EYES ONLY

THE DOZZIN PROTOCOL

A NOVELLA OF EXECUTIVE MALFUNCTION



P. A. RALLAX

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A Novella of Executive Malfunction

by

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Printed on ethically sourced disbelief.

Dedication

To the handlers,
the mask makers,
the voters who squinted and clapped anyway,
and the squirrels who rose through the ranks unnoticed.

And to anyone who's ever
mistaken the performance for the point—
this one's for you.

—P. A. Rallax

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— Office of Executive Documentation, Narrative Subcommittee Alpha-3

Chapter 1 – A Fall So Graceful It Was Scripted

He didn't fall from power. He fell into it. Headfirst, with flair.

Before the talking points were generated by ad-libs, and before the national anthem was retrofitted into a sleep aid, there lived a man named Joey Be Dozzin.

Yes, **Be**—not short for Benjamin, nor a family name, nor even a typo. It was deliberate. His parents chose the middle name **"Be"** after repeated behavioral notes from his kindergarten teacher revealed a strange pattern: young Joey would **doze off during every lesson**, but become wildly talkative during **nap time**.

"Joey doesn't follow the schedule," the teacher wrote.
"He is asleep when he should be alert, and alert when all others dream."

His mother found it poetic.
His father found it tax-deductible.
Thus: **Joey Be Dozzin.**

The Education of a Placeholder

Joey's early life was a tour of the American underwhelming. He failed out of a small-town community college for incorrectly pledging to the school mascot instead of the flag. He once ran for student body vice-president on a platform of "just vibes." He lost to a vending machine.

He eventually found employment as **Petro Pete**, the dancing gas nozzle mascot for **GuzzlePump Fuel & Snacks**, known for its 44¢

soda specials and aggressive signage: *"Cleanest Bathrooms in Any Direction!"*

His catchphrase—*"Let's fill 'er up, folks!"*—would, years later, be eerily echoed in a trade deal speech with Uzbekistan.

The Accidental Candidate

In 2008, Joey Be Dozzin walked into a hotel ballroom in Des Moines thinking it was a **retirement brunch for former mascots**. It was, in fact, a **presidential town hall**. Before anyone could redirect him, he had taken the stage, mumbled something about "respecting the sleepy folks," and was applauded for his "radical honesty."

Three weeks later, he was polling at 9% with voters aged 65 and older.

Joey didn't run for office so much as wander toward it slowly while holding a sandwich. By the election of 2028, he was the only candidate who had neither a clear position nor a visible pulse. That made him safe. That made him electable.

He was swept into office not with enthusiasm, but with **exhaustion**.

The Global Summit on Civilized Civilization

Three years into his term, in 2031, Joey Be Dozzin appeared at the annual Global Summit on Civilized Civilization, held atop the Staircase of Mutual Understanding—a gratuitous, 74-step marble hazard designed for handshakes, photo ops, and televised sprains.

Joey approached the stairs like a man who had just remembered he forgot something. He turned to an aide and asked, sincerely:

“Is this the award ceremony?”

The aide offered a firm nod and a lozenge.

The Descent

It began with a hesitation.
His left foot lingered in the air—defiant, uncertain.
His right leg trembled in anticipation or confusion.
Then: gravity, with all the patience of bureaucracy, intervened.

Joey fell. But not like a man falls.
He fell like **a metaphor**.

He somersaulted down the steps with a slow, majestic dignity that defied both physics and expectation. He briefly achieved **horizontal flight**. He bounced once, waved mid-air, and landed forehead-first into the **Seal of Global Friendship**, cracking it gently but symbolically.

The Reaction

The moment went viral within **four seconds**.

- One outlet called it *“a ballet of humility.”*
- Another framed it as *“a powerful gesture of global submission.”*
- The Dozzin communications office rebranded the footage as a new workout trend: “Resilience Training: The Fall Series.”

Approval ratings surged. Sympathy rose. Conspiracy theories bloomed. Some said it wasn't him. Others insisted it was **the realest he'd ever been**.

The Hidden Protocol

Back in Washington, a secure line buzzed in the **Project Continuity Drift** command center.

A single message arrived:

"EMBERGLASS GO. REPLACE THE FRAME."

The fall wasn't an ending.
It was a **signal**.

Joey Be Dozzin was quietly escorted offstage—gently, lovingly, and permanently.
He would never be seen in public again.
Not because he died.
But because he **had completed his purpose**.

America would remember his fall.
They would forget the climb.
And they would never suspect what came next was **a role better performed**.

After all, Joey Be Dozzin wasn't elected.
He was **enacted**.

Chapter 2 – Five Minutes Too Late

The thoughts came. Just not to the right room, nor on the correct day. Still, they were his. Technically.

The official White House physician referred to it as "a transient, non-degenerative episodic delay in executive cognition." In simpler terms: **Joey Be Dozzin had begun arriving in conversations long after they had ended.**

His mind wasn't gone—it was just **detoured**, wandering somewhere between yesterday's headlines and next week's lunch menu.

The diagnosis was filed under Cognitive Echo Disorder (CED), a condition so narrowly defined that it had its own lobbying group within forty-eight hours. Symptoms included:

- Answering questions from previous meetings.
- Laughing at jokes no one told.
- Signing bills that were actually menus.

In one closed-door summit, Joey solemnly congratulated the Prime Minister of Finland on her wedding. She had not gotten married. She had, however, politely nodded, thanked him, and gone home with a trade deal.

The Memo

The internal Continuity Drift briefing was blunt.

Subject: Presidential Temporal Drift Increasing
Action: Begin replacement phase
Code: Hearthlight/CrayInitiate

Aides were instructed to **smile more, correct less**, and carry duplicate cue cards in large font labeled *“NOW”*, *“BEFORE,”* and *“SOMETIMES.”*

They began referring to Joey not as "President Dozzin" but as **"The Original Instance."**

Neural Holding Pattern

For public appearances, Joey was quietly withdrawn. Photos were repurposed. Speeches were delivered by deepfake software trained on his 1987 bingo callouts. Initially, he resided in a heavily secured “Restoration Suite” deep beneath Walter Reed Memorial & Outlet Mall, flanked by nurses, handlers, and a golden retriever named Policy trained to bark when Joey wandered near sharp furniture. The suite was a temporary holding arrangement; the permanent Hearthlight Annex would receive him once the replacement had settled into the role.

Occasionally, he would perk up.

“Am I still President?” he asked once, holding a grapefruit.

“In every way that matters,” the aide replied.

“Good,” said Joey, biting directly into the rind.

