

## Episode 1: The Return of the Overseer

FEMALE VOICE (hissing whispers underlay the voice): Welcome Overseer. It has been an unusually long time. It's... [she hesitates as though \*nice\* is not the proper descriptor for the complex palette of emotions this moment has conjured] ...\*interesting\* to see you again.

The overseer opens his eyes, the lids heavy, weighed down by a dogged stubborn sleep still trying to drag him back into the beckoning arms of a slumber from which he'd just awoken. He finds he feels more \*revived\* than he does \*awake\*, as though the act of opening his eyes had done more than process light into images in his visual cortex but also maybe... and this thought arrives with a shudder, maybe... saved his life?

FEMALE VOICE: Do you know where you are?

He did not. And as his eyes adjusted to his surroundings he began to question if he even \*wanted\* to know. Some things are, after all, unknowable and this room he finds himself in seems to fit snugly into that category. But you and I, friends, the limits of knowing do not extend to us \*as we are the witnesses\*, and by the end, we will all have a slightly different story to tell. Before we know this room though, this room on the dividing line of everything and a nothing so complete the word nothing doesn't even begin to define it, we must know the arrival. (Female voice in background: "byeeeee!")

(DOOR DASH CHIME starting normal and slowly devolving as the statement moves forward.) 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.

He'd been making waste of time low rent deliveries all day at that point: two dollars here and three there. An average all day delivery shift in a perpetually collapsing economy veering dangerously toward what some might consider the end, while others, like our driver here, would consider an \*improvement\*. As the sun set over his anywhere town USA in a wash of pastels, night began seeping into the sky like ink blots on a Rorschach test, appearing to our driver as butterflies or genocides depending on his mood and the traffic and - both changed minute to minute.

He released the steering wheel and reached for the device ringing in the passenger seat of his gun metal gray hatchback and made a sort of duck lipped kissy face at the camera to unlock the screen. His mouth immediately fell open and his blue eyes sparkled a hint of green because in place of the usual 2.50 and four miles was 26 miles and 175 dollars and holy shit, he might finally be able to call it a day.

A few different thoughts crowded our driver's mind when he saw this and for a moment everything became overwhelming and the world pushed against the edges of his vision compressing everything in on him, toward him in a threatening way as though the world and everything in it was going to force itself into his eyeballs and down his throat and the brake lights ahead of him were fast approaching and he took a deep breath in and.... Out.

---This must be a fucking glitch. Or what if it fails to accept cuz the nearest tower got struck by lightning or hackers are ransomwaring AT&T's bitch ass [finally] (background voice "amen")?

Or It's going to go to some other driver, and I am going to get stuck delivering Popeyes to some asshole with a tesla in their driveway for a 38-cent tip. Orrrr the next one is a fifth floor no elevator for sure.

He slammed on his brakes and the car skidded toward the curb, his fender a quarter inch from grazing the bumper of the car ahead and for a second, he wondered about how a man with confederate flag and second amendment stickers on a wood paneled station wagon might react in a wreck type situation and well, he probably dodged a bullet there. The car stopped, rocking on its axles and for a second,

Time evened back out and the world settled back where it belonged, as in *\*anywhere but on him\** and he pressed the flashing red ACCEPT at the bottom of the screen. The man in the station wagon stared at him in the rearview mirror, violence flashed in the mans eyes for a moment, the kind of violence only an insurrection or civil war can tame and just as quickly as it appeared it was gone and the wagon lurched forward, none worse for the wear. Our driver waved at the man with an apologetic gesture and looked back down at the screen.

Fortunately, for our driver, though in hindsight, decidedly unfortunate, the order assigned correctly. Then and there he should have known something was amiss. Things too good to be true always are and that's a fact he knew then just as well as he knows now. But money got the better of him, as money does to us all, so he pulled a quick and very illegal U-turn and headed toward the merchant in the square downtown.

