

## Episode 7: Working Class Hero

Hi friends, thank you for coming to see us again here round the bend but I think this time you may want to reconsider. You see, I had every intention of taking you back into the future with me, tied to a tree, dripping with honey and waiting for the ants to come, but certain... events have made this prospect untenable. So then, where do we find ourselves? Do we follow our Agent Orange through his indoctrination before he helps find the key to the end of everything? Do we pay a visit to our dog and worm funtime brother buddy story? Do I fill in how Abria became queen of the lotophages on the isle of Djerba oh so many years ago? Or do I present an unabridged history of the Palindromes? Maybe I should tell you all exactly who is imprisoned inside of our war torn sphinx? We could even go back to my first foray into the long buried Mojave Logistics headquarters where I found the video tapes that will soon make up the totality of the Mojave Memos? No friends, none of these feel quite right. Though these answers will be apparent eventually, I think it's time we got a little personal. Not with me, mind you. I do not matter in this chain of events until a ways down the road and that is if my captors have a change of heart at some point in the next day or two, three at the most. The honey will only coat the skin for so long, a sugary sweet shield currently protecting me from the very real and seemingly unavoidable pain I see on the horizon.

No friends, I think today, we should pay a visit to our overseer deep in the recesses of his mind and history. And as Vaati Vidya used to say in the long dead days of deep dive video game story time, prepare to cry. It's cannon. It's in the lore.

His eyes blink open, bright fluorescent light floods his visual cortex and renders his surroundings in painstaking detail. His brain both processes and creates the reality he finds himself in. A hospital room, stark white and gleaming metal. Sanitizer scents and the copper tinge of blood in the air. He is groggy and disoriented until a searing pain in his left side seizes him and brings tears to his young eyes. He stares up at the drop ceiling tiles and shifts himself in the bed. His mother runs into the room, "don't move baby," she said, "try to be still." She places a cylinder in his hand with a button at the top and says "if it hurts too bad baby, just push the button." It does so he does. A wave of opiates carry him away into the yawning void of sleep.

His eyes flash again, now 30 years older but this time there is no light, no render of reality, a dark lonely chasm occupied by himself and god knows what else. He finds himself in that viscous embryonic fluid with something eating at his brain, he's been here before, he knows he has, that creature that held him still in the air, body blazing and stuck, staring his death in the face, and then back again into the fluid and that voice... that fucking voice. [MOMO SPARE AND SKIRMISH] He rips his arms from the fluid, and pulls himself to his feet.

The pain returns, sharp and forbidding. The kind of pain that turns the very reality around you into your enemy. He is strapped to the hospital bed to prevent sudden erratic movement. Every orifice of his body except for the anus has a tube or wires sticking out like his body has become a garden of medical breakthrough technology. All of these things that shouldn't be where they are but here they are nonetheless. He scans the room for his mother. She said she'd be right there with him the entire time but he cannot see her. He does not remember why he is here, it's dancing on the edge of his memory, taunting his developing mind, and he doesn't realize it just yet friends, but he will carry far more scars away from this ordeal than anyone could have anticipated. Fraggie Rock blinks on to the soundless television and he rests his eyes there for a moment trying to trick this pain by not paying it any attention but friends, we all know distraction never works for long. He pushes the button his mother gave him again but this time there's no wave of euphoric peace coming to save him, no instead of that, a man in a lab coat walks into the room, smiles at him, takes the magic button away and sets it aside. The man looks at him through soft green eyes, his smile widens uncomfortably and he says, "Let's get that tube out of you? Whaddya say?"

Scanning the space around him, his shuffling feet crushing thick yet fragile stalks of something that could be flesh as easily as vegetation beneath them, the darkness is encompassing, as though he's been swallowed whole by a sky, both starless and bible black. His senses tell him very little, the only sound is his stumble, the smell is overwhelming yet unidentifiable. Sour and stagnant. Air that has never been taken into lungs. He rotates and strains for any fragment of light, any inkling of a way out.