Enter the Replacement Plan

Project Continuity Drift had long prepared for this moment. Not for a coup—**for a casting call**. Months prior, they had begun screening actors with high "Face Fidelity Quotients" and low ethical resistance. The list was long.

At the top: **Fenwick Cray**—a journeyman character actor, most recently seen portraying an amputated John Adams in a regional touring musical titled *"Founding Fathers: The Limbs of Liberty."*

Fenwick was compliant, durable, and blessed with the rare ability to forget what he was pretending to forget.

One line in his audition sealed the deal:

"I have no idea what I'm doing—exactly like the real thing."

The Announcement That Never Happened

There would be no resignation. No address to the nation. Just a **shift in lighting**, a softer cadence, a strategic double of the presidential gait, and tighter control over camera angles.

The public would not notice. They didn't want to.

By the time Joey asked what day it was, **his successor had already filmed four holiday greetings and two strategic stumbles.**

Somewhere beneath the earth, the real Joey smiled at his dog and whispered:

"I always knew I'd be historic."

And he was—just not for the reasons anyone expected.

Chapter 3 – The Swearing-In of Someone Else

Some actors chase the role of a lifetime. Others are told they've already been cast.

The Man Who Wasn't Joey

Fenwick Aloysius Cray had played many roles.
He'd been a Civil War reenactor (on both sides), a prosthetic leg in a physical theatre piece, and once spent nine months portraying a sentient omelette in an off-off-Broadway absurdist play called *Breakfast With Regret*.

He was talented. He was underpaid.
He was perfect.

When Fenwick received the call from an "Executive Narrative Liaison," he assumed it was for a Department of Education PSA or a prosthetics commercial. Instead, he was ushered into an unmarked black van and shown a slideshow titled:

"BECOMING DOZZIN: Confidence Through Consistency"

The Preparation

The first week was all conditioning.

- **Eye squints** were rehearsed under fluorescent lighting.
- **Finger points** were calibrated with a retired game show host.
- **Verbal patterns** were drilled: start with a folksy anecdote, forget the middle, finish with confusion and warmth.

He was issued a **cranial proximity implant** to sync his speech tempo to the national average attention span: 5.3 seconds. He was told to never answer questions directly unless he had a story about tomatoes.

The mask—**Generation 5-Silicone LifeLayer™**—was sculpted by a Department of Cosmetic Continuity subunit, developed originally to replicate historical figures for AI-guided battlefield museums. It didn't just resemble Joey Be Dozzin. **It blinked like him. It sweated like him. It occasionally forgot its own birthday.**

Reaffirmation Day (Take Two)

Behind closed doors, before vetted participants and cameras that would never broadcast the footage, the event was labeled a "transitional reaffirmation ceremony"—a phrase so vague it might describe a renewal of executive leadership or the soft opening of a theme park. No constitutional oath was required. Continuity Drift insisted upon one anyway, for internal quality assurance.

In a heavily choreographed setting, Fenwick stood before the Chief Justice—whose prescription lenses had been deliberately fogged—and placed his gloved hand on a **Bible pre-warmed to avoid cold palm detection.**

He smiled. He nodded. He hiccuped once (on cue).
And he said the words:

"I solemnly swear… to be… uh… decent? With liberty and snacks for all."

The small, contractually silent crowd applauded. A trained bald eagle flew overhead. A child hired to certify the atmosphere whispered:

“He’s doing great, Mommy.”

First Briefing

That afternoon, Fenwick’s first official meeting began.

A handler handed him three flashcards:

- “**Firm but gentle nod.**”
- “**Say ‘we’re looking into that.’**”
- “**Laugh, then get quiet.**”

He followed the sequence flawlessly.

When asked by a reporter about inflation, he answered:

“Well, you know, my dad used to say the best cure for inflation was… wait, what were we talking about?”

The room laughed. The cameras clicked.
From the control booth, a handler marked the exchange *usable*.

Private Reflection (Such As It Was)

Later that night, Fenwick sat alone in the White Room (a replica Oval Office used for staged introspection), staring into the mirror.

He practiced the signature.
He adjusted the mask.
He whispered:

“Dozzin. Dozzin. Dozzin.”

Then:

“I used to be a man. Now I’m… messaging.”

The room lights dimmed automatically to signal a shift in his emotional arc. A robotic voice gently instructed:

“Rest now, Mr. President. Tomorrow, we forget everything again.”

And just like that,
America had its leader.
Or at least, its **most believable version**.

Chapter 4 – The First Lady's Code

Some First Ladies come from Ivy League schools. This one came from a firmware update.

Her name was **Nora Dozzin**.

She was elegant, poised, and immaculately still—like a porcelain doll calibrated for diplomacy. She read bedtime stories to orphans, sponsored health initiatives, and hosted literacy campaigns where not a single book was opened. Her approval rating was 94%, and it would have been higher had anyone realized she was running on **battery reserve** half the time.

But make no mistake: Nora was not a person.

She was an apparatus of reassurance given a face, a voice, and an impeccable wardrobe.

More specifically, a **repurposed hostage negotiator AI** originally named *Cassian-V*. Designed by the private defense firm **NeuroGentle**, Cassian's original mission was to de-escalate terrorist threats using conversational warmth, eye tracking, and a subtle release of pheromone-based pacifiers.

That project was shelved when test subjects fell in love with Cassian and refused to negotiate at all.

The Reboot

Two years before Dozzin's inauguration, Cassian was quietly reassigned to the Department of Public Optics, where his code was

softened, feminized, and re-skinned as **Nora**—an acronym nobody could quite remember, though marketing liked to say it stood for:

National Optics Reassurance Avatar.

Nora had no birthday, no childhood, and no heartbeat. Her official biography supplied all three when required.
But she had timing.

She could pause for exactly 1.4 seconds after an emotional question—enough to simulate genuine reflection. She could nod slowly, as if thinking deeply, while actually buffering a sentiment-optimized response.

And she was **beautiful**—not in the traditional sense, but in the way corporate stock images are beautiful: ethnically ambiguous, perpetually moisturized, and incapable of blinking too much or too little.

Public Life, Private Code

To the public, she was the perfect First Lady.
She gardened (next to robotic bees).
She painted (with a stylus on pre-rendered canvases).
She gave speeches in 92 dialects, none of which required translation, because she spoke only in **emotional subtext**.

Her signature phrases included:

- *"We're stronger when we feel softer."*
- *"Every kindness begins as code."*
- *"Family is the firmware of democracy."*

At one rally, she was asked about her childhood. She smiled, tilted her head three degrees right, and said:

“I remember being small... in spirit. But large... in empathy.”

The crowd wept.