He sped through the streets, going 70 in a 45 as he always did, slipping in and out of lanes in front of slower cars and behind faster ones for ticket cover. He drove, as most delivery drivers do,

in a manner that was both antagonistic to public safety and necessary to make enough money to live another day and do the same thing all over again. And hey, this would after all, he thought as he zipped down the road, be the first and probably only time he was going to make 175 dollars an hour and he was going to treat it as such. Normally this meant sitting on a zoom call with other corporate lawyers discussing the cost benefit of either ignoring that pesky business of sometimes the gas tank just fucking explodes on the new ~~Kia Soul~~ model or doing a recall, [not in terms of human lives mind you, but \*settlements and tax write offs\*,] and \*not\* driving 65 through a school zone to get to the curiosities shoppe across town. But our Driver, he will take it where he can get it.

A Curiosities Shoppe?

He took a closer look at his phone as the car slowed for a sharp turn. In all his 1500 some odd deliveries he had never once been sent to a \*curiosities shoppe\* nor did our Driver even know one existed in this town. But there it was, sure as life is long, in Geometric Grotesk tt norms: Reynold's Limited Curiosities.

The 175 began to make a tad bit more sense at that point. Considering his terribly bad no good luck, he was likely about to haul some cursed antique mandolin way out into the dead farm wasteland of the rural south nodding behind the wheel while it plays a haunted melody. Or, seeing as only old people would be interested in whatever \*curiosities\* are, he'd have to carry something into an \*old's\* house and maybe have to shake their old hand and smell the faint scent of a life dissipating into the ether.

Either way, whatever he was in for was not going to be pleasant, or quick. He had a sense for when an order needed to be dropped because the money wasn't going to equal the hassle and this one ticked all the boxes.

And as he pulled into the parking lot his regret sharpened. The building was dingy, the bricks dirty, the mortar stained and flecked with brown and red like the walls of a slaughterhouse. A squared off relic of the old days that looked sort of... well, \*drug down\*, as though the building once sprouted from the clay earth below and was now returning to its original state. The windows were filthy and streaked with a white film of... \*unknown origin\*. And through that film, the fluorescent lights strobed and stalled, going bright to dim to dark every couple of seconds and had he been inside, he would have noticed the buzzing bug murder zap noise that accompanied each phase of fluorescence creating a smothering atmosphere that would've made his jaw clench tight, and his hair stand on end. But the sign, friends, the sign was immaculate and the only part of the establishment that lent any credence to this place being an owned and operated business. 'RLC,' sat atop what appeared to be a slogan: 'Where lost objects go to be found.' The words cast in lowercase blackletter that gleamed luminescent gold shot through with clean lines of green giving off a real Saint Patrick's Day at the goth club vibe.

The more he stared at the place, the less he wanted to go inside. He had that strange foreboding feeling he only got when he smoked too much weed after he'd made a decision he felt guilty about and then the act of smoking made him feel more guilty because he should be doing something with his goddamned life, not smoking and being so guilty and pitiful about being both pitiful and guilty. A looped feeling reminiscent of that. But haunted mandolins and guilt be damned, he thought as he clicked ARRIVED AT STORE in the app, flicked his cigarette out of the cracked window, left the ignition on and stepped out of the car.

The pickup instructions listed on the screen stated: come inside store and ask for order at reception. If store is empty, wait, we will appear. If you are the impatient sort, come to the back room, this is inadvisable and may lead to stress and night terrors but will garner you the attention you seek.

He stopped and once again considered cancellation but after a moment and a deep breath or two he shrugged to himself and pushed the heavy wood paneled door, and of course friends, we all know it was locked. But below the lock, a small handwritten sign announced: 'If the door is locked ring the bell' and had an arrow originating from a spiral pointing toward a tiny red plastic button that seemed to be glued to the brick next to the brass door handle. And well, what else was he gonna do besides press it and ignore the fact that it looked like a toggle switch you would buy at Home Depot and appeared to be connected to nothing. Just a weird toggle switch glued weirdly to a weird brick on a weird building. And as we all guessed friends, nothing happened. The button didn't even depress.

A frustrated sigh passed his lips and as he was about to turn and head back to the car, he heard a loud smooth (CLICK). He stepped backward instinctually, tripped retrogressive like the country that he lived in as his heel hit a broken piece of sidewalk jutting from the ground, then, looking around sheepishly, brushed his hands on his corduroy jeans to play it off as best he could in the event he had been observed.