["Joseph" repeating into infinity "you should run."]

The man in the lab coat sits on a chair beside his bed, it squeaks slightly but in our patient's ears it is the only thing that can be heard. His mother steps into the room, he can see her but this doctor, this motherfucker says "Ma'am you need to leave, you do not want to see this." She glances at our patient, her child, with a sad and broken glare like maybe, secretly, she had hoped for the procedure to fail, hoped he would never open his eyes again, because even though she does not want to admit it, her life would be easier without the weight on her shoulders, and the truth of this vicious little thought will only become more apparent over time. More cost, less benefit. Constant heartache with very little pay off. She'd never say it out loud but the look is enough, even for our nine year old patient to grasp. And it isn't her fault. It's 1991 and Reagan set a series of events in motion that will never ever trickle down to her. It will only get worse as the years go by and these medical bills? They will drive her into bankruptcy, only not the rich people version one files when they are tired of paying their employees and go home to the mansion, but rather the version for poor folk that leaves a mark that cannot be ignored for years and years. She steps back out of the hospital room, as the man in the lab coat grips a surgical drain sticking out of our patient's side and tells him to count to three. "I will pull on three." He

says, “Don’t worry, this will not hurt a bit.” Our patient closes his eyes in preparation and begins to count.

1

2 [RIPS FROM FLESH]

And this was the first time our patient heard the voice that lives in his head: They lied to you. They will never tell you the truth. [echoes into oblivion]

[VOICE IN HEAD:] It is coming Joseph. It is here and it is coming. You should sit down and wait. You cannot win. Just let it happen. You have fought your entire life, but you can rest now, all is well.

Violent thrashing approaches him from behind. A rumble breaking the dead silent space. He fumbles forward, tripping on the stalks and launching himself into the space before him. He struggles back to his feet and feels a hot wet splash from his forehead, coating his face and making his skin slick and sticky. He scrambles along the perimeter, his hand sliding along the wall he crashed into, in an attempt to prevent it from happening again.

[VIH:] Just sit down. Sit down. You have never won a battle in your whole life. That does not change today. Give up, it’s never bothered you before.

The sound behind him thrashes ever closer. Echoing, vibrating through him.

[VIH:] SIT DOWN.

He knocks on the walls, beating it with his fist as his desperation grows. [knocks growing hollow.] He notices a change in sound with each beat.

[Palindrome:] It’s almost here. Push. Hard.

[A screech fills the void around him. A terrible noise in his right ear. Heavy breathing and wet smacking. The sound of an animal lapping up water.]

[VIH:] Yes that’s right. Feed it, allow it to gather its strength. It has been so long since it had a friend to play with. So long since it had a toy. What else do you think you are? What else do you think your life has been? Your existence has always been contingent on your willingness to be kicked around, swatted at, and crushed. A peasant through and through.

[THE KNOCKING IS LOUD, HOLLOW, AND FRANTIC]

[Palindrome:] Don't listen to it. Push right there.

He smashes his shoulder into the wall and feels it give, [LICKING SOUND STOPS REPLACED BY A SAD YET ANGRY WHIMPER.] slightly. He drives his body against the wall again.

[VIH:] You are going to make it cry. Do you want it to CRY?

[Palindrome:] ONE MORE TIME.

He crashes into the wall one last time and this round he does not stop. The wall rips like paper and he falls. For a moment he feels suspended in mid air, hovering still like some looney toon, but friends, gravity wins, even in this place and the wind rushes by him but he can feel it approaching. The termination. The end. The bottom. Because as a great man once said, physics makes us all its bitch.

Three weeks after the hospital he found him self at home, freshly repaired heart in chest, brand new friend living in his brain, and a cartoon Hobbit on the television that had to be rewound every 77 minutes. Another inconvenience for his poor parents. Or at least that is what the voice likes to say. He has to lay still for two months or the gash in his side, just under the ribs, will reopen, though moving is the furthest thing from his mind and everytime he comes close to thinking about it, his body is there to remind him.