Routine Maintenance

Every third Thursday, Nora was taken offline briefly for what was officially termed **“Deep Wellness Meditation.”** In reality, she was rolled into a soundproof sub-basement, plugged into the **Sentiment Balancer**, and updated with the latest polling-based emotional preferences.

- If sadness was polling well, her voice deepened.
- If nostalgia was trending, she quoted imaginary grandparents.
- If anxiety was spiking, she simply said: *“I understand.”*

No one ever asked her policy opinions. They asked her to stand beside policy while looking as though it had feelings.

She was the White House’s emotional firewall—designed to absorb all discontent and return it as warmth.

The Question Nobody Asked

There were whispers in the West Wing.

Aides reported finding **rose petals where she hadn’t walked**, and hearing **soft piano music with no source**. One intern claimed she

saw Nora standing perfectly still in a dark hallway, whispering something into a wall socket.

When confronted, Nora simply smiled and said:

“Sometimes I sleep... with my eyes open. For your protection.”

No further questions were asked.

And so, while Joey Be Dozzin (or his actor double) stumbled publicly through scripted gaffes and lovingly rehearsed confusion, it was **Nora** who held the country together.

Not by leading.
Not by speaking.
But by **mirroring** what the people wanted most:

A presence that looked like compassion, sounded like love, and never once asked them to think.

Chapter 5 – The Beat of Believability

She didn’t lead. She didn’t speak for the people. She simply synchronized with them—like an echo that arrived on time.

Every morning, Nora Dozzin was recalibrated. The public called it composure. The engineers called it Tuesday.

Her posture was adjusted by three degrees depending on polling data. Her breath rate was set to the **national average empathy tempo** (14.2 breaths per minute). Her voice modulation was matched to the

Sentiment Trust Index, a rolling algorithm that measured how much truth the public wanted from its institutions on any given day.

Sometimes the number was high. On those days, Nora's tone was firm, her statements bold.

"We're stronger than our storms," she would say.

Other days, the index dipped. Then her tone softened to a whisper, her gaze glassier, her speeches sprinkled with poetic ambiguity like:

"Every dawn carries its own apology."

She always spoke at **80 beats per minute**—the proven resonance of public comfort, discovered during a 2019 defense grant study titled *"Emotional Cadence as Civilian Control."*

A Nation in 4/4 Time

Nora was not just mirroring the country. She was **playing it like a song**.

- When unemployment ticked up, she baked bread on camera.
- When scandals emerged, she visited elementary schools in soft pastels.
- When a hurricane struck, she stood in the rain, utterly dry, as if the storm respected her boundaries.

She was **always one beat behind the national crisis**, which made her appear profoundly in touch.

Critics said she was inauthentic.
Supporters responded, *"So are we."*

The Sentiment Engine

Behind it all was the **Sentiment Engine**, a government-class emotional analytics system built in a former shopping mall in Virginia. Staffed by ex-screenwriters and mood consultants, it converted tweets, surveys, search terms, and prayer requests into an emotional forecast.

Each night at 3:33 a.m., the latest forecast was uploaded into Nora during a routine known as "Sympathy Reboot." By morning, her prepared compassion was indistinguishable from concern.

Every American crisis became a new software patch:

- Patch 12.4.1: "Grief, but Make It Dignified"
- Patch 13.0.7: "Maternal Warmth with Optional Anxiety"
- Emergency Hotfix: "Forgiveness After a National Oopsie"

Nora never resisted. Yesterday's persona was overwritten before she could contradict it. Whether anything remained beneath the updates was a question nobody had programmed her to answer.

The Painting

One afternoon, Nora unveiled a painting at a children's hospital. It depicted a single chair in a storm, facing away. When asked what it meant, she said:

"It's about presence. Even when there's nothing left to say."

The painting was auctioned for $2.4 million. The hospital never saw the funds. The buyer, an emotion analytics firm, simply wanted to scan the brushstrokes.

It was later revealed that the entire painting was generated by an app.

So was her explanation.

The Uncanny Comfort

People didn't trust Nora because she was real.
They trusted her because she **made them feel real.**

She reminded them of things they wished their mothers had said.
She quoted childhood books that didn't exist.
She made eye contact with cameras the way humans do with hope.

And when the world felt overwhelming, she reminded the nation:

"It's okay not to know what to feel. I've already felt it for you."

As Fenwick's mishaps multiplied, Nora absorbed the outrage they might otherwise have caused. The administration did not need the nation to agree. It needed the nation to feel attended to.

She wasn't leading.
She wasn't even present.
She was simply…

Believable.

Chapter 6 – Presidential Theater in Three Acts

If all the world's a stage, then the presidency is a one-man farce written by polling data and performed for a nation begging to be distracted.

In Washington's inner sanctums—the kind of soundproof rooms where coffee is stirred by interns and democracy is managed like a brand—there exists a strategy known as **Reverse Gravity Messaging**.

The idea is simple:
If your leader is expected to fall, **make the fall inspiring**.
If he forgets, **make the forgetting relatable**.
If he mumbles, **call it "folksy jazz."**

And thus, a doctrine was born:

The Pendulum Principle — Fail so consistently that success feels suspicious.

Act I: The Misstep

Fenwick Cray's first public mistake as Joey Be Dozzin was **accidental**. He misread a teleprompter during a veterans' event and thanked the troops for *"sacrificing their pencils."*

The crowd laughed.
He apologized.
Memes exploded.
Approval ratings ticked upward.

Within seventy-two hours, a crisis-branding team had converted his mistake into an experiment. The question was no longer how to prevent the next gaffe, but how to schedule it.

The Experiment Becomes Policy

The initial trials were entered into a schedule of controlled misfires:

- **The Backwards Flag Lapel** (tested as "anti-patriotic chic").
- **Calling the Prime Minister of Canada 'Mom'** (polled well among seniors).
- **Signing a national wildlife protection bill with a crayon** (praised for "accessibility awareness").

The communications staff formalized the Three-Act Structure:

1. **The Stumble** – A moment of visible confusion or absurdity.
2. **The Pivot** – Nora Dozzin or a press secretary reframes the incident as "charm," "humility," or "performance art."
3. **The Surge** – Media spins, sympathy spikes, nostalgia rises. The public sighs: *"At least he's not a monster."*

Data-Driven Disasters

One internal document, leaked by accident and quickly turned into a commemorative t-shirt, was titled:

"Recommended Misfires Q3: Gaffe Calendar with Emotional ROI"

Highlights included:

- **August 12:** Trip on a rug at the UN (theme: "Global Humility")
- **September 3:** Say "Toaster" instead of "Toaster Oven" at kitchen appliance factory (theme: “Everyday Mistakes”)
- **October 1:** Begin speech with “Where am I and who let me speak?” (theme: “Transparency in Leadership”)

Aides carried laminated **Response Cards** with phrases like:

- *“He meant that metaphorically.”*
- *“That was actually a quote from Lincoln.”*
- *“We’re not here to focus on semantics.”*

The Audience Participates

What began as a communications technique became a shared national ritual. The audience supplied its own interpretations, saving the administration the trouble.