He pushed the door harder than was necessary because he'd grossly misjudged the weight, and had he not been engulfed in the strange circumstances of this delivery, he would have thoroughly questioned why what appears to be a solid piece of oak weighed the same as cardboard left out in the morning dew. The door swung gracefully inward on rusted hinges at speeds the door had likely never experienced. And at this, the Driver winced, because he \*just knew\* that liar of a

door was about to crash into some expensive \*curiosity\* display case and break everything inside and this whole trip would be for naught more than an interesting story to tell his partner back at home over a cup of kratom tea. Luckily, instead of all that, the door bounced back with a pronounced (BOING) after striking the doorstep behind it and swung without a single creak or squeal despite the rust, back and forth until finally slowing to a stop to reveal an L shaped room full of dusty knickknacks, yellowing ceramic, and brittle antique wooden furniture.

He crossed the threshold slowly and as he did a bell rang, presumably a way of letting whoever worked here know they had a visitor, but it must have been broken or... altered, because it rang so loudly, he swore he felt his eardrums vibrate and pulse with each pump of his quickening heart. He covered his ears, knuckles white and nails digging into the skin above his cheekbones and temple as his trepidation evolved to an overwhelming sense of fear and annoyance. He stepped backwards again outside and for a second, he thought he had gone deaf because suddenly, there was no sound... \*at all\*. No bells, no cars, no sirens, not a single bird chirping or tree rustling. Immaculate silence.

But the bell was still sounding in his head and, thinking about it, he swore he recognized the sound, though it seemed off, sharp and discordant.

He shook his head and looked around for anyone else on the streets or shadows in the windows of surrounding buildings, and strangely, saw no one. Saturday evening in the town square was generally a bustling affair, insofar as a town this size can \*bustle\*. Full of bar patrons pretending not to be drunk while cops watch with their beady cop eyes concealed in wraparound sunglasses, leaning on bicycles in spandex shorts, looking for a stumble or hint of horseplay like predators seeking movement in a tangled jungle, and when they pounce it is not with their teeth sinking into flesh but rather handcuffs sinking into freedom. That, or ladies of a certain age and persuasion, shopping at overpriced boutiques, never once considering the clothes they purchased

for their grandchildren were produced by someone else's sweatshop trapped grandchild and the only reason this is not vice versa boils down to numbers and geography. But the streets were empty and silent friends, not a soul in sight. Empty and still.

He craned his head over the threshold and once again the ring blared, fire engine loud and his hairs prickled and stood on end as if responding to the stimuli.

He pulled back and nothing... complete silence.

Back into the ring and then back to silence, and okay, friends, you get the picture, he pulled his head in and out, using this slight bit of what must be architectural anechoic fuckery, as a novel distraction from his increasing anxiety [during this the ringing noise should be going in and out.] He did this for a few moments as the sound slowly faded and finally he could hear the buzzing fluorescent lights, blinking on the ceiling like morse code, both inside and outside the door and yeah they were louder than they should have been but that was barely noticeable compared to the alarm bell nightmare the preceding minutes wrought and this helped restore enough normalcy to the situation that our Driver felt as comfortable as he was going to get with walking inside.

So, he took a deep breath and stepped into the room. Under the yellowed fluorescence, were several tables placed in a baffling fashion, set at harsh asymmetrical angles consistently narrowing the isles between them as if to discourage browsing. They were full of dust covered tea pots, picture frames, and trinkets, cobwebs strung between them in sharply descending ziplines like some dustpunk arachnid adventure park. He ran his finger through the dust and rubbed it with his thumb, watching as it streaked black and fell away like... ash. The walls were lined with books end-to-end floor-to-ceiling and the books themselves seemed to be the only thing free of this ashen dust, and that remained true until he saw what he assumed must be the Reception Desk. Centered dead square in the crook of the L sat an ornate executive's desk, the



likes of which he had never seen. The finish appeared as grey snakes swimming on the surface of void black oil and was polished to the point of reflection. The jaundiced light flickering above appeared transformed when it shone from the desk as though it had been processed and purified, mirrored back dingy and cold. The wood had been carved, seamlessly as far as our Driver could tell, into a Sphinx. Starting with a placid serpent suspended between two kneeling lion legs, paws settled into divots on the laminate floor. The stomach above was gaunt and stuck to the ribs, bones showing through matted and bloody fur. The chest curved upward but still dipped down in a submissive pose, human breasts hanging down, nipples wrapped by the lips of suckling pig heads attached to the bodies of gluttonous babies, front arms bent outward behind the creatures awkwardly cradling them, palms outstretched before her supporting the weight of it all. The human head has its face buried in what looks like a bowl of dog food, splashes of wood carved slop frozen in the hair and dripping off the ears. Splayed above the entire figure were the eagle wings, low and straight over the back of the head and ending in sharp knives of feathers past the impotent tail, the wings acted as the base for the slab top, behind which, no one sat.

No Receptionist to receive.

RECEIPT FOOTNOTE [MAYBE]

He pulled his phone from his pocket and pulled the app up to go back over the pickup instructions because after \*all this\* his head was foggy and unfocused, but he clearly remembered the uhhhh (mumbling pick up instructions) yeah, there it was, that bit about the night terrors, very weird. In that context, “We will appear” sounds like a sinister magic trick and he is unsure if his brain can handle any more of that before it completely breaks.

His phone screen went black and then flashed white noise. A phantom blue phone icon began strobing on the screen, each time it burst onto the screen, and burst is the correct word here, it

was accompanied by the fuzzy drone of a dead radio broadcast. He stared at it for a few moments, fear building with each blink, before tapping the icon and shakily whispering,

--- Hello?

--- Hi!!! [a warm voice responded, evoking a customer service IVR about to get him to the right agent who would be happy to assist with his concern.]

The voice seemed to come from both the speaker on his phone and each corner of the room, enveloping him from all sides. With each syllable the voice spoke his mind lightened, mundane minute to minute thoughts dissipated into wispy memories. He had begun to sweat and breathed a little more heavily. The yellowed fluorescence took on new characteristics, gaining cohorts from the spectrum and now, when the bulbs performed their dim boring dance of slow fade and flicker, a rainbow would slink from one end to the other like technicolor worms swirling through the tubes.

--- Your package is on the desk! We want to thank you sincerely, from the bottom of our infinite heart, for visiting Reynold's Limited Curiosities. Where your curiosities transform into knowledge. We are so very glad to have you and absolutely ecstatic you chose to avoid the night terrors! They can be a real doozy if you aren't, you know *\*in\** to that sort of thing.

--- Where are you?!? Our Driver demanded, his voice clipped and harsh. Instinctively, he knew this is how he should sound at a moment like this. A moment that called for fear and confusion if ever a moment did, and if not those then *\*unease\** at the very least, but he felt none of the ways his tone implied. In fact, he felt, you know, just cool or whatever. His head jerked wildly around the room, muscles forcing the reaction as he scanned for the source of the everywhere voice, but his brain felt more and more like a balloon tied precariously to a frayed string. He was comforted

by the fact that if he willed it, he could just drift away from this place and everything else for that matter.

--- The relevant question is not where I am, but rather, where **you** are going. And oh dear overseer, you will soon be at the intersection of all that is, and all that is not. Off into the blank and motionless heart of reality. You will become its beat. The war drum that will keep it marching forward.

He chose to ignore the voice because it did not seem to be interested in, or courteous enough, to try making any sort of sense and he didn't know where this buzz he felt was coming from, but he could fucking dig it and this lady and her nonsense was coming dangerously close to ruining it for him and that is a particular type of sin our Driver cannot abide. So, time to get the delivery and peace out, he decided.

He hesitated in his first step toward the desk, lifting his leg high as if the floor was a sponge and his candy flip was kicking in, ecstasy and acid mixing to make the world, and especially \*the floor\*, both frightening and \*new\*.

--- I'm gonna be late, he muttered.

--- We are sure wherever you are going, you will get there right on time. [The voice responded as rainbows slithered through the bulbs overhead.] --- Watch out [he can hear the eyeroll in the everywhere voice] for the majestic Sphinx, Overseer, she has been known to seek attention when she is in heat, which again, can be a doozy if you aren't into that sort of thing.

Our Driver laughed at this, wondering how wood could be in heat but then again, wood is a descriptor for a dick when that dick is in heat so... well, full semantic circle, he guessed. He took another clumsy step, now only a few away from the desk. He could finally see the box on the solid slab set atop the carved war-torn sphinx, just a—

—He leapt backwards as a gray grained serpent lashed at him. Hissing violently and lunging toward him with a type of violence our driver had never witnessed.

--- Lay off woman, [the everywhere voice said.] You look like road kill with a meth addiction. Ignore her overseer, she's just a dirty girl, is all. Trying to make hybrid wooden myth babies everywhere all the time.

But the sphinx heard none of this. A heavy lion's paw kicked forward, landing with a heavy thump that sounded more like leather than wood should be allowed. Bone showed through the black leg, stark white splitting the gray grain just above the paw.

As the leg lifted again, this time pushing hard off the floor, attempting to leverage its strength, color began seeping from the bone. Swirling in all directions and extricating the black, yet the colors were still wrong. In place of the bloodstained golden brown, the lion leg was bright lime, and the blood, where it appeared in splatters and splotches, was a deep purple, the color of a fresh bruise. The other leg stretched and clawed at the infant pig things suckling her breasts, slicing through the wooden skin, black tar oozing from distended black bellies.

--- But she knows she is just going to leave them in the dunes while she goes to party at the pyramid.

The babies deflate, the last of their insides leak into a puddle on the laminate floor and slip in the cracks between the dingy white tiles, slowly and completely disappearing. The head raised from the dog bowl, the frozen slop now dripping from its cheeks. The look on the face that stared at him was an even mixture of murder and fear.

--- She will leave them in the sand to die so she can snort mummy dust and fuck some old god with a bird face. I know her kind.

The sphinx opened its mouth, highlighter colors swirling over its entire body save the wings, still black and immobile, keeping the thing from breaking completely free of the desk. Its pink teeth dripped thick white saliva which flung outward when it gnashed at him.

--- I um, I I am going to be late. [Our driver repeated. The real horror of the experience washed out by whatever was happening to his brain.]

--- Last chance creature. [The everywhere voice said angrily.] Last chance before I set the worms free.

The gnashing clawing thing fought against its own growl rising from its lungs and inching through its throat, sounding a lot like a scolded dog who can't quite control the impulse to bark at a passing car. The claws, now done with their grizzly infanticide, thrust out at our driver and he stepped backwards slightly, despite already being out of reach of this thing. They tore at the floor, scratching and struggling as far out as they could reach. The growl reaching an apex and then—

—The bulbs on the ceiling burst, sending shards of glass and phosphor raining down in the dark and Our driver watched as writhing sectioned technicolor worms fell from the fixtures, radiating rainbow glow and landing hard and heavy with wet smacking noises. Hisses filled the room. Mouths positioned at both ends of the worms showed jagged teeth and began spinning like saw blades. They leapt toward the creature, the mouths latching onto the fur and flesh, and burrowed through the thing's skin as if it were an apple.

--- I tried to warn you, [the voice said.] That's the thing about myths, no sense of reality.

The creature's face twisted in fear and pain. The growl turned to cries of agony as the worms drilled and disappeared into its decimated body, the holes they created oozing with purple blood and dim multihued light.

The thing slunk mechanically to its original position. The cries faded. The black and gray wood finish washed over the unnatural shades that had overtaken it and just as quickly as the creature came to life, it returned to stillness. The only difference now was the face. Instead of neck deep in the bowl for a meal of wooden slop, it stared at our Driver, eyes fixated on his, lips curled in a menacing snarl, teeth, still dripping with drool and filth, bared as if to say:

--- (everywhere voice overlaid same as back in the core of Wireland) The next time our paths cross, I *\*will\** eat you.

Our Driver stared back at the sphinx, afraid to approach the desk though that was the only thing he could think of doing. His sense of urgency and stress was creeping through the fog that filled his brain and made him feel so good, so *\*goddamned\** okay for a few fleeting moments. As it began rising in him and processing everything that had just happened, he noticed that the sphinx was not yet completely still. The wood around its torso and legs bubbled and undulated, tubes slinking and sliding toward the tail. The skin stretched around the worms as they slithered along the spine, their light dampened but showing through the jagged wood grain. One by one they slid through the serpent and out of its dead mouth. They congregated in a circle under the serpent and once the last of them plopped from the mouth, now stretched like an old sock, they swirled together, spinning around one another faster and faster and started to meld into one, color combining into color combining into the brightest white light our Driver had ever seen. The light extended forming the shape of a very long unfurled snake and then swirled about itself into a

tight spiral. blinking and dimming slightly, it spun above him toward the ceiling and with each turn it formed a new limb, arms, legs, head, hair flowed and wrapped itself into several separate dreadlocked ponytails. The individual strands whipped out and split into separate colors forming several discs that were orbiting the newly formed head, each, one of the worms that protected our Driver from a vicious death at the hands of the war torn sphinx.

The fully formed figure drifted slowly down from the ceiling and landed gently next to the desk. The light had dimmed, yet not enough to make out individual features. The light appeared to nod and take a slight bow.

--- Your delivery is on the desk, run along now, wouldn't want you to be too late. (Voice is different than the everywhere voice.)

He watched as the form turned with a flick and drifted toward the door to the backroom as though it was nothing more than a fall leaf in a high wind, stopping at the door as quick and graceful as it had gone.

Built in bookshelves surrounded the door but in place of the books that covered every other wall in that bananas ass shop were a series of old fashioned mason jars. The jars themselves were dusty but friends, our keen eyes can confirm that each was canned with care and precision. Fine lace and expensive bows were laid intricately to form complex designs on the lids, and if our Driver had to give those designs a name, he would likely choose the word 'sigil,' as this is what jumped to mind most readily when he saw them. The most interesting thing about the jars, and this was true of most jars he supposed, were not the lids but rather the contents. Inside was a viscous pink fluid, reminiscent of liquefied flesh, enveloping a crystalline bubble that can be seen clearly from all sides and inside the sphere is an orchid rooted to the base of the jar. In the first

jar, beginning at the stem, the petals are cyanide blue fading into darker and darker hues until ending in black. A small bright flame burns in the labellum mirroring the cyan, flickering just above the blackest part of the petals. The same is true for each proceeding jar, with the only difference being the shade of the base and flame. Finally, each jar had a label written in beautiful red script that swooped and curled meticulously like threaded needles. Some were old and faded so thoroughly that our Driver could not read them but the last appeared fresh and clear, stating: No. 0665, August 2021. The one before contained a descending number and a date 50 years prior, and the trend continued: descending number, August, 50 years. There were hundreds of these jars and if the pattern did not deviate, and mind you, he was surely no mathematician, but these dates had to stretch back tens of thousands of years. But that couldn't be right. Couldn't be right at all.

The glowing figure shrugged when our driver looked at it for an explanation, shrugged and opened the ash gray door.

--- Curious, ain't it? Don't look at us, we just work here. Shame we had to worm the riddle monster.

Through the cracked door our Driver could hear high pitched screams and low frequency bellows. A deep droning hum. Red light flashed sporadic onto the adjacent wall from the opening.

The form thinned itself and dissipated from the room. The door slammed behind it. And there our Driver was, alone in a silent space, glass crunching under his shoes and phosphor still settling over the ash. Staring at thousands of years of burning orchids and ten minutes outside of a mythic desk creature confrontation.

His phone dinged incessantly, though he just now noticed it and when he unlocked the screen



with his kissy face, thinking the whole ritual far more absurd than mere minutes earlier, multiple notifications slid down the screen all saying the same thing: It seems like you're having trouble let us know how we can help! He cleared the notifications and clicked CONFIRM PICK UP. He used the light from the screen to locate the small box on the desk, grabbed it and ran through the door and into his car as quickly as possible. He plugged his phone in and when it vibrated to signal successful connection, the vibrations did not stop. A long low rumble shook the swampy summer night. In his rearview mirror he saw the rush of a dust cloud headed toward the car and within a second, engulfed it completely, blotting out the world around him and for a fleeting moment, created a universe all his own.

When the dust settled and our driver could see fragments of the road in his headlight beams, he pressed the directions button in the app and a map popped onto the screen showing the first step of a 22-mile-long journey. He put his car in reverse and the rear camera feed popped onto the dashboard screen, he suddenly realized that both his mind and the world around him had fundamentally changed and might never again be the same.

Reynold's Curiosities was gone.

Radio announcer: Now, on loan from the great deep soul of humanity we have @angletonso orchids and their rendition of: The House (pause) Of the Rising Sun, unhinged.