And here we find the roots of his accursed life. The unholy trinity of plagues that will ride ever forward on fire breathing steeds, trampling him at every twist and unfortunate turn his world will take. First, his heart. Born with a rare congenital blockage in the aorta that was not found in his infancy. The doctors made sure to hammer home just how rare that is. Less than a month ago he was running around a field with the football suit on, falling far behind the kids his coach referred to as "weak," meaning, in toxic macho language, too thin or too fat or too feminine or too anything other than aggressive future date raping "real boys." He had fallen over somewhere along the perimeter of the field, nose bleeding profusely despite lack of injury. The coach runs toward him yelling get up, yelling okay prissy boy, we will just leave you there, and they did. He was not helped till his mother arrived to pick him up after a long day at the salon. And those weak kids? Well they begged the coach to assist him, even made attempts themselves but each time they were forced to dash again, pointlessly, like the pussys their fathers constantly told them they were. You see, friends, Joseph had no blood flow in his legs, it was concentrated in his upper body and it needed a place to go, so life, as we all know... found a way.

Second, the drugs. When he pressed that button from his hospital bed fragile rock fever dream, he found a lifelong friend. A friend that would always take his pain away and make him feel better regardless of the circumstances of his life. A friend who would caress him in places a lover never could. A friend the Sackler family would propagate across the country that he lived in to toss lives into bottomless pits and arrest those that survive, all the while making the prettiest of pennies. In his adulthood the government would pretend to take that family to task and force consequences onto them such as removing their name from the university library. Needless to say, that had to sting them pretty bad. Meanwhile, your grandmother got addicted during a short lived bout of breast cancer, and while the cancer didn't kill her, the overdose did.

His body slammed against the ground.

[VIH:] Have you had enough yet? All you have to do is lay here and wait.

[Palindrome:] Stop listening to him and get up. Get up and run.

He can hear that same screech above him, falling ever closer. And the voice is right. Why does he fight so hard to maintain the breath that allows him to stay in constant contact with the torturous demon of a life he was always told was a fucking gift. After all, he survived a deadly congenital birth defect for nine full years, he must be meant for something, right? He must be chosen for something, RIGHT?

But instincts win again, he rolls forward as the thing that chases him, the thing that maybe always has and though it does not register immediately, there is light now, he can see, and my god how he wishes he couldn't.

You can likely guess by now the third and arguably most devastating plague which has haunted every single minute of his existence since the day his life was given new meaning: the voice.

[VIH:] Now we're getting somewhere.

At first, he was able to ignore it, pretending it wasn't there until one day he could pretend no longer. Throughout his childhood the voice made sure to let him know, at every opportunity, his life is ultimately a burden to everyone around him. He would never be able to work due to his heart, never be able to play the sportsball games or hide and seek with the few friends he made which did not live inside his head. Originally it was somewhat comforting, especially when he found himself alone in his mother's room watching the hobbit for the six hundredth time. It was conversational and it seemed to know more about him than he knew of himself. Which was not a difficult proposition given his age. It pretended it cared for him and only wanted to protect him from the world, from his parents, and most importantly from himself. But friends, it did not take

too long for those around him to determine something was not quite right. They found him mumbling to himself, having full on conversations about weighty topics like death and fate and sometimes, the song go ninja go by one Mr. Vanilla Ice. His parents ignored these full on private convos via various forms of mental gymnastics to somersault around the truth: that perhaps this child that cost them so much money and effort and time and heartbreak and essentially cursed them to poverty though they'd never stop chasing the dragon of that elusive American dream, well maybe he was also victimized by mental illness.

Before him, as he runs and trips and rolls about, a pale pink and indiscriminately diseased landscape unfolds. The foliage is fleshy and bleeding and seems to reach toward him as he passes. Red mist envelops him and dissipates just as quickly as though he is traveling through low lying viscera clouds acting as fog wherever the fuck he finds himself. The thrashing behind him has not ceased. A wave of dread inducing noise nipping at his heels. His breath is hard and hot in his chest, searing his lungs. He has to stop. For a moment. Just to catch his breath.