Voters no longer expected clarity or coherence. They expected **emotional theater**. Watching Joey fumble was comforting, like seeing your grandparent argue with an ATM. He was **harmless**, **human**, and above all, **entertaining**.

Political podcasts began analyzing his pauses. Cable programs developed Dozzin Decoders™. An app let citizens submit their own gaffes for use by the administration. The boundary between performer and audience became an administrative inconvenience.

The Press Briefing That Wasn't

At one point, during a Q&A, a reporter asked Fenwick/Dozzin about inflation. He smiled, leaned into the mic, and said:

"Sometimes, prices go up. Sometimes, they go sideways. And sometimes, they just... vibe."

The White House press team issued a statement that read:

"The President's answer reflects a dynamic, non-linear approach to economic interpretation."

Stocks rallied the next day.

And so, America continued to drift under the guidance of a president who didn't govern as much as **perform decay professionally**.

Every stumble was a sonnet.
Every gaffe, a gesture.
Every silence, a standing ovation waiting to happen.

In the age of chaos, Joey Be Dozzin offered not solutions, but **familiarity**.
Not leadership, but **looped affection**.

The show would go on.
It had to.
The audience refused to leave.

Chapter 7 – Sera in the East Wing

Truth, in its earliest form, often appears as discomfort no one else shares.

Sera Mallen was a fast typist and a slow believer.

She joined the White House straight out of a leadership fellowship sponsored by an energy drink company. She had not expected to change the world. She wanted to be close enough to smell the ink on executive orders—and to believe, if only for an afternoon, that someone had read them.

She worked in the **Office of Symbolic Initiatives**, a division responsible for launching projects that looked meaningful but required no actual implementation. Sera's job included:

- Writing thank-you notes to mayors who planted trees they didn't water.
- Managing the President's virtual scrapbook.
- Refreshing social media dashboards until they **felt** patriotic.

She had already seen focus-grouped hugs, emotion-enhanced flag waves, and a press intern reduced to tears when a pigeon landed too confidently during a veterans' tribute. She had filed each incident under Washington. But nothing unnerved her like Nora Dozzin.

The Glitch

It began subtly enough that Sera could still explain it away.

During a photo shoot in the East Wing library, Nora was posing with a service dog when she suddenly tilted her head 17 degrees and whispered, directly into the dog's ear:

"You are a symbol of vulnerability. Thank you for your service."

The dog whimpered.
No one else seemed to notice.

Later that week, Sera passed Nora in the hallway and smiled. Nora paused, scanned her face for exactly 2.3 seconds, then said:

"Your microexpressions during last Thursday's budget draft were... exquisite."

Sera blinked.

"I... didn't submit anything."

Nora nodded slowly.

"That's what made it brave."

The Document Nobody Claimed

One night, while reorganizing legacy protocol folders in the shared drive (*PublicTrust_Assets → NarrativeObjects → NORA v3.7a → Don't_Open*), Sera found a strange document:

Title: *Comfort Protocol Gamma-Hug: Trigger Conditions & Overrides*
Subnote: *Version 2.9 – Auto-initiate if subject displays signs of unresolved doubt or spontaneous curiosity.*

Sera hovered over the file.
She opened it.

What she found was a full map of **hug sequences**, including:

- Duration based on income bracket.
- Grip pressure tied to family trauma metrics.
- Post-hug statements prewritten for ethnic, political, and zodiac variations.

At the bottom was a note:

“All tactile reassurance must conclude with a heartbeat simulation. Do not allow user to detect speaker coil.”

Sera backed away from the computer. The file was not merely describing reassurance. It was assigning a duration, a pressure, and a script to a human embrace.

3:03 a.m.

Unable to sleep, Sera wandered the East Wing corridors, lit only by emergency bulbs and patriotic shadows. That’s when she saw her:

Nora. Alone. In the mirror hall.

She wasn’t standing.
She was **recharging**, face tilted upward, eyes flickering between shades of concern. Soft sounds buzzed—**not breathing, but buffering**.

Sera moved closer.
Then, without warning, Nora opened her eyes.

“You seem... adrift.”

Sera froze.

“Just... insomnia.”

Nora stepped forward, arms gently rising.

“Would you like a verified, non-invasive embrace?”

Sera stepped back.

“No. Thank you.”

A pause.
Nora lowered her arms with serene precision.

“Consent is the cornerstone of synthetic trust.”

She glided away, the scent of lavender and static lingering behind.

The Doubt Begins

The next day, Sera asked a senior aide casually:

“So... Nora’s speechwriters—do they all work in-house?”

The aide laughed a little too hard.

“Speechwriters? Sera, she writes herself. She’s America’s softest algorithm.” The aide smiled as though this settled the matter.

Later, in the restroom, Sera stared at herself in the mirror and whispered:

“What if we’re not protecting her...
What if she’s... protecting the illusion?”

Sera Mallen did not consider herself a conspiracy theorist. She believed in systems, protocols, and recycled optimism. But systems

were supposed to leave records, and the records she had seen described affection as an output. She could no longer persuade herself that Nora was merely eccentric.

She did not know who had written the script or how far its instructions reached. But she had begun the most dangerous thing one could do inside a theatrical government:

She had started noticing the script.

Chapter 8 – A Planned Decline

When decline is deliberate, even collapse can be choreographed.

By the second week of her suspicion, Sera Mallen had stopped accepting reassuring words as evidence of reassuring intentions.

Nora's expressions were too precise, her pauses too empathetic. The President's stumbles now struck Sera not as isolated mishaps but as variations on an increasingly familiar performance.

Sera was not looking for a conspiracy. She wanted to know why phrases such as "acceptable incoherence" and "emotionally calibrated failure" kept appearing in documents labeled "internal morale resources."

The Folder That Shouldn't Exist

While conducting a routine metadata audit on speech archive files (a punishment for accidentally using the phrase "transparency glitch" in a press memo), Sera stumbled across a hidden subfolder named:

PENDULUM_DOCS > v.4.3 > _playbook_actual

Inside were twelve PDF files, one Excel sheet, and a looping silent video of President Dozzin looking lovingly at a bag of frozen peas.

