

The man called at 12:00 on Saturday. He called me by name immediately as I picked up the phone. He sounded like he meant business. I disregarded that as best I could.

“Hallo!” I responded, as cheerily as I could muster, not quite managing the act. “Who is this?”

“I’m Smith H. Barnaby. That’s not important to you though.”

“Yes, it is, Mr. Smith,” I said gratingly back to him, “I’d appreciate if you could tell me some more about yourself.”

“I know you’re just humoring me now, Kív. With your skills I’m sure you could find out more about me than I want you to know. That’s why I’ve given you a false name. This, I’m sure you’ve already discovered.”

He was wrong about that, I hadn’t looked him up. I hadn’t even considered it, although if he was going to give me ideas like that I might as well use them. I typed his name into my computer, slowly whittling down the search results with my left hand, while I twisted the cord light blue phone around my right index finger. “True enough,” I replied casually, slowly shifting the phone I held wedged between my ear and shoulder. He had overestimated my initiative, but had drastically underwritten my skill. “I see. Smith H. Barnaby. Also named John Réal. Also know as Winston Breakweather. Birth name, is, surprisingly enough, Barnaby Smith. That’s not as clever as I would’ve expected you to be. It’s really not effective, just flipping your name if you want to hide. It seems almost as if you want someone to find you.

“You’re a real estate speculator. You’ve specialized in grabbing up land before it’s even habitable. You once bought a large section of ocean, two months before tectonic activity set off a chain of volcanos. You made millions off selling estate on what had barely even been solid rock for a month.”

“I see that my estimates were well founded,” he said confidently back to me, not breaking the stride of his businesslike manner. *Not quite.* I thought to myself. *You helped me some.*

“I did it with one hand,” I told him confidently, then I continued. “Anyway, why is a man like you calling me?” I asked him.

“I have a proposition.”

“Yeah. But why are you calling *me*?”

“Surely you expected someone would notice you,” he scoffed, “you won an international analytical mathematics competition for God’s sake!”

“Okay, that’s a fair enough point, but why do you want me?” I slowly set down set phone next to the hook, the cord unwrapping and slapping the old wooden slats of the wall. It was the cord of a rotary dial phone, old to the point of an antique. Most things in my room were like that. My computer was a Hyperion XII – small as your fingernail and fast as something really fast – but it was inside the case of an Apple II. My desk was solid wood, replacing the synthetics of the modern day, but beneath the appearance of a technology museum it was already beyond the average modern room.

“I’m sure you’ve read something about the Lediptes, you aren’t a complete recluse,” he told me, his voice slightly distorted by my distance from the phone. “Their charge is predicted to change the axis of the earth by as much as one degree,” he continued, rambling on and on. Of course I’d heard of them, but I let him keep talking and making a fool of himself. I’d heard of them, but I certainly didn’t care about them.

“One degree’s rotation won’t affect me, not over a twenty year span,” I said calmly, leaning down in order to speak directly into the phone. “I don’t care if some large neodymium rock wants to come an’ drag on our magnetic field and move my house a few kilometers.” I flipped a switch under the far edge of my desk and his voice jumped over to the computer’s speakers. I hung up the handset and continued to talk. “I’ve done all the models. There’ll be some bad storms for a few months around the 8 year mark, and that’s all.” My fingers casually rippled across the keyboard, placing a trace on his call. A few seconds later data began to stream across my computer’s small screen. I had opted to replace the original display – one that had only been a few inches wide — which made a difference right now. He had a surprise in store for me, however. *Wow, he’s hiding this call well!* I thought, impressed.

“I have reason to believe that you’ll be dealing with much worse than storms,” he told me. This short sentence extended the search a bit farther. He was calling me through Com-Sat 8932, which was receiving the audio stream from... An Unregistered satellite.

“Excuse me, but I couldn’t help but notice you’re calling through an unregistered communications satellite.”

“I’m sure you could’ve helped noticing that. In-fact, I’m surprised that you managed to get that far. You’re good. Now, you see, this brings me to my proposition. I’m bouncing my call through a survey satellite that I’ve launched with my numerous billions. I’ve taken much more precise data on the Lediptes Comet Cloud than has ever been taken before this moment, and it’s getting better each day. I need someone who can crunch it all for me.”

“Is that all you want me to do? Crunch some numbers here and there? That doesn’t sound too hard.”

