

CHAPTER 54: I'M SORRY, I CAN'T HELP IT, BUT YOU MAKE ME SCREAM

*I*s that the guy there? What's his deal? When will he decide to do the right thing? There is only one way forward (to the future). He'll get it. Or he'll fade away.

Yawn. Stretch. Lovely morning, ennit?

"I really like coming here. What is it about this place?"

Hmmm. Oh. Hi. Smile. I think we are still writing a book for you, yes? So, let's see. Lots of characters, we have, running around, doing exciting and intriguing things. Maybe you're invested in some of these characters, and concerned and curious about how they might be getting on? Well, wouldn't you know it that they are doing just fine. You know, considering, you know, *everything* and all. But look just back over yonder from whence they came, and be amazed the beauty of the current landscape. Takes the breath away, doesn't it?

"Hey Mom. No. I was wondering. Perhaps you might be interested in a trade."

--NEWS BREAK--

So many things are happening. Look at all those moving parts. Don't look too close, though. Might boggle your mind. Oh, what's that over there? Is that Zorba Cathexis's cousin, [Zorba's Cousin], who appar-

ently our authors have still not bothered to give a proper name to (or maybe the paperwork is still floating through the mail perhaps?)? And what's that smell? Is it food? Is it...garbage? You know how sometimes a smell can teeter on that borderline between pleasant and revolting? You know how one fly's shit sandwich is another fly's chocolate stuffin'? Wow, you know so many things, I think. But did you know this:

[Zorba's Cousin] was hiking up through the mountain pass. After catching the crosstown trolley back in, um, Townsville, she decided to forgo the giant celebration and all those holiday festivities that her new friends had kind of sort of invited her to, since she *was* already starting to tire and she, you now, *did* have a mountain or two to climb, still. At the moment she was regretting this decision just a smidge, but then again, sometimes the universe has places it wants you to be. Just then she saw what could be interpreted as a bad omen, or perhaps more accurately, a warning that danger might be creeping through the vicinity. She noted this and walked on.

"Uh oh," she said to her walking companion, a large cat that had recently joined her a few turns back on the trail, "I think we might be surrounded by clowns."

The cat looked up at her with a sly grin, as if to say, "Honey, I eat clowns for breakfast, sometimes."

[Zorba's Cousin] smiled, returned her eyes to the path ahead, and took a deep, satisfying breath of fresh mountain air.

"Do you feel that?" [Zorba's Cousin] said to the cat, "I think it might be a blessing."

"Don't count your chickens," came the response in her head.

"Chickens?" said [Zorba's Cousin]. "I don't have any chickens. Unless," she thought, pondering the sorts of measurement units that might

be current in her new friend's cat society or whatever, "I suppose from a certain perspective I do have maybe three chickens."

The cat growled.

"Oh right," said [Zorba's Cousin], "You said *don't* count your chickens."

They walked a bit through a misting rain. "See," said [Zorba's Cousin] as they reached a sort of familiar plateau of sorts, "that is almost definitely sort of a partially formed semi-fluctuating rainbow." The cat rubbed its head against [Zorba's Cousin]'s hip. "Okay okay," she replied. "Point taken."

Just then, voices.

"I'm hungry."

"I'm tired."

"Oh no, what's that?" thought the cat as it gave a sort of a gasp of a meow and tensed up in alarm.

"Don't worry," said [Zorba's Cousin], "everything. is totally. and completely. normal."

Apple Hippopotamus was dancing in her chair. Having decided to fill her belly with various cakes and delicacies this morn, she was feeling all sorts of fine. All of a sudden it seemed, her world was crowded with delectable intrigues and sweet mysteries, and for the first time in many a moon, Apple was feeling that comfortably stretched out and snug fulfilling-her-being's-potential sort of feeling as she bounced around from scene to scene. Like, she was maybe comfortable with who she was and with how she was interacting with who she wasn't. Which was, you know, in and of itself, kind of a big deal. Of course, this also meant that the stakes had shifted, and with them, the depths of her relations and the palpable heft of her responsibilities. But then again, it could be said that Apple always played her part with the long

game in mind, amid the pinnacles of her imagination, her eyes on that snow-capped mountaintop. Apple's tongue scraped at the insides of her mouth, gathering the crumbs and tiny morsels, and sucked them down into her gut.

Johnny Cinnamon hopped through the alleyways and backstreets like a deceased one-legged frog drying in the sun. He clutched the cramp in his side where it felt as if someone had taken a large bite out of his flesh, which apparently might have been a thing that did indeed happen. Gods, he wished he had more time—another week, another day—but now he didn't even know if he'd get a chance to see Apple again before he had to hightail it out of town—assuming he made it that far, of course. This past month had been astoundingly pleasant, to say the least; the romance had been, well, unexpected and more than welcome. Almost like something out of a storybook, even. Yeah, it was almost as if he was living **inside of a story**.

*Stop what you're doing, because I'm about to ruin everything again.
It was fun while it lasted. I guess.*

"I LOVE LIFE!" exclaimed an astonishingly exuberant Lettuce Bamboo.

"Oh, no no no," said the diligent worker bird from its hidden perch by the road. "That's coffee. You love *coffee*. Life, my dear, life sucks."

"Okay, sure, I guess," replied Lettuce, who we just decided has been an undead zombie girl this whole time. "Poop," she added as she walked past the nondescript leavings some dog had left by the side of the road. Indeed, Lettuce, indeed.

CHAPTER 55: AND NOW WE'RE MOVING (AGAIN)

“You look good. But oh no, don’t look too closely. From that angle, you almost look like a—”

“Man alive! I sure have the sniffles today.”

“Rumbling. Bumbling. Stumbling.”

“SNIFFLE.”

“It’s like the old woman and the vase.”

“What?”

“Like the crone and the two faces and the young woman. And the vases.”

“Um.”

“Uh.”

“And what is it that you see when you gaze upon my brilliance?”

“I see two women, slowly dying, sharing a kiss so sweet. I see a—”

“No, no. That’s enough.”

“But I see so many things.”

“YAWN.”

“YAAAAAAWWWNN.”

“Wait. Are you sure you’re not a monster?”

And so it was, dear reader, that we find ourselves in another chapter of best-selling novel, amidst all sorts of comings and goings and passing on bys. Our characters were...coming together (and coming apart?) at a

specific moment in time (out of time?). It all makes sense if you think about it (don't think about it too hard, though). Sigh. I feel like we are definitely missing something (something important?). Who knows, though. How could we possibly know anything about the thing that we are maybe missing? Maybe it is not important at all. Maybe nothing is important. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe...

Sorry, what?

CHAPTER 56: FILL IN THE BLANKS

CHAPTER 57: UM, HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Zorba grabbed Apple by the shoulder. “Hold up, will you? Did you ever.” He took a second to catch his breath. “Did you ever just, you know, like. Apple. I mean. Like, look around. How did we get here?”

“Yes,” pondered Apple, absentminded-like, gazing off towards some unseen point, “it is quite awesome, this view of where we are. At the moment. Looking at things from, you know, a certain perspective.”

Zorba gaped at Apple, slack-jawed.

“But then again,” added Apple, now looking at Zorba, “I did tell you my intended destination back when we started this journey. Are you so shocked that we might actually have stumbled onto the right path?”

Apple and Zorba were two days into their journey, which had started shortly after a series of events, both fortunate and un-. Just two days in and already come so far they had. But we won’t bore you yet (ever?) with the details. Suffice it to say, there were zombies, seedy bars, crosstown traffic, and missing persons, and Zorba had insisted on accompanying Apple as she departed town hot on the trails of yet another mystery to solve.

“SNIFFLE.”

“Oh honey, are you still sick?”

Missy put her head to her throbbing head. She put down her pen and

shut her notepad. She smiled at her partner.

"Whatcha working on?"

"Oh," said Missy. "Just trying to trace things back to the source. Tease out some of these threads a bit. Anyway, there's still some gaps to fill, but, well. What's on your plate?"

"Oh, just another standard misplaced keys case. Hardly worth reporting on."

Missy raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I'll follow protocol. Don't you worry your pretty little head about that."

"My head hurts," said Missy. "My pretty little snot-filled head."

Hello? You there? Are you looking at me? Hello?

"Yes, I'm here. Yes. I got your message. No, I. No, I realize. I mean, obviously. Yes, I acknowledge the fact that you exist."

"Hey."

"Wait, hold on. I'll have to call you back."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't realize you were talking to someone."

Ahem. Hey. What's up. Sorry. I guess I'm still a little hung over from all of that mass communication I was engaged with this weekend. Not to bore you with the details of my personal life or anything, but just give me a second to catch my balance here. So, um, this is a novel? Of fiction? Which, um, I am writing, I guess, and you are reading, I suppose. And it's just like, we can't stop or something. It keeps going and going and going, which is good? I don't know. I just know that I'm struggling a bit this morning to keep all of these plot lines straight on the page. But anyway, the thing is, what I really mean. Sigh. Okay. Eyes on the prize, still. Eyes on the prize.

CHAPTER 58: I'M LOOKING AT YOU, YOU'RE LOOKING AT ME

CHAPTER 59: BECOMING UNGOVERNABLE

Metadata. Metadata. Metadata. How might one classify this body of work? Racist? Super dry? A little bit poetry? What sort of story is this? Sorry. I don't quite recall how to play this game (act like you've been here before). Arggh.

"What do we need to solve mysteries for, anyway? I mean, it's okay if we don't know everything. We don't have to understand *everything*."

Zorba was looking a bit exasperated. Not having previously worked as a detective himself, he was only now wading into some of the theoretical depths that Apple had been swimming in for, um, maybe a long time. Apple smiled. She sighed and shrugged. She yawned a little yawn. "Excuse me," she said.

Just then, voices.

"What, no. We're not ready."

"They're moving too fast. How did they get here already?"

"We'll have to make it up as we go. It's not finished."

"But we have to give them something. They'll be expecting *something*."

"Are there three of them?"

"What about a digression? What if we led them off on some other trail?"

“Like?”

“But they aren’t all coming from the same place.”

“Oh shit. They’re already here.”

“Can they hear us?”

“Oh shit. Pretend you’re telling a story.”

Sadie Rosen was sitting on a bench. Waiting. Waiting for someone to call her number. But why? Why was she going through this nonsense, yielding to the dictates of some fascist police state? This was not the world she wanted to live in. Or was it? If you like mysteries and suspense, tune in next time to find out the answers to questions unknown. Is Sadie actually a real person? And is she actually really here? Or will her lack of proper documentation reveal her presence in this story to be but a figment of her overactive imagination? Sigh.

“Number sixty. Number sixty? Number sixty?”

Not quite there yet. But moving along. Certainly, most definitely, they were moving along.

TICK TICK TICK TICK TICK