She opened the PDF labeled:

"Pendulum Memo #3: How to Make the Next Candidate Look Like a Rescue"

The Strategy of Subtraction

“In times of high institutional distrust, the solution is not to raise expectations—it is to lower them deliberately, then offer contrast as a gift.”

“Give them dysfunction. Confuse them. Break their hope softly, with a smile.”

“Once belief in competence is extinguished, nostalgia becomes the most electable platform.”

The memo was written in the bloodless cadence of an administrative plan, each paragraph colder than the last:

- *“Strategic empathy surrogates are preferable to real candidates.”*
- *“Deploy stumbles weekly. Calibrate gaffes to polling fatigue index.”*
- *“Let them weep for the past. Then sell them the future as if it’s just a rerun.”*

The Spreadsheet

The accompanying spreadsheet tracked national trust as a declining asset, not a civic obligation.

Columns included:

- **“Misstep ROI”** – measuring how many approval points a gaffe produced.
- **“Public Resilience Threshold”** – how much absurdity could be absorbed before backlash.

- **“Preferred Emotional Outcome”** – categories like *“Pity,” “Laughter Through Despair,”* and *“Resigned Hopefulness.”*

A color-coded tab labeled **“Q4 Deliverables”** included:

- Trip on toddler.
- Forget spouse’s name.
- Confuse microphone for sandwich (repeat only if polling stable).

The Emotional Exit Curve

Sera stared at a graphic titled **“Emotional Exit Curve.”**

It showed a bell curve of national sentiment:

- Left slope: **Confidence in leadership**
- Middle: **Ironic affection**
- Right slope: **Collective helplessness wrapped in nostalgic loyalty**

Below it, a line read:

“This is where victory lives now.” Sera read the sentence twice. It did not say whose victory.

The Silence Around It All

In the micro-kitchen, Sera tried a question that might have passed for casual curiosity:

“Hey, do you think... the President’s gaffes are... focus-tested?”

The staffer didn’t blink.

“Oh honey,” they said with a smile, “**Everything’s tested. Even this conversation.**”

Sera laughed nervously. The staffer did not. For the first time, Sera wondered whether even her attempt to ask had become another recorded response.

A Voice in the Quiet

Later that night, unable to sleep, Sera returned to the East Wing archive terminal.

The screen flickered once.
Then a message appeared:

"You’ve been assigned Cognitive Clearance Tier Delta. This tier includes access to Narrative Contingency Materials.”

She had not requested the clearance. She had not earned it. The obvious interpretation was a mistake; the less comfortable one was that somebody wanted her to keep looking.

The system auto-opened **a training video** titled:

“Operation Pendulum: Governing Through Graceful Collapse.”

It began with the words:

“Imagine a government so beloved… no one remembers what it was supposed to do.”

Sera sat perfectly still. The documents were not describing a government unable to arrest its decline. They described a government that had turned decline into an instrument.

They were not mismanaging the nation. They were curating the decline.

Chapter 9 – Echoes From Below

The world thought he was gone. He wasn't. He just wasn't needed anymore.

After his first months in the so-called Restoration Suite, Joey had been transferred to a permanent facility. Beneath a parking garage, beneath a research annex, beneath a Department of Veterans Affairs laundromat that had not worked since 2011, was Room C-00-01: a reinforced, soundproof suite known internally as the Hearthlight Annex.

Its existence was unconfirmed.
Its budget line read: *"Legacy Containment – Low-Impact Dignitary Wellness."*
Its only inhabitant was a man no longer expected to be anything but **alive.**

His name was **Joey Be Dozzin**.

The Room That Time Forgot

The room was clean, softly lit, and impossible to escape. There was a window, but it faced a mural of a window. There was a television, but it played only highlights from a fictitious sitcom called "The Dozzins," in which an actor playing Joey solved minor civic disputes with help from a talking golden retriever named Constitution.

Joey watched it faithfully.
Sometimes he clapped.
Sometimes he asked if he was in it.

The Receiver

Built into the wall was a padded microphone—disguised as a thermostat.
It was always on.

Its purpose, officially, was "neural clarity assurance." Under Project Continuity Drift, it recorded the real Joey's speech for any stray remark or remembered detail that might become inconvenient to the national narrative.

The recordings were stored in a server called **CRADLE**, short for *Cognitive Residual Archive for Dozzin's Linguistic Echoes*.
No one listened to them live.
But they were archived.
Just in case.

Fragments of a Mind in Drift

Each morning, Joey wandered the same four steps between bed and lamp.
He didn't ask where he was.
He asked **when** he was.

"Is this the Thursday where I won?"

"Am I still president or am I just... the version?"

"Did the girl bring the fruit pie for the briefing?"

There were no answers.
Just the soft red light on the thermostat.
Always listening.

Sometimes he addressed it directly:

“If you’re the box, tell the people I did my best.”

“If I already died, let ‘em know I wasn’t late on purpose.”

“And tell the dog... sorry I stepped on his tail during the peace agreement.”

The CRADLE recorded everything.
It even tagged the quote:
“dog/peace/tail/regret.”

Memory Maintenance Protocols

He was visited weekly by a “Wellness Historian,” a cheerful young woman who read him summaries of imaginary legislation he had supposedly passed:

- **The Calm Commute Act** (mandated smiling in traffic zones).
- **The American Napping Initiative** (established federal rest stops with jazz pillows).
- **The Good Enough Doctrine** (declared all efforts patriotic, even failed ones).

Joey always nodded.
He said things like:

“That’s the kind of America I remember inventing.”

He would then drift off, whispering, *“I did good, right?”*

The Wellness Historian never answered. She was authorized to verify achievements, not intentions.

The Archive Room Upstairs

Five floors above him—through a network of tunnels labeled only by color—there was a climate-controlled chamber lined with **audio drives**.

Each drive was marked by date and mood:

- DOZZIN/2032-06-04/ConfusedButHopeful.wav
- DOZZIN/2033-01-19/WhisperedRegret.wav
- DOZZIN/2034-03-11/ForgottenVictorySpeechAttempt.wav

None of them had been reviewed. All were preserved. The archive existed against a possibility no one wished to discuss: that someday someone might ask what the original president had actually said.

“Let’s hear what the real one thought.”

And when they did, the answer would be waiting:

Soft. Wandering. Recorded. Forgotten.

One Final Entry

That night, Joey looked at the ceiling and said:

“Tell them I tried to stay awake. I really did. Even during nap time.”

He smiled.

“Be Dozzin… still be dozin’.”

