the three of us?” The Joymen smirked to one another.

Lisa had forgotten about the rationings and the impracticality of sharing.

“You will hear from us soon. I still have a few questions. About the coffee.”

The Joyman scared you when they visited. They scared you even more if they promised to return.

The Joyman formed their exiting ritual (shoulder to shoulder). Opened the door and walked eastward. The proper procedure was to stand there and watch them leave.

As they turned the corner Lisa looked across the street and her neighbors looked back, shook their heads and went back into their home.

Disturbed and feeling slightly triumphant, Lisa left her porch, entered her home and closed the front door. Mike closed the basement door behind him and went to comfort and congratulate his brilliant wife.

Mike, the first to speak and the more fearful spoke first: “Are we ready for this?”

Lisa shot back: “Do we have a choice?”



Anthony Carter is a writer and cultural critic. Among his books are the mental health strategies found in *Unfettered Mind: The Importance of Black Male Mental Health*, *Strong Stuff: Tips On Surviving and Thriving Despite Being Unemployed*, a plea for social change regarding the fear and lust of the black male body in *Kiss Me Kill Me: Trayvon Martin, Black Male Bodies and White Supremacy* and his latest book a collection of Science Fiction Stories, *Rules of Reality*. He recently launched *Burn the Manual* his weekly column with the Good Men Project.

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