“I don’t have an accurate model of the problem,” he admitted, “but I have gone through the expensive process of data collection, and it would be a waste to end here. I can pay you well.”

“How much?”

“I can pay for the rest of your education. Graduate programs, whatever you feel like taking.”

“I don’t need school. It’s not as if they could teach me anything new. I want a research lab, I’ll do something for the world besides sitting in my room programming.”

“Wonderful. I can pay for that in full. All your work on my data is to be my sole property, and you will report your findings directly to me under the following encryption,” as he finished, a burst of static filled the room, “I’m sure you’re recording this, you can go back and grab that at any time. I’ll arrange the data for you. You may begin immediately.”

“Wait, but—”

“I have full confidence that you will do this. I’m buying you that lab you wanted. Now get to work, Kív.” Barnaby hung up the phone suddenly.

He made me angry. I’d do his job, and I’d do it well. He treated me simultaneously as a business man, and as a child. Neither of those described me.

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I spent the following days poring over the lists of variables, wading through endless seas of text until the glow of the screen was enough to burn the text into my

face. My pupils grew continuously smaller, the computer's sensor all the while panicking, the screen's brightness pleading with them to open wide again. It was a failed effort. I grew gradually more tired, taking at least one call a day from Mr. Barnaby, and though I thought that I was coherent, I was no longer sure. I had slept for 7 hours on the third day, and it was almost to the point where I would have to sleep again.

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“Yes, Mister Barnaby, I've written a format for the survey data. If you'd install it on either the satellite or the relay I'd be grateful,” I had told him on the sixth day.

“Yes, I have a functioning data structure. You should expect a first estimate within the week,” I said on the eighth.

“Yes, I'll make sure to get more sleep,” was my reply on the twelfth. This was true — I had slept during 3 of the past five days. Though it had only been twelve days since he had first called, I had made significant progress. Developing an even slightly accurate model of a phenomenon with more than 600 measurable variables was no light matter, even for someone like me.

The bell rang at 10:00 PM, as it had every day during my work. I stretched and stood up. I took my short walk to the door — one of the three periods of exercise I got daily — and opened it. Today there was a pizza. Each day my nutritional programs selected me a different meal, ordered it, and paid for it without me having to spend a moment away from my job. I picked it up, walked back to my room, and sat back down. I opened the box and continued to think on the problem. Even my meals would not distract me for long. I took a large bite of the pizza and settled back into the rhythm of programming his model.

I followed a very simple protocol: Write 20 lines, take a bite. Run. Debug. Take a bite. Compare to equation, then take another bite of pizza. Run. Debug. Finish piece of pizza. Open box. Remove piece of pizza. Return to programming. (Nom pizza nom.)

This routine lasted many hours into the night — (my pizza lasted only for the first hour) — and I made further progress. I must have accomplished something, for I vaguely remembered falling asleep — something I would not have allowed myself otherwise. I slept reasonably for the first time since my assignment began. Later that morning I awoke to the phone's raucous bell. “Hallo?” I said groggily, speaking from my bed.

[Answering phone. Enabling speakerphone,] spoke the calm voice of my automation.

“Hallo?” I repeated, this time with some effect.

“Hello Kív! What progress do you have to report today!”

“I slept?” I answered, confused. I was still waking up. “Give me a moment,” I said.

“You really slept? I’m sorry, did I wake you? I didn’t think you’d sleep that late.”

“Yes, Yes. No need to rub it in.”

“No! Of course not, congratulations!”

“I hope you realize how absurd that sounds,” I said back to him, flicking my hand in the general direction of the computer. It turned on. “Here,” I said, “I’ll give you my report from last night. Maybe it was this morning. I forget which.” I climbed out of bed, and sat down in the chair in front of the computer. “Oh,” I said after a moment of scanning my record. “It looks like I’ve finished it.”

“Good! When can you begin simulation?”

“I could start one now, do you have any other computers I could work with?”

“I can get you a list. You’ll receive it once the call is over.”

“Thanks. Oh, and Barnaby?”

“Yes, Kív?”

“If you’re going to congratulate me for something, make it something worthwhile.”

“Of course,” he laughed, then hung up.

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The simulation ran all day. Then all day after that. I knew it would take a while to get its first results — and then it would spend even longer refining them — but I hadn’t known how hard it would be to wait. I tried to guess what the answer would be, what did he think that he would find? *Why was he willing to pay me £25,000,000 equivalent?*

I didn’t like the answer I got.