[Palindrome:] Just a little farther. Come to the base of the tower.

As the Palindrome speaks the ground begins to rumble beneath him, the white noise giving chase, squeals. If Joseph was in the right frame of mind he might realize the squeal holds a tinge of fear and taking this information toward its natural conclusion would lead him to the awareness that if there is fear, there is also weakness. The shaking ground knocks his legs from under him and he flips forward again. He is so fucking tired.

[VIH:] Just let it happen.

[A ROAR FILLS THE AIR]

Walls break through the slick fleshy terra firma, his hand, having fallen where the wall broke the ground as it slid up and into reality, went with it. And now he is no closer to understanding anything around him and short a hand to boot. But as his appendage ascended into the heavens, he had a sudden realization that should have been obvious from the moment he opened his eyes. You see friends, as his hand grows back while he watches, expression rapt with terrifying awe, he realizes—

And the voice made sure he always remained isolated from everyone and everything. Whenever he formed a new relationship that voice would swoop in for a bit of the ole self imposed emotional ultra violence. It would scream so loudly within the confines of his skull that he would hurt himself to make it go away, to stop thinking about it for a single second. And when he hurt himself he drove everyone else just a little further away. Then comes the drug lust... it's a cycle. A cycle he never thought he'd be able to break. A cycle that would continue through his teens.

And it seemed every five or six years he was having another heart procedure, another bout of intense pain and months of lying in bed immobile and over time the hobbit was edged out a tad more and replaced with increasingly darker media, both real and otherwise. Anything to make him feel like someone, anyone, has things worse than he does.

Whenever he made a mistake the voice nagged and wore him down. Berated him into numb acceptance. He would be alone for the entirety of his life. He may as well go ahead and accept it now before he causes himself or anyone else unnecessary pain and anguish. Throughout his teen years he became more and more dependent on harder and harder drugs until by the age of nineteen he found himself in quite the heroin trap quagmire. For the addict, addiction is a conundrum constantly combed through in the mind. They know they do not want the drug but they also know they want nothing else but the drug. This cognitive dissonance allows the thoughts to spin and spin about in the mind until the question becomes too difficult to confront. Because of the State of Things™ reaching out for help is likely to lead to more trouble than the fractured junky brain can cope with and thus becomes no more than a new step in a ceaseless cycle. And when that help does come, if ever, it's often coupled with religious nonsense the addict has an inherent aversion to, and for those with no preconceived religious aversions well they just replace one addiction with a god who only cares if your devotion comes with a 10% price tag. But one thing we all realize more and more each day is the system is not designed to help but rather to hold down, to firmly plant one's face in the dregs of a polluted lake made of money, labor, and shame. Unless of course, yr a cop, in which case the system is designed to allow you to be the hand that holds those millions of faces way down in the deep inky black piss we call a society.

He realizes, when he sees the same hand in two different places simultaneously that maybe, just maybe, this place is less real than he initially conceived. [THE FEAR SQUEAL REPEATS.] As the tower fully forms and settles before his eyes, a door hewn from a single piece of carved bone and adorned with a symbol made of petrified wood appears in the wall with a flash of blinding pink light. And for just a moment, as he passes through, he knows he has seen that symbol before. It is a simple, elegant, and expertly carved orchid in a jar.

[VIH:] DO NOT GO IN THERE. [VOICE FADES AND DISAPPEARS WITH THE CLOSING OF THE DOOR.]