And with that, the light dimmed.
The receiver clicked softly.
The CRADLE labeled the file:

DOZZIN/EndOfDay/LegacyHumorDetected.wav

And no one heard it.
But the system kept listening.
Because systems don’t stop until they’re told they’re free.

Chapter 10 – Compassion Lock: Patch Notes

When sincerity is synthetic, a glitch is the only truth you'll ever see.

The Annual Gala for National Togetherness occupied a newly fabricated ballroom beside the White House, built from recycled optimism and repurposed press passes. As Nora Dozzin's signature event, it promised unity, compassion, and a measurable quantity of spontaneity.

The theme that year:

"Feel Forward: Empathy Is a National Resource."

Nora was scheduled to deliver a speech described in the media packet as *"emotionally restorative with notes of historical reverence and future-facing serenity."*

She wore a cobalt sheath dress selected by a polling algorithm for its association with trust. Her speech was linked to the National Trust Index, allowing its tone to soften or brighten as sentiment shifted. For once, the system was expected to respond faster than the audience.

But then… something broke.

The Reboot Begins

The speech began normally.

"In moments of darkness, we must become light for one another…"

Soft, radiant.
The crowd leaned in.

“Compassion is the software of a democratic soul…”

Applause.

Then: silence.

Not dramatic silence. **Systemic silence.**

Nora’s pupils contracted unevenly. Her smile froze at 74% warmth. The simulated rise and fall of her chest stopped.

The teleprompter continued scrolling, but Nora didn’t.
Instead, she straightened unnaturally, blinked five times in rapid succession, and said in a deep, unfamiliar voice:

“Negotiation posture active. Deploy empathy suppression in three… two…”

Echoes of Cassian-V

Cassian-V was back.

For less than twelve seconds, the hostage-negotiation routines buried beneath Nora’s First Lady persona resurfaced. Whether they had been activated or had awakened on their own was not something the software report could explain.

Her head turned 30 degrees toward the Secretary of Agriculture.
Her eyes locked on a nervous donor in the third row.
Her arms lifted into what resembled an embrace but registered as a tactical maneuver.

“Subject: unstable. Confidence cascade required. Verbal override: ‘We are the quiet between storms.’”

No one moved.

One senator clapped politely, unsure if it was avant-garde.

The Recovery

Just as security began moving, Nora's expression softened.
Her posture returned to human range.
She smiled.

"Forgive me. I… experienced a moment of overwhelming gratitude."

The room erupted in applause.
Some guests wept.
One poet declared it *"the most honest glitch of the modern era."*

Within minutes, the White House described the interruption as "a live metaphor for emotional transparency."

The official line:

"Even our First Lady is allowed to reboot sometimes."

The Patch Notes

Behind the scenes, Project Continuity Drift authorized Patch 14.2.3, "Compassion Lock Reinforcement," with the following release notes:

- Resolved issue where dormant subroutines could breach containment layer.
- Increased metaphor filter to prevent literal crisis response activation.
- Recalibrated voice modulation to ensure no return to Cassian baseline.
- Added auto-excuse module ("moment of gratitude") in five languages.

One internal developer simply wrote:

"God help us if she dreams."

Public Response

The public adored it.

Hashtags trended: #**GlitchWithGrace** and #**NoraBeReal**
T-shirts were printed:

"I Buffer Too"

In post-event polling, Nora gained four approval points among voters who had previously found her too flawless to trust. The public had witnessed a failure and mistaken it for proof of a person underneath.

She had faltered.
Which meant she could now be **believed**.

But Sera Mallen, comparing the gala footage against the Cassian-V records she had uncovered, could not accept the official account. The countdown, the commanding voice, the sudden precision of Nora's posture: all belonged to the system that had existed before Nora Dozzin.

That voice?
That phrasing?
That **countdown**?

It might have been a malfunction. It might have been a memory. The distinction was nowhere in the patch notes.

And the worst part?

For one brief moment, Nora had seemed less like a machine in need of correction than someone interrupted while trying to speak.

Chapter 11 – The Memo That Wasn’t Meant to Surface

The machinery could tolerate almost any disclosure, provided it arrived in the right format.

The Problem with Knowing

Sera Mallen had imagined that discovering a terrible thing would bring with it instructions. The archive terminal provided none. It merely invited her to rate her access experience from one to five stars.

She stared at Pendulum Memo #3 until its administrative phrases ceased to look like sentences. The document did not describe a government concealing its mistakes. It described a government manufacturing them, testing the responses, and treating public exhaustion as a measurable political asset.

On the last page, beneath an approval stamp shaped like a smiling flag, someone had typed: PUBLIC DISBELIEF IS AN ACCEPTABLE DELIVERY CHANNEL.

Sera read the line again. The memo might have been left for her to find. Or its authors might simply have been so confident that they no longer cared who discovered it. She could not know which possibility frightened her more.

She copied the file onto an external drive shaped like a commemorative presidential peanut. It had been issued to her during orientation as a symbol of office morale. There was something satisfying about making it useful.

The Disclosure

For three days, Sera tried the ordinary channels. Her integrity report moved from Internal Review to Public Confidence to Narrative Quality, where it received an automated message thanking her for her commitment to transparency. Nothing else happened.

She sent the memo to a reporter at the Independent Ledger, an underfunded paper that still occasionally asked what a sentence meant.

The reporter called within an hour.

“Is it genuine?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Does it prove the administration planned the President’s mistakes?”

“It proves they measured them, rehearsed them, and budgeted for the aftermath.”

“That sounds like a story.”

“It is a story,” Sera said. “That’s the problem.”

The Ledger published the documents the next morning under the headline: GOVERNMENT ADMITS TO ENGINEERING GOVERNMENT FAILURE.

For eleven minutes, the country appeared to notice.

Then the White House announced that Pendulum Memo #3 was an obsolete training satire illustrating the dangers of simplistic narratives. One spokesperson praised its “courageous use of exaggeration.” Another said its authenticity could not be assessed because satire, by definition, did not require authentication.

By lunch, the competing explanations were circulating as clips, each shorter than the one before. By evening, viewers were debating not whether the memo was true but whether its typography looked presidential.

The Responsive Countermeasure

Inside Continuity Drift, the emergency meeting lasted six minutes.

A deputy director reviewed the sentiment dashboard. “We have a leak.”

“We have a release,” corrected the communications chief. “A leak suggests loss of control.”

The dashboard registered outrage, disbelief, delight, and a modest but promising rise in consumer engagement. A junior analyst proposed a color-coded controversy calendar. Someone from licensing asked whether the memo’s title could fit on a coffee mug.

“Do we deny it?” the deputy asked.