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“Hello Kív.”

“Hallo Barnaby.”

“I heard you’ve got some results.”

“Yes,” I said.

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"Well, Aren't you going to tell me?"

"My contract requires me to. You know that."

"That's not stopping you from dragging it out. You don't sound happy about this."

"Nothing in my contract says I have to be convenient to you."

"That's true," he said, then his voice faded from the phone, "John! Make a note to add that to my future contracts!" He returned a moment later, "So, what's the answer?"

"The Lediptes are going to spin the earth by almost ninety degrees."

"*What?*" he asked incredulously.

"I hope you plan to do something good with this."

"Oh yes. This is far better than I expected! Far, far better."

"*Are you crazy?*" I screamed at him, "This'll destroy civilization!"

"No, it won't. People always survive the downfall. It happened once in the twenty-first century. We'll survive again. Some will survive in luxury. I'll determine all the places that will become prime real estate, and buy them all before anyone else has a chance. It's simply down to selling it to all the rich people who will have nowhere else to live."

"What about all the people who can't afford to buy your houses?"

"Oh, I'm sure they'll all be fine. It's still happening over twenty years, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it still follows the normal curve for the first five years, after that it has accelerates even more. No one will notice until it's too late."

"It will be fine."

"But we need to tell someone!"

"Kív, Kív. How do you expect me to get all of that land for a reasonable price if everyone knew what would happen to it? It's wasteland now, but if they knew that it would someday be paradise, then even I wouldn't be able to afford to buy it all."

"The thing is Barnaby, I'm not interested in profit," and saying these words was what decided it for me. I opened up my browser.

"Let me put it this way Kív," he said quietly, "think of all the people you would save if you got that lab."

"Why can't I have the lab anyway?" I asked politely, then emphatically tapped the return key. PeerReview.net loaded quickly as Barnaby continued to speak.

“That data is my property. I won’t be buying you that lab if you break the contract. I won’t have enough money to buy it for you.”

“What? So just one file would ruin you?”

“Yes Kív. One file. If everyone knew the locations I’m interested in, I would likely go broke fighting for them. This is how I survive.”

“You survive quite well, are you sure you even need more money?”

“I’m sure that I do. I’m already at the lowest I’ve been in several decades. I don’t know if I could survive a blow like that.” I continued listening to him plead as I searched for the file I had created. It was my masterpiece, containing a global map of estimated climate data over time, differences in water level across the world, and changes that would have to be made. I spent so long creating it and he claimed it as his without hesitation. But he sounded so sad.

“Please Kív,” he pleaded.

“I don’t know,” I told him, again whispering. The page sat in front of me, the file waiting to be published. All I had to do was click.

“I deserve a good life, Kív. And yet you would take all of that from me?” He pleaded. That decided everything. He had convinced me of what I needed to do. It was true, he deserved his life.

So did everyone else. I dragged the mouse across the screen to the large beveled “upload” button. The cursor felt somehow heavy.

“I’m sorry Barnaby,” I said. Then I clicked.

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## Afterward

“I sit here writing all of this on a small, near ancient computer. It’s less than one tenth the computing power of the one I use *in* the story. (Although it does use less *electrical* power as well, which is a useful feature in this day and age.) I can’t get a better one, since they ration everything so strictly now.

I never gained any benefit from releasing that data. Barnaby managed to bring the situation under control. He bought most of the land before my paper was widely noticed, and he somehow managed to gain all the credit for *my* paper. Those italics give the wrong impression, but I'm going to leave them in just as an excuse to explain myself.

I'm not writing this so I can claim credit (although some would be nice), or to show what a pitiful specimen Barnaby is, I'm mostly writing it because I really like writing. It's a skill I didn't know I had before this disaster, and one that is both useful and easier with all the strange things that have been happening. (In the old days if you wrote about this it would be fiction, nowadays it's just a historical account — albeit one that is exceedingly interesting.)

My job now is just to tell people the story, and for authors, there's not much competition left. The population is somewhere below a billion now — although without any reasonable form of communication it's impossible to know. Even with the threat of extinction held over their heads, most people couldn't manage to defeat their capitalist instincts and just *help*.

In any case, I'm writing this so that the people who are left will have something to read. That they will know that some people cared about them before. Well, and because it really is quite fun.”

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