Again, his reality has changed. He finds himself in a bunk surrounded by prison walls. He has been in solitary confinement for close to 8 months with a copy of twilight and the prison handbook as his only company. He did attempt to read twilight but even in this impressive state of boredom, he could not make it through the first chapter. Though if he had to pick one way or another, Team R Patts for fucking life. His addiction led, as addictions often do, straight into the big house. He was caught with a half gram of heroin but in the little town he was arrested in

you'd think he had a pocket full of satan. And they gave him four years. And unfortunately for him, his arrest likely kept him alive. The voice was less active during this period and he found if he focused, he could almost ignore it completely. He would, upon release, take this skill with him and use it to build a life he never believed he could have. So when Halloween of the third year came around he was out and thrust back into the world. A year of parole later and it was as if it never happened to begin with.

As you might expect, the voice did return with a vengeance upon his release because that voice serves only one purpose: to keep him isolated to the point that if he were ever to go missing, there'd be very few people willing to look for him.

Inside the tower, he finds a single plank of petrified wood with an orchid carved out of its center, on the floor. The walls are lit as if by the sun. The air dances with sweet fragrance. Something about this place feels *\*different,\** feels untouched by whatever hell has overtaken the landscape just outside which could be a million miles from here and traveled by no more than a humble step.

[PALINDROME:] I'm so glad you made it Joseph. It was touch and go for a moment there. Come on up to see us.

Joseph steps forward as the plank starts to shake as if it were attempting to wiggle out of gravity's grasp and free itself from the laws of reality. And once he plants his feet firmly in the middle, the plank does just that.

But you see friends, those years of confinement allowed him to not only have a better grasp of who he is but also provided enough piece of mind and comfort in that knowledge to finally, after all these long and miserable years, understand the voice was not him at all. And if he didn't know better, he would almost assume it was so foreign he would never be able to fully grasp where it *\*did\** come from. And friends, in that, he would not be far off from the truth.

After prison he did his best to work in a stable job but unlike the voice his soft machinery could not be easily ignored. And as he got older the procedures and medical concerns only grew more frequent. But still, despite all of life's violence and myriad mazes without solutions, Joseph found another person that made him happy. And I gotta tell you friends, the voice did not like this one bit. It forced itself upon him with a gumption generally reserved for celebrities pushing non fungible tokens of edgy monkeys with cigarettes hanging from their mouths.

[POUNDING ON A DOOR]



As the plank rises the bone door he walked through mere moments ago fractures and burns into ash.

## EVERYTHING STOPS

Unknown voice: Where do you think you are going?

From the gash in the wall where the door used to be laced black tendrils grip the edges of the cracked stone. Inch by inch and farther in, as they move they leave behind silken black trails and if one were to look close enough into them they would see the tattered fringes of the fabric at the center of everything. The fabric that was meant to be cycled through long ago but found itself arrested, stagnant and headed toward the type of oblivion it cannot come back from. And unfortunately, either way, you and me and everyone we know are destined to keep it company all the way down. The cirrus weave their way closer, each slither and slide sucking the light from the tower. Consuming fresh fragrant air and processing it through a pestilence filter and back into the room as silver miasma that burns his nostrils and gnashes at his eyes.

Unknown voice: nonono you and meee, we need to have a conversation.

The tendrils grow larger as they coil and curl along the walls and onto the floor, their diameters growing as they approach, filling in the hole left by the door with the same fleshy stalks he remembers from his first encounter with this place, when he ripped himself from the embryonic pool in which he'd awoken. The tendrils halt their motion toward him. The plank beneath him shakes, as if coming back to life. From the creases and black silken cracks left in the wake on the walls a golden glow seeps through. The glimmer hardens the cirrus and travels along their lengths. Hundreds, maybe thousands of wormlike coils appear, if only for a moment, as glittering solid gold before shattering into mist.

Unknown voice: There is no escape when you are the prison.

You see friends, this person he found himself caring about more than the air keeping him alive in his lungs, was shattered in her own way. Abused by men in her life from age 8 and on. But there is beauty in the broken and when two people are cracked just so, they can glue themselves together and make both whole. And this is exactly what they did. They laid in bed for days when they met, having those conversations that seem to stop time itself and freeze all the tragedy and heartbreak and soiled rotten histories for a short but brief respite. He was honest with her about everything so when his friend did rear its ugly head, they were both prepared to meet it head on and though they did struggle, each in their own ways, they could no longer be harmed by the fractious circumstances of their lives. He started to do deliveries when he could after their first child was born, it was rare but he did do his best to help. And when his body was keeping him

down then he provided support in different ways and tried to alleviate her stress wherever it might originate from. Two years later they had their second child, and that was when he began to understand, maybe he was meant for more. He made a difference in the lives of the people he loved. People he thought he'd never have and friends, you and I know, this is the most any of us can strive for.

The mist snaps back unto itself and as quickly as it shattered it took form once again. And what he sees before him evokes a particular and exceedingly sinister feeling that is hard to place one's finger on. He has only felt this feeling once before. In his early twenties, he went camping once, alone. He took pictures of birds and the sunset, and later, before bed, the moon and stars in the sky. A few days later he had those pictures developed and as he flipped through them he found pictures he did not take, of himself while he slept.

Unknown voice: why so frightened?

A few weeks ago, Joseph's partner got Covid. Her boss did not believe this was an issue and attempted to make her come to work despite this fact. She said no, as any reasonable person would, what with having a moral issue with becoming a vector of disease within her community, and was immediately, and unceremoniously fired. Common story for sure and even more common is what comes after. You might not think being 175 dollars short on the rent would be an issue when they paid six times that each month for the two bedroom apartment in which they lived but day in and day out the landlord comes a knocking. The parasite speaks as any parasite would when one of their tenants among the 185 properties they own needs a helping hand, with threats and vile superiority. The parasite asks if his children know their parents are dead beat losers who can't afford to provide them with a place to live. The parasite says this loud enough for his children to hear, both huddled together and crying behind him in the doorway because they don't understand why this is happening. It says, "you don't want them to live on the street do you?" It says, "I am sure your wife can make things right with that sweet ass she carries around." The parasite says these things with a confident tongue leading Joseph to believe it has been successful before. The parasite says, "a little pussy might buy you and your family a couple of days, you can even watch, if you'd like. But lemme warn you, after she gets this, you might not be able to pull her off of me." Joseph felt the pain in his chest reminding him not to do something which might leave his children alone in a world that produced the pile of parasitic human trash that stood before him. Asking for money. Always asking for money. The children were sobbing. The parasite smiled one last time and turned to whistle its way to its Audi TT. As it opens the door to its car it says "Have my money or have her lubed up and waiting. Your choice."

Joseph's 8 year old child looks up at him and asks, tears still flowing from his innocent eyes, he says, "Daddy, what does lubed up mean?"

And friends, how do you honestly answer that?

Unknown voice: How do you think she fares now? You have been gone for weeks.

The gold mist creature walks toward him, the plank shaking violently under his feet.

Unknown voice: Do you think she is at home waiting for you? Or is she sitting in the passenger seat of an Audi paying the rent? You'll never know. We will make certain you think of nothing else.

Sharp golden appendages grip his ankle and harden in place like cosmic handcuffs, pulling him down as the plank shakes steadily upward, toward whatever was calling him toward the precipice.

Just below the plank, he can see flaxen tinged eyes that lock on to his stare, those same tendrils writhing out from inside them. Shooting forward and gripping him by the throat. The tendrils harden and sharpen around his neck, tearing at his flesh. The pain is blinding and clears his thoughts, reducing him to that thing we are when the fight or flight kicks in but what this thing does not seem to understand is instead of fighting or flighting, this guy fucks. He might be weak in body but spirit and mind are an entirely different story.

[PALINDROME:] Take our hand.

SCREECHING SOUNDS AND TERRIBLE SQUEAL. A LOUD CRASH AND THEN SILENCE.

The chime seemed different on the last delivery he made. The bright focus group approved. Pavlovian dinging that ushered slave wage delivery terms onto his screen was muted and slow, seemed deeper, darker, and somehow, as he considered the memory, more than a little unwelcoming.

Angleton's Orchids "working class hero" plays.

OUTRO