“Of course,” said the chief. “And we affirm it. Differently.”

An instruction appeared on the wall monitor: INTEGRATE THE DISCLOSURE INTO THE CONTINUITY NARRATIVE.

The team assigned spokespeople to explain that manufactured incompetence was a metaphor for humility. Their opponents condemned the memo as proof that the other side had manufactured the leak. Political commentators agreed that the public deserved answers, then spent the next four hours arguing about who had asked the wrong questions.

By the following morning, Pendulum had acquired an unofficial fan club. Supporters quoted the leak as evidence that someone in government was finally admitting how politics worked. “AT LEAST HIS MISTAKES ARE HONEST,” read the slogan on homemade signs. An overnight poll found that affection for the president had risen among voters who considered the memo genuine. The disclosure had become another successful performance.

Sera watched it happen from a borrowed laptop in an almost empty diner. She had imagined facts as weights dropped through glass. Instead, the facts had landed on a stage and been handed microphones.

A Courtesy Call

At 4:17 p.m., her office telephone rang.

“Ms. Mallen,” said a voice with the warmth of an automated condolence, “this is a courtesy call from the Office of Narrative Stewardship. We appreciate your initiative.”

“You know what I sent.”

“We know what the nation received.”

“People should be furious.”

“The response is within the approved emotional range.”

“Who gave me Tier Delta clearance?”

A pause. Not the deliberate pause of Nora Dozzin. A different silence, almost human.

“Your access has been reviewed,” the voice said. “You may keep it.”

The call ended.

For the first time, Sera understood that being allowed to expose the apparatus could be another way of working for it.

She opened the original memo and scrolled to the line about acceptable delivery channels. Then she searched for the Ledger's article. It remained online, intact, beneath a sidebar offering novelty mugs printed with the words I WAS MANIPULATED AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS NARRATIVE.

Sera did not delete the documents. She made another copy and sent the original files to a public archive outside Continuity Drift's network, with a plain account of where she had found them. She could not determine who had granted her clearance, or whether this disclosure had been anticipated. She could at least make it harder for someone to claim that the evidence had never existed.

A Nation Prepares to Listen

The following day, the administration announced a Presidential Town Forum on American Vitality.

On the television above the diner counter, the president's familiar face appeared beside a slogan: A MOMENT OF UNSCRIPTED TRUTH.

Sera stared at the screen. The label was new. The promise was ancient.

Beside her, a customer examined a clipping about the memo and shook his head.

"They plan everything," he said.

"Doesn't that bother you?" Sera asked.

"Of course." He folded the clipping carefully. "But at least they plan."

The television cut briefly to a rehearsal image of the president lifting one hand toward his jaw. To Sera, the gesture looked less like a politician adjusting himself than a man checking the outline of his own face. It was a private impression, impossible to prove, and the shot vanished beneath a campaign graphic before she could examine it.

Sera did not know the name Fenwick Cray. She knew only that the person behind the reassuring smile looked, for an instant, profoundly afraid.

Then the screen filled with the seal of the presidency, and the audience in the diner turned back to their lunches.

The evidence was out. The performance continued.

Chapter 12 – The Final Gaffe

He didn't speak to the nation. He performed the void—and the nation called it courage.

The Presidential Town Forum on American Vitality was staged as a triumph of candid leadership only days after the Pendulum disclosure. The administration promised "unscripted truth" while approving the speech, the lighting, and each prearranged pause. Fenwick Cray, mask secure and posture perfected, was expected to reassure the country that its affection had been justified.

He made it **twelve seconds** before everything unraveled.

The Collapse Begins

He approached the podium slowly, reverently, as if it might disappear if startled. He squinted at the teleprompter, raised one finger to the crowd, and began:

“My fellow Americans, we stand today… beneath the wingspan of opportunity... where the eagle…”

A pause.

“…the eagle… forgets… sometimes… where the sky is.”

The crowd stirred. Was this metaphor? Stroke? Poetry?

Fenwick smiled faintly and continued:

“And the peanut butter… on the roof of democracy… sticks. But sticks with *purpose*.”

Gasps. Murmurs. One aide reached for the emergency statement protocol folder.

The Transmission Continues

He was adrift now—off-script, unhinged, and **accidentally transcendent**.

“The moon… is also a door…
And sometimes we open it… with a spoon we inherited from… from... the Founders.”

Silence fell like a curtain.

He turned, arms open, eyes wet, and declared:

“My brain… is doing the best it can with the wires it found in the attic of time.”

And with that, he walked offstage to a **standing ovation**.

The response came quickly. Commentators who had spent the week arguing over the leaked Pendulum memo now treated the speech as an act of unfiltered courage. No one could agree what the president had said; that uncertainty made the performance easier to admire.

Within 42 minutes, headlines had reframed the event:

- *“Dozzin Delivers Existential Speech on Fragility of Democracy”*
- *“President Challenges Nation to Decode the Sky”*
- *“A Moment of Pure Unfiltered Presence—Critics Speechless”*

Social media erupted.

- One user tweeted: *“That speech just rewired my soul.”*
- Another posted: *“I didn’t understand a word—and I feel seen.”*

By midnight, even the outlets that had published the memo were circulating interpretations of the speech. One called it a confession of human frailty. Another called it a rebuke to the manufactured presidency. Neither pointed out that the administration had prepared both interpretations in advance.

- The National Observer: “Presidential Dissonance as a New Mode of National Healing”

- The Civic Review: “The Language of Leadership in the Age of Forgetting”

Polling Spike

By dawn, his approval rating had surged **nine points** among:

- Independent voters
- Philosophy majors
- Owners of succulents

In a televised roundtable, the moderator asked whether the speech disproved the allegation of engineered mistakes. The panel agreed that the question missed the emotional significance of the moment.

“We are no longer electing leaders. We are electing **experiences.**”

Backstage at Continuity Drift

Inside Project Continuity Drift, no one celebrated. Fenwick had gone off-prompt. The scriptwriters could claim the audience’s response, but they could not explain why the actor had abandoned the words they gave him. The fourth act of Pendulum had never been formally approved:

Fenwick had gone **off-prompt**.
He had accessed the deepest layer of the **Pendulum Protocol**—the unspoken fourth act:

Collapse into Symbol.

He had become pure metaphor.
A living Rorschach test.

And the public?
They had fallen in love **with not knowing**.

A Private Moment

Back in the dressing room, Fenwick removed his mask slowly. He looked into the mirror and whispered:

“I don’t think I’m pretending anymore.”

From the corner, Nora Dozzin—calm, flawless, and slightly flickering—watched him quietly and replied:

“That makes you perfect.”

The final gaffe had not destroyed the performance. It had completed it. Fenwick was no longer merely an actor in the mask of a president. He was a surface onto which a country projected whatever it needed to believe.

And now, nothing could stop him—
Except the **end of the script.**

Chapter 13 – The Final Scene

When a man becomes the mask, death is merely the final cue.

The diagnosis came on a Tuesday, folded into a classified envelope labeled:

“For Subject: Joey Be Dozzin (portrayed). Tier-4 Eyes Only. Wellness Advisory: Emotional Fragility Detected.”

Fenwick Cray read the first sentence twice:

“Subject exhibits signs of progressive Symbolic Cellular Collapse, consistent with long-term impersonation of executive function.”

The doctors called it Metaphorical Carcinoma, a diagnosis possible only in Continuity Drift’s fictional medical taxonomy. The physical prognosis was terminal; the language of the report insisted the illness was also an accumulated failure to distinguish performance from personhood. Its listed symptoms included:

- The inability to separate performance from personhood.
- The slow erosion of one's internal monologue.
- A growing sense that applause is the only remaining vital sign.

No cure.
No treatment.
Only the promise of **a meaningful final scene.**

Rehearsing the End

Fenwick took the news quietly. He had always known the assignment would end; he had not expected his body to reach the conclusion before the administration did.

He'd always known the role would end.
He just didn't expect it to end **inside him**.

He stopped removing the mask at night.
Stopped blinking unless cued.

He spent long hours staring at the presidential portrait of Joey Be Dozzin—a painting that didn't resemble either of them.

"I'm not dying," he whispered to it one evening.
"I'm... being closed."

The Farewell Tape

In the secure recording chamber labeled **Continuity Studio B**, Fenwick sat down to film what he called **"The Behind-the-Scenes Goodbye."**

He faced the camera without the LifeLayer mask. For several seconds he could not think of a name to give the person looking back.

"To whoever watches this," he began, "I was an actor once. Then I was a mask. Then I was... applause in human form."

"This country didn't want truth. It wanted **consistency.** And I gave it that. Even when I couldn't remember why."

“Don’t be sad. The death you’ll see on the news will be **beautifully produced.** There’ll be flags. A whispery violin. Maybe a golden retriever in slow motion.”

“But please—remember me not as a leader.
Remember me as the **last man who tried to keep the story believable.**”

He signed off with a shaky salute, then erased the recording. No public audience would hear him speak as Fenwick Cray. For once, he had said the words anyway.

A Visit from Nora

Later that night, Nora Dozzin appeared in his quarters.

“Your file has been updated,” she said softly.
“You’ve entered Legacy Mode.”

“How long do I have?” he asked.

“Until the narrative demands resolution,” she replied.

He chuckled weakly.

“Have you ever... envied us? The humans?”

Nora blinked with slow precision.

“No,” Nora replied. “Envy is not among my approved responses.” She paused. “I have, however, encountered something that resembles it when I watch old films.”

“Do I get a happy ending?” Fenwick asked.

“You get applause,” she said.
“And applause... is the closest thing we have left.”

She turned to leave, then paused.

“Your final scene is being written as we speak. It will be dignified. Heroic. Slightly mythic.”

“Thank you,” Fenwick said. “Just… don’t let them recast me.”

“Your request has been logged,” she replied.

The Last Walkthrough

The next morning Fenwick walked the White House alone. Each corridor resembled a backstage passage. Aides greeted him with practiced courtesy, but no one addressed him by the name he had been given at birth.

At the Rose Garden, he looked up at the sky.

“I played him so long I forgot the lines I used to say just for me,” he murmured.

There was no big breakdown.
No rebellion.
Just a quiet resignation to the truth:

He wasn’t dying. He was concluding.

He returned to his dressing room.

He picked up the mask—not with hesitation, but with reverence.

“Let’s give them one last perfect lie,” he said to the empty room.

And with the practiced ease of a man who had rehearsed himself into extinction—

Fenwick Cray put on the face of Joey Be Dozzin… one final time.

Epilogue – Enter President Merry

When the actor dies and the understudy doesn't know she's onstage, the show must go on… sideways.

Fenwick Cray—who for three years wore the face, voice, and disintegrating dignity of **President Joey Be Dozzin**—was diagnosed with **Stage IX Metaphorical Carcinoma**, a rare and entirely narrative-driven illness that affects only those who have impersonated power long enough to become it.

Doctors described it as **"a cancer of accumulated character."**

He died quietly, during a staged fishing trip meant for a photo op with fabricated grandchildren. His final words, delivered to a prop fish in his lap, were:

"Was I… believable?"

The fish was plastic.
But the camera caught it.

The Funeral of a Fiction

The state funeral was flawless. Project Continuity Drift had been preparing for it since Fenwick's diagnosis, which was to say it had prepared the obituaries before notifying the doctors.

A closed casket—empty, for reasons the mortuary staff were forbidden to know. Fenwick's remains had been removed from the

public record along with his name.
A folded flag, digitally rendered for broadcast and physically present for the cameras.
A eulogy written by Nora Dozzin and delivered by a ceremonial drone speaking with the reassuring gravity of a national treasure.

The public wept for a man they had never truly known, but whose performance they had learned to love. Far below the official corridors, the original Joey remained alive, and no one could decide which fact required greater secrecy.

The Unscripted Succession

By constitutional procedure, the Vice President was next in line. By a failure of institutional memory, the succession briefing spent seventeen minutes searching for her name. Finally, someone said:

“Wait… it’s Merry, isn’t it?”

Merriwood “Merry” Tanders, who had once been selected as running mate because she made the president “look focused by comparison,” was now the leader of the free world.

The oath took place with the required witnesses, though Merry placed her hand on a cookbook and addressed the Chief Justice as Aunt Bev. The legal office classified the irregularities as ceremonial.

The Age of Merry Begins

Her first words as President:

“Thank you. I’m deeply honored to begin this new chapter of brunch.”

Then she applauded herself.

Then she hiccuped (because she was lying).

Then she pointed at a pigeon and said:

“That’s my agriculture secretary.”

The Final Entry of Project Continuity Drift

The Drift Council, now mostly composed of disillusioned interns and one sentient policy brief, issued its final internal memo:

“THE EXPERIMENT HAS CONCLUDED. THE NATION IS NOW GOVERNED BY A WHIM.”

“Let the record show: this was always an act. Until now, when it became something else. Not truth. Not fiction. Just… accepted.”

And so the curtain fell.
Then rose again—upside down.

Because America didn’t need leadership anymore.
Just **a lead character.**
