

F17

“This must be satire, right?” Alice Year-of-the-Boar realized she probably made that last comment out loud as she looked around to notice all the eyes in the waiting room were now focused on her. “Um. [awkward smile].”

Meanwhile, across timespace, Lucy was getting down to business. “Wait, you want us to sell books now?”

“Well, pamphlets. Think of them like little informational downloads. Like communicational inoculations, for your, um, customers. Clients? Sorry, I’m not familiar with the lingo.”

“Fuck sake. You talk like her, you know. I don’t know what language you speaking, but I get your message alright. You two ever date?”

[Zorba’s Cousin]’s consciousness flashed back to her past’s alternate future which her current meatspace mind processed as illicit desire. But, it’s not like, I mean, they never. Not that there would be anything. I mean, it’s nobody’s, um, business. “Why?” she said to

Lucy as she returned to form, “Do you think she’d be interested?”

Meanwhile, I think we forgot to properly introduce this chapter:

CHAPTER 1118: WHAT CAN I SAY? I LIKE BEING HERE WITH YOU

Anyway, what were we talking about? Oh yeah.

Missy Hammer was staring at the etchings on the table, yet another instance of impossible coincidence, the ephemerality of which belied an intricate system of meaning making that spanned across the regal jellies of spacetime. This had become a routine occurrence as of late, and her mind couldn’t help but trace these points of emergence back to her cozy mountain village and her introduction to that world-wise and glamorous mystery detective. But how could such a relatively short interval of time contain the seed(s) of such complex brilliance, and is it really possible that this seed could have been planted by one probable human? It was, um, perplexing.

“You look perplexed.”

“Huh, what?” said Missy. “Um, seeds are weird, yeah?” Missy took a deep breath, and smiled.

“Yeah, caterpillars, too.”

Mississippi Hammer was in love.

CHAPTER 119: It WoULd HAVE BEEN ENOUgH (EXCEpT IT WASn'T)

CHAPTER 120: COMING APART AT THE SEAMS

“It’s not going to hold.”

“[FART].”

“I told you, it’s not going to hold.”

“What are you, some kind of metaphysical engineer or something?”

“Gods, why does everything have to be so meta with you guys?”
“Anyway, where were we in this novel we are living?”

CHAPTER 121: THE PLACE THAT WE ARE

Apple Hippopotamus was a mystery detective, this is true, though it had been some while since she had solved a mystery, let alone written an official case report. True, there were some tall tales floating around that posited a world where Apple had solved all the mysteries, making obsolete not only her position, but that of her entire profession. But Apple of course knew that time was cyclical (amongst other things) and that lessons were there to be re-learnt again and again (and over and over), because that which is worthwhile is worthwhile across perspectives, or some such thing that maybe sounded good in her head after a few glasses of bourbon. That wasn't the only thing that sounded good after a few glasses of bourbon, but Apple was less likely to make an effort to, let's say, scratch at her various itches now that she was more squarely in her washed up middle ages. And then, something happened.

And then something happened that would change everything forever. And then something happened that there was no coming back from, from which there was no return to the place that we used to be. And then

--WE INTERRUPT THIS BROADCAST--

“That ship has sailed, you know. We can’t never go back.”

“Sometimes, that’s all you get.”

“Some times are harder than other times.”

Apple looked around and wondered how she had managed to end up back here, the place that she currently was. Sigh, she thought, here we go again.

CHAPTER 122: SOMETHING BROKEN THAT CANNOT BE FIXED

A pigeon fluttered its wings and dove below the horizon. Specific colors on a cupboard door. It seemed an odd place for everything to end. It was just so...un-momentous. Yet here we were, fork stuck in our gut, bloody entrails leaking out of our rented suit, vultures circling above, worms licking their little worm lips, hoping to feast. They say you reap what you sow, but I can't seem to remember what I planted. Surely not this. Oh. Oh, I see. His vision became blurry as rain overtook the landscape. Drip drip drip. Oh, I see. Drip drip.

CHAPTER 123: LOST IN TIME

A hop, skip, and possibly a jump away is a 13 year old boy. He is lost from his family and starts getting scared. Seeing the dead bird, he almost throws up. Starting to panic, he starts shouting for his parents and twin brother. He eventually stops recalling the events that just took place.

Ahhhhhh! Johnny Kishkes burst through the door and flopped onto the table.

“Um, hi. I don’t believe we’ve met yet.”

“Zorba!” snapped Apple. Zorba shrugged with an impish smile. Apple rushed over to Johnny to see what was wrong.

“What? His character doesn’t get introduced until section unit two.”

“The timeline,” Johnny gasped. “It’s all screwed up. I...”

“Johnny!” Apple screamed, wide-eyed with concern.

“Being inside a body...sucks.”

...He eventually stops, recalling the events that

just took place.

“Well, I can’t tell you how to be a girl detective, but I can just generally communicate everything I know about the world in a possibly obscure fashion or whatever.”

“Sometimes that’s all you get.”

MALFUNCTION

And the rain dripped down her back and tickled the crack of her
MALFUNCTION.

“You can’t archive everything, you know.”

“But who would do such a thing?!”

It was murder, glorious murder.

“What is that? It sounds ominous. Where is it coming from anyway?”

The clouds over the city parted and the declining sun burst through into Apple and Zorba’s line of vision.

“Kind of bright, yeah?”

“Yeah, hot too, that light.”

“The sun, you mean.”

“Mm.”

“The sun is a ball of fire.”

“Well...”

“We are all on fire.”

The clouds parted over the overcast narrative that you called your life as sweat dripped down your back. Sweet, this life, you thought to yourself. Hot though. The clouds parted over the city as the sun set into the artificial horizon. This had something to do with cycles and phases and patterns and spinning around, over and over, constantly, never stopping, always always moving, until, one day, one fine day,

everything ends (maybe).

“What do we owe you? How could we possibly repay you for all you’ve given us.”

“Oh sweetie,” said the universe in the form of a physically manifest human, “Don’t you know, you’re getting just what you deserve.”

For a brief eternal moment, you maybe thought this all made sense, that you solved the mystery of what was actually going on, that you actually understood what was being communicated to you in this act of mass communication that connected you across time and space to so so many completely different other people that are not you but are somehow also part of this best-selling novel, this physically manifest book that totally exists in this very real world. We’ll never get out of here alive.

CHAPTER 124: LIFE
(THIS PORTION IS NON-NEGOTIABLE)

Mississippi Hammer was trapped in a dream she could not wake up from, which was sometimes kind of pretty okay when she thought about it sometimes. Rain dripped down her no wait a minute. That's not correct. Once upon a time, we were alive.

All alone, in her room, an old woman was slowly dying. Music? Some sort of machine? Some sort of impossible machine, some sort of inconceivable plot device that gives us the illusion of movement, that transports us from page to page to no wait, that's not it exactly. Once upon a time, we were alive.

Mississippi Hammer scratched her perfectly shaped head. She glanced at her reflection in the, uh, feedback, machine. She was, um, trying to move this story to its conclusion, which was...a tricky thing.

"Ends are heavy things," said her partner, glancing up from the page.

"These words," said Missy. "These words are sensitive to time." Once upon a time, this portion is non-negotiable.

**CHAPTER 125: WE'D JUST LIKE TO INFORM YOU THAT
NO ONE HAS DIED AND FROM HERE ON OUT
EVERYTHING WILL BE AS NORMAL AS IT EVER WAS**

CHAPTER 126: A STORY

Once upon a time, Apple Hippopotamus sat, waiting for something to come and take her and transport her to a place where she wanted to be. And then came a wind so cool and refreshing and polite. And as she floated on into another spatial dimension, she gazed back lovingly at the peaks and valleys of the landscape that constituted her past/future and thought, well, I guess that's something.

Zorba gently placed the folder upon the folding table and stated, ponderously, "Odd place to end a story there at the end."

"Well, it has been said that good stories end when you least expect them to."

"Hmm yeah mmhm. A story, huh."

"Sometimes, well, you know. Sometimes that's all you get."

"Mm." Zorba reached for something just out of reach, something just over there on that shelf and he stretched and time stretched and became this thing, this palpable thing and